



TURKEY'S QUEST FOR AIR DEFENSE: IS THE S-400 DEAL A PIVOT TO RUSSIA?

SUMMARY

In an attempt to build up its air defense systems, Turkey is finalizing a deal to purchase the Russian S-400 weapons system. Ankara's decision is in part a response to the threat posed by Russian involvement in Syria. Turkey is hoping that cultivating closer ties with Moscow might remove Russia as a threat. But, as this paper illustrates, the deal fails to address Turkey's security concerns, further alienates its NATO allies, while providing Moscow more leverage over Ankara.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ As Russia takes an aggressive stance in Syria, Turkey is frustrated with NATO for dragging its feet on security assistance and differences in threat perceptions.
- ◆ Turkey wants to become more independent in its defense technology, but remains reliant on other states for air and missile defense systems.
- ◆ The deal is hardly a sign of a strong Turkey-Russia strategic partnership. On the contrary, Turkey still views Russia as one of the biggest threats to its national security.
- ◆ Russia has used trade as a point of strategic leverage against Turkey in the past. This latest deal only deepens Turkey's vulnerability to Russian policies.
- ◆ Turkey's zigzagging on issues with Russia, such as Crimea's annexation, demonstrates Ankara's increasingly weak hand in relation to Moscow.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defense system has been a topic of much discussion in the West. Western capitals see the purchase as a snub to the NATO alliance and the latest sign of Turkey's pivot to Russia. But the deal is hardly a sign of a strong Turkey-Russia strategic partnership. On the contrary, the relationship is marred with distrust and competing interests. Turkey still views Russia as one of the biggest threats to its national security. In fact, Ankara's decision to purchase the S-400 system is in part a response to the threat posed by Russian involvement in Syria. In the minds of Turkish decision-makers, Russian aggression in Turkey's immediate neighborhood has rendered the development of Turkish national air defense capabilities all the more urgent. Frustrated with NATO over what Ankara sees as foot-dragging in response to Turkey's security concerns, Ankara has turned to Russia. But the purchase of the system does not meet Turkey's demands and presents more challenges than benefits.

TURKEY'S THREAT PERCEPTION OF RUSSIA HEIGHTENED

Turkey and Russia share a long, profound history of unease and mistrust. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Russian empire and the Ottomans fought many wars that largely resulted in Ottoman setbacks. And during the Cold War, Turkey acted as a NATO bulwark against the Soviets. Despite these historical geostrategic disagreements, the two nations have largely managed to compartmentalize

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their relations in recent history, separating political differences and economic interests. Trade ties and energy cooperation have steadily improved, even during times of geopolitical tension.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia war, however, destabilized Turkey and Russia's uneasy amity. The five-day war brought relations between Russia and the United States to their lowest point since the dark days of the Cold War, and Turkey was caught between its NATO ally and Russia. When the United States sent military ships to the Black Sea to provide hu-



humanitarian aid to Georgia, Russia pressured Turkey to request that the U.S. warship leave the area, using trade as a point of leverage.¹ Russian officials stranded Turkish trucks with traded goods at the Russian border for weeks, and despite threats from Ankara to retaliate, Turkey could not feasibly respond in kind.

Russia's use of trade to extract geopolitical concessions from Turkey ended the long-lasting practice of compartmentalization of economic and political relations between the two nations, highlighting Turkey's weakness vis-à-vis Russia. The incident was well noted by Ankara.

The conflict in Syria heightened Turkey's threat perceptions still further. U.S. Patriot missiles were deployed at the Gaziantep 5th Armored Brigade Command in Turkey's

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southeast after it appealed to its NATO allies to guard against aerial threats from Syria. Though the United States, Germany, Netherlands, and Spain provided Patriot missiles for protection of the Turkish-Syrian border, Ankara criticized the delayed arrival of the batteries.

Russian military buildup in Syria has been of particular concern for Ankara. Russian warplanes violated Turkish airspace several times during Moscow's bombing campaign in Syria aimed at bolstering the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The Turkish military also complained that Russian missile systems harassed Turkey's warplanes patrolling the Syria border. The Turkish foreign ministry summoned the Russian ambassador several times, protesting that unidentified MiG-29 had harassed Turkish jets.²

Relations between Turkey and Russia reached their lowest point in 2015, when Turkey downed a Russian jet along the Syrian border, claiming that it had violated Turkish airspace. The incident led to a collapse in bilateral ties. In retaliation, Russia deployed S-400 anti-aircraft missiles at the Hmeimim airbase in Syria, imposed trade sanctions, and suspended

Russian package tours to Turkey, hurting Turkey's economy. President Vladimir Putin declared that restrictions would not be lifted until Russia received an apology from Turkey. A desperate then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had little choice but to apologize to the Russian strongman.³ The incident was another reminder to Turkey

that Russia could threaten Turkey's security and economy, and that Ankara had very little leverage over Moscow.

Following the crisis, NATO agreed on a Turkish air defense package to enhance the country's air and naval presence, which included



maritime patrol aircraft and an AWACS platform in the eastern Mediterranean provided by German and Danish ships.⁴ NATO also provided an extra deployment of Italian SAMP/T and an Arleigh Burke class U.S. ship to be deployed in the Black Sea.⁵ But Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States later withdrew their Patriots, despite Turkish objections. These developments strengthened calls to develop Turkey's own capabilities.

TURKEY'S AIR DEFENSE NEEDS

Turkish desire for air and missile defense capabilities dates back to the First Gulf War, when Turkey faced Scud threats from Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Ever since, Turkey has made several attempts to reduce its vulnerability in air and missile defense through foreign acquisition, co-production, and finally indigenous development of low-to-medium altitude, short-to-medium range systems.

But Russian aggression in Turkey's neighborhood as well as what Ankara saw as NATO's less than enthusiastic approach to Turkey's security needs have made the matter more urgent in the eyes of Turkey's leadership. Many quietly cite Iran as a threat as well. Turkish decision-makers think that NATO's missile defense architecture does not meet Turkey's heightened security needs and the alliance does not fully understand the urgency of threats Turkey is facing.

Indeed, given Turkey's geographical proximity to aerial threats from the Middle East, the existing NATO ballistic missile defense architecture doesn't provide total protection to Turkish territory, leaving out the eastern provinces. Turkey hoped to have a greater role in the NATO system by hosting an X-band early-warning radar in the Turkish town of Kurecik. The radar has the capability

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to detect ballistic missile launches from the Middle East. However, a ballistic missile interceptor such as the Standard Missile (SM-3), cannot engage a missile midcourse when launched from the Middle East to eastern Turkey, due to its very short trajectory.⁶

Turkey needs a separate defense against shorter-range threats through the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) or equivalent systems. The United States, in its European Phased Adaptive Approach, has stated that THAAD could be introduced to enhance coverage for such gaps.⁷ For Turkey's entire southeastern border, approximately four THAAD systems would be required. It is unlikely, however, that a THAAD system would be permanently stationed in eastern Turkey and a tempo-



rary deployment would not placate Turkish decision-makers' concerns.

There is also a disagreement in threat perceptions between Turkey and relevant NATO parties. While the Pentagon perceives Patriot deployment as a largely symbolic gesture, Turkey considers the presence of the systems highly significant. Turkish defense circles are in consensus on the need to shift its air and missile defense reliance away from

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external sources to its own indigenous defense capabilities. Leaders of the Justice and Development Party (A.K.P) strongly argue that the unsustainable measures and political barriers that technology-providing countries, such as the United States, impose to protect their competitive advantage will require Turkey to eventually develop technology itself as part of its procurement plan.

To that end, Turkish military electronics producer, ASELSAN, and the missile contractor, Roketsan, have started to manufacture low and mid-altitude air defense systems.⁸ In terms of longer-range, however, an indigenous system cannot be effective against air and missile threats without a sufficient num-

ber of batteries and accompanying radar and early warning systems that would provide tracking information. Without technology transfer, Turkey is likely to run up high costs and encounter technical difficulties; the country has yet to take the pre-requisite technological jumps in detection, exo-atmospheric missile interception, or space technologies. In 2014, with these considerations in mind, Turkey cancelled a \$3.4-billion tender provisionally awarded to China to devel-

op a long-range missile defense system. The cancellation came when China refused the transfer of technology to Turkey.⁹

NATO in fact encourages the allies to develop and contribute their own national capabilities, in addition to basing support. However, the key to

NATO missile defense cooperation is interoperability.

TURKEY'S DECISION TO PURCHASE S-400

The S-400 will not interoperate with the NATO systems. Despite that, in September 2017 President Erdogan announced that Turkey had finalized a deal to purchase the S-400 from Russia and had already paid a deposit of \$2.5 billion.¹⁰ Turkey is hoping that cultivating closer ties with Moscow might remove Russia as a threat, but Ankara's hopes are misplaced.



Moscow has been cautious in announcing the finalization of the arms deal and delivery schedule. The head of the Russian state corporation Rostec, which produces the S-400 systems, stated that the technology transfer was not negotiated with Turkey.¹¹ Russian media also reported that Russia would not offer Turkey access to the command and control, software, and maintenance of the S-400 system, so as to avoid NATO access to sensitive Russian technology; the technology would be “black boxed.”¹²

Turkish officials initially responded that Russia’s denial of technology would be a deal breaker.¹³ Since then, Ankara has changed its rhetoric and taken steps to accommodate the limitations of the deal. On November 8, Turkey signed a letter of intent with France and Italy to cooperate on military electronic and air defense systems. Turkish Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli announced that the countries would work jointly to develop, produce, and use the SAMP/T system.¹⁴ Canikli’s statement demonstrates that Ankara hopes to buy the Russian S-400 as an off-the-shelf purchase for immediate needs, in addition to longer term cooperation to eventually acquire European technology.¹⁵ However, neither the European partners nor Russia have confirmed that these are done deals.

As a stopgap solution, Turkey’s S-400 procurement would boost its air defense ca-

pabilities with surface-to-air missiles against airborne threats, particularly aircraft. However, the stand-alone, national system would not interoperate with the Turkish Air Force’s Link 16, a military tactical data exchange network used by NATO. Moreover, it would not provide defense against ballistic missile threats, given that is not attached to NATO’s air and ballistic missile defense architecture, which consists of layers of early warning ra-

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dars, sensors, and interceptors. The S-400 would also not benefit from NATO’s network-based Air Defense Ground Environment (NADGE) and satellite detection capabilities, which would significantly deteriorate the system’s performance. Taking Article 5 into consideration, Turkey’s S-400 system would contradict NATO’s aerial assets and the identification, friend or foe policy, whether in supporting Turkey in the case of conflict or Turkey supporting another NATO ally. Bringing a Russian strategic system into a NATO country along with the Russian soldiers and personnel that would need to train their Turkish counterparts also poses operational concerns and considerations.



The purchase of the Russian system presents further challenges to Turkey. Turkey-Russia talks on the S-400 sale have already strained Turkey's ties with its NATO allies. Though Turkey sees no issue in purchasing a stand-alone Russian system as the "best deal it got," while fulfilling its responsibilities as a NATO member, its allies, the United States in par-

independently protect itself against airborne threats nor stop Russia from posing a threat to Turkey geopolitically. On the contrary, the deal is likely to make Turkey more vulnerable to Russian policies. Turkey is already the junior partner in the relationship, highly dependent on Russia for its energy needs. Russia is Turkey's third largest trade partner and ranks third in Turkey's imports. This dependency has rendered Turkey vulnerable to Moscow's policies. In the past, Russia has not hesitated to use trade as a weapon against Turkey when Ankara's policies threatened

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ticular, appear to strongly disagree. Maryland Senator Ben Cardin, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has already warned the Trump administration that Turkey's purchase of a Russian air defense system would violate U.S. sanctions against Russian defense and intelligence sectors and could impact U.S. security assistance and arms sales to Turkey.¹⁶ While Turkey is a member of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Consortium, voices in the United States have attempted to block Turkey's acquisition and operation of the next generation fighter. Others in the United States have encouraged the removal of some 50 U.S. B-61 gravity bombs hosted at the Incirlik Airbase and called for reduced reliance on the base in counter-ISIS operations.¹⁷

The Russian air defense system acquisition would neither give Turkey the capabilities to

Russian interests. The purchase of the S-400 not only fails to meet Turkey's security needs in missile defense but also further weakens Turkey's hand vis-a-vis Russia and limits Ankara's room for maneuver in its immediate neighborhood.

COMPETING INTERESTS STAND IN THE WAY OF A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

Russia is also wary of Turkey's policy of enhancing its influence in the South Caucasus. Ankara appears to be pursuing a policy of containing Russian influence by fostering closer ties with the countries of the region. In October, Ankara signed a defense deal with Georgia and Azerbaijan in an effort to strengthen military and defense industry



ties.¹⁸ From the Kremlin's perspective, Turkey is actively facilitating NATO encirclement of Russia.

More recently, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway (B.T.K.) linking Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia was inaugurated. Russia sees the railway as subverting its interests. The B.T.K. is being hailed as the final piece of the New Silk Road, a multimodal trade route linking China to Europe via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. This key transport route aptly bypasses Russia and the sanctions it imposes on E.U. goods; therefore, enhancing E.U.-East Asian trade and liberating the New Silk Road from potentially its greatest barrier, Russian sanctions.¹⁹

Turkey is courting closer ties with Ukraine as well. The two countries signed an agreement in 2016 on joint manufacturing of aircraft engines, radars, military communication and navigation systems.²⁰ Most recently, the two governments have pushed to strengthen economic ties through the Turkish-Ukrainian High-Level Strategic Council. In October, Erdogan met with the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko during the Council meeting in Kiev and the two sides signed a number of cooperation agreements designed to raise trade volumes from the current \$4 billion to \$10 billion.²¹

Moscow's annexation of Crimea added friction to Russia-Turkey relations. Ankara's in-

terest in the peninsula is not only because of its location as a strategic energy corridor along the Black Sea, but also Turkey's historic ties with the Turkic Crimean Tartars. Yet Turkey has pursued an ambivalent approach towards Crimea, further highlighting Turkey's weakness vis-à-vis Russia. At times, Turkey has been vocal in its criticism and has refused to harbor ships arriving from Crimea.²² Other times, Ankara has quietly accepted the status quo and granted entry to ships coming from the peninsula. More recently, Erdogan dialed up his criticism of the Russian annexation of Crimea during a recent trip to Ukraine, which has provoked a strong reaction from Moscow.²³

Moscow is watching warily as Ankara tries to enhance its strategic posture in Russia's backyard. Ankara is also closely monitoring Russian actions in what Turkey considers

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as its own backyard: Syria and Iraq. Ankara, which was vehemently opposed to the Iraqi Kurdish referendum, was uneasy when the Russian Foreign Minister expressed sympathy for Kurdish national aspirations.²⁴

Turkey was already concerned about the close cooperation between the Kurdish



Democratic Union Party (P.Y.D.) in Syria, which Ankara views as a national security threat. To Turkey's dismay, Russia proposed a draft constitution earlier this year, which included Kurdish autonomy.²⁵ More recently, Moscow decided to invite the P.Y.D. to a congress of Syrian ethnic groups in Sochi in November, and announced that the party would be included in the Astana talks. These decisions have become thorns in bilateral relations.²⁶ Despite Turkey's objections, Russian officials continue to argue that the P.Y.D. must be at the table when discussing the future of Syria.

A recent announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Putin urged all Syrian parties to participate actively in the Geneva political process,²⁷ making clear that the P.Y.D. is invited to take part in negotiations. Though President Erdogan criticized the joint statement on his way to

Turkey's zigzagging behavior further highlights Ankara's weak hand in its relations with Russia. The 2008 Georgia war was a sobering moment for Turkey. Ankara then realized that it had little room to maneuver in the South Caucasus without Russian consent. Russia's military buildup in Syria was another wake-up call for Turkey. Given U.S. reluctance to abandon the Syrian Kurdish militia in its war against ISIS, Turkey is now firmly in the Russian orbit in Syria. Ankara knows all too well that its policy focused on containing Kurdish advances in Syria is at the mercy of Moscow.

CONCLUSION

The S-400 deal not only fails to address Turkey's security concerns; it also provides another leverage to Moscow over Ankara. The 2008 Georgia war and the developments following the Turkish downing of the Russian jet in 2015 have shown that the era of compartmentalization of political and economic relations is over between Russia and Turkey. Russia will not hesitate to use every means of leverage available to make sure Turkey does not threaten Russia's strategic interests.

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visit President Putin,²⁸ he quickly changed his tune after their diplomatic meeting and expressed support for the deal between Russia and the United States.²⁹

Ankara now considers the S-400 acquisition as a "done deal" to be deployed in 2019 and plans to demand technology transfer for a second system.³⁰ Although Turkish officials are trying to assure NATO allies that its



S-400 deal with Moscow is not a snub to the alliance—such as by emphasizing the Eurosam deal instead—NATO circles remain unconvinced.³¹

Turkey went to great lengths to finalize the deal with Russia at the expense of its NATO allies. In return, it seems Ankara only got more headaches.



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