

“THE GAME IS OVER”

I've been wondering, ever since Viktor Bout got arrested, what he meant by his sole public statement at the time: "The game is over." Who knows in what language he uttered the statement or how well it was translated, but the statement seemed to convey the closure of a particularly finite project rather than a long life of eluding death and the law. Getting rich, after all, is not a game, it's a presumably boundless process. Whereas a game—that implies a beginning and an end, winners and losers.

Suffice it to say that I'm wondering even more now, as I hear news of the wrangling between Russia, the US, and Thailand. First, there's the story (admittedly told by Bout's lawyer and brother, not independent observers) that the Thais tried to ship him off the US immediately upon his arrest.

Thai authorities tried to force Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout to get on a plane to the United States hours after his arrest in Bangkok earlier this month, the legal counsel for the alleged "Lord of War" claimed on Monday.

Bout, dubbed the "Merchant of Death" by his detractors, was arrested in Bangkok on March 6 in a US-led sting operation that allegedly caught him making a deal with Colombian rebels.

On March 7, Thai police said Bout, 41, would remain in the kingdom to face possible charges of committing illegal activities in the country. If Thai courts turn down the case, Bout faces extradition to the US.

But **Bout's Russian lawyer Dasgupta Yan on Monday told a press conference in Bangkok that Thai authorities had tried to force his client to board a plane to the US immediately after his arrest. He said US officials were also present at**

the time.

"Some government officials at the moment of his detention tried to send him to the United States without proper extradition procedures," said Yan, of the Gridnav & Partners law firm.

"They told my client you need to take an aircraft to the United States, they want to talk to you there. But my client was saying I'm not ready to go, because I don't understand why I'm arrested and secondly I didn't have any plans to go to the United States," said Yan. [my emphasis]

Granted, after confirmation that Abu Zubaydah was shipped off secretly to Thailand to be tortured, Bout ought to be more worried about being whisked from the US to Thailand rather than being whisked from the Thailand to the US (though who knows anymore, really). But the possibility (which I consider unconfirmed) that the US wanted to ship Bout off to the US without extradition proceedings is rather curious, not least because we seem to be taking our sweet time in issuing an extradition request now.

Add in the news (via the Blotter) that the Russians are getting cranky with the Thais over their treatment of Bout.

Russia has protested to Thailand over alleged violations in the rights of Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, recently arrested in a police operation in Bangkok.

"On April 11, Supot Theerakaosal, the ambassador of the Kingdom of Thailand, was summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry, and a representation was made to him over the violations of the rights of Russian citizen V. Bout, arrested in Thailand at the request of the U.S.," the Foreign Ministry said without elaborating.

Bout, 41, was arrested in March in a joint police operation led by the U.S. Washington is seeking Bout's extradition on charges of illegal weapons deals with militant groups, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda, in Middle East and African countries.

Bout's brother said on Thursday U.S. officials had tried to take him to the U.S. without the move being sanctioned by a court.

Thai authorities said on Wednesday that they would not bring charges against Bout, but would keep him in custody pending a decision on a U.S. extradition request.

Again, this could just be the kind of intervention any country might make for a prominent—albeit crooked—citizen arrested and held without charge for a month. But the alleged irregularities sure have me wondering, again, what Bout was referring to when he referred to the game. And it makes me wonder whether the Russians are rather more active participants in Bout's game than they're making out, and whether Bout's efforts to arm FARC weren't backed by Russia somehow (which would, in turn, suggest the cross-border raid from Colombia into Ecuador might be part of the game, too).

If so, given Russia's growing influence and the US' declining influence, the game may well not be over yet.