

Autonomy in Arms

Turkey's Weapons Procurement and the S-400 Missile System

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(Turkey's National Defense Ministry - Anadolu Agency)

For decades, the Turkish defence system has relied on support and permission from both NATO and United States. However, decades of failure from the United States to adequately support Turkey's defence needs has prompted Ankara to develop its defence system through external means. Turkey's recent acquisition of the S-400 system reflects a valid need to protect itself against regional threats. Washington's opposition to Turkey's purchase of the defence system, demonstrated through sanctions, shows less of American concern for Turkey's military actions and more of American fear over Turkey's — as well as other countries' — future intentions to diversify the suppliers of its defence industry. However, the US should recognise Turkey's need to maintain peace and stability in the region and backtrack on its rhetorical and sanctions-based opposition to the purchase of the S-400 defence system.

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Introduction

Turkey's strategic location is of the utmost importance. Since the end of the Second World War, Turkey has had to overcome various regional threats. While the Soviet Union represented the greatest threat during the Cold War, new sources of instability have emerged in the post-Cold War world, especially in the Middle East. As a NATO member, Turkey has always supported its allies in such confrontations. Since Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait in 1990, Turkey has tried to create a fully-fledged defence configuration to cope with hostile regional actors. However, Turkey's air defence system is outmoded and insufficient, potentially compromising its own national security, as well as that of its allies. Today, the Turkish government aims to establish an effective air defence system by purchasing the S-400 system from Russia and joining the F-35 project as a partner. Here, I will outline why Turkey is in genuine need of such an air defence system and why Washington's opposition to this procurement is not based in sound reasoning.

History of US-Turkey Relations

The first point of note is that Turkey's demonstrated will to develop its national defence industry from an increasingly diverse supply of sources is strictly in response to its disappointing experiences in bilateral relations with the United States. This disappointment has been felt since the 1960s.

In 1950, upon the call of the US, Turkey sent its military forces thousands of miles away to Korea. After becoming a NATO member in 1952, Turkey aligned its national security strategy with the priorities of the alliance. It did not invest in its own defence industry and began to fulfil almost all of its needs from the US. In addition, Turkey reluctantly allowed the deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles on its territory, which could have caused a confrontation with the Soviet Union. However, the United States has not responded to Turkey's cooperative attitude accordingly. In 1964, when Turkey began preparations for a military intervention in Cyprus in order to save the Turkish Cypriot community from ethnic cleansing, a letter from Washington shocked the Turkish government. President Johnson urged Turkey not to intervene in Cyprus by using American weapons and clearly stated that NATO could not help Turkey in case of a Soviet attack. Maybe the most striking example of this US attitude is the arms embargo imposed on Turkey after the Cyprus Peace Operation in 1974. The US Congress halted the transfer of weaponry and ammunition, which had already been approved to be delivered, to Turkey. Over the years, other similar examples have marked the Turkish-US military partnership. Since 1990, even weaponry that was already paid for by Turkey was subjected to conditions by the US Congress.

Turkey, however, has learned from these experiences. From the mid-1960s onwards, Turkey started taking gradual steps to develop its own national defence industry. The National Defence Doctrine of 1978 was a part of this process. Following this decision, Turkey's national defence industry began significantly shift away from foreign dependence. In addition, by diversifying the sources of its supply, Turkey started to counteract US political pressure through arms sales.



(Sefa Karacan - Anadolu Agency)

The Deployment and Activation of S-400s

Turkey is a NATO member. However, this does not mean that the whole Turkish Armed Forces are under the NATO command and control system. Turkey has four armies within its land forces. Three of them fall under NATO command, but the fourth army, or the Aegean Army, remains outside of this structure. This structure is not unique among NATO members. If Turkey decides to deploy the fourth army, any concurrent use of the S-400 missiles will not result in S-400 integration into NATO command. Moreover, NATO has a radar station in Kürecik, which was established for air defence in 2012. Thus, being out of NATO command would not be harmful to the alliance.

Some argue that the S-400 missile system will be installed for active use in case of necessity but will not be switched on in times of peace, with the exceptions of maintenance and manoeuvres. I, however, do not agree with this argument, as air defence systems are installed to be able to respond to a sudden attack. Since World War I, we can observe that most wars do not begin with declarations but rather, with pre-emptive attacks. The vital feature of air defence systems is their ability to function as a deterrent of attack. To effectively deter against potential aggressors, the system must constantly be in service. Hence, this missile system was not acquired to rust in depots.

Turkey has been in need of an effective air defence system since the 1990s. Ankara sought to acquire the American Patriot missile system for years. However, this process ultimately failed because of obstacles created by the Amer-

ican side. Turkey struggled and took many risks in order to procure the S-400s. After all these efforts, it is unwise to think that these missiles would not be activated. This deal was not made for appearance's sake; the S-400s represent a crucial part of the national defence system. Moreover, it should also be mentioned the transfer of technology is an additional important aspect of the S-400 deal. A built-in provision related to technological and knowledge transfer will allow Turkey to develop a national air defence system. Yet, this purchase should not be viewed as aggressive; Turkey is installing this system with defensive aims, to deter against attack. A key example of its effective use would be in the military based in İncirlik. The S-400 system can effectively defend this base, if it is attacked, a reality that should reassure Turkey and its allies.

CAATSA

Furthermore, the argument that Turkey would not activate the S-400 missiles is based on misinformation regarding CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act). Some commentators remark that the US will impose an embargo unless Turkey halts the installation of the S-400 system. This is also not the case.

CAATSA was passed in 2017 to impose sanctions on Iran, North Korea and Russia in an effort to combat their influences across the globe. According to the act, the US Congress identify the companies and persons in violation of the act and report them to the President of the United States. The CAATSA sanctions are solely about natural and legal persons. For example, if a specific Turkish company is doing business with Russia or a certain member of the board of directors within that company is doing business with Russia, they can be targeted with these sanctions. The US government can, among other things, freeze the guilty persons' assets in the US, impose a prohibition of entry to the US, or refuse to provide credit from American Eximbank. Therefore, sanctions do not directly and totally apply to the Turkish state. Through CAATSA, the US President cannot impose a general embargo on Turkey, which would affect the whole economy of the country. There is another relevant clause within CAATSA: "The President may delay the imposition of sanctions [...] with respect to a person if the President certifies to the appropriate congressional committees, not less frequently than every 180 days while the delay is in effect, that the person is substantially reducing the number of significant transactions[...] in which that person engages." It is apparently understood that the President may delay the impositions of sanctions again at the end of six months.

Mr. Trump voiced a very important expression after a meeting with President Erdoğan at the G20 summit in Osaka: "Turkey was not treated fairly by the Obama Administration". Presumably, Mr. Trump had been given



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (L) visits US Patriot Battery Troops at the 5th Battalion in Turkey's Gaziantep province on October 10, 2014. (Orhan Çiçek / Anadolu Agency)

briefed about various policy options before this meeting. One of the policies proposed that he should adopt a tough attitude against Turkey's S-400 decision, just as in the Brunson crisis. It is understood that, however, among those briefs, there is one that stated that Turkey should be treated fairly, that Turkey is in need of an air defence system, that Turkey firstly knocked US' door to buy it, that Turkey looked to Russia upon the refusal of the US, and that the deal was done before CAATSA was enacted. The US President clearly took this background into consideration while forming his opinions on the matter. Turkey is an ally of the US, hosts US airbases and NATO facilities, has the second-largest military force in NATO, has taken part in all NATO out-of-area operations since 1996, was blocked from purchasing the Patriot missiles on several occasions. What could Turkey do in this circumstance?

The F-35 Project

The F-35 Lightning II aircraft is not solely a US product; it has been produced by a consortium, which operates in accordance with decisions adopted collectively. Turkey has participated in this project and signed up to buy 100 F-35s. It has invested heavily in the F-35 programme, with Turkish companies producing 937 of the aircraft's parts. In addition, although Turkey has already paid about \$1.5 billion from the total amount, a number of pilots were trained and only four F-35s were delivered. Moreover, Washington had raised no objections while Turkey was negotiating the S-400 deal with Russia. Only after the S-400 deal was done did some circles start saying that it would not be appropriate to deliver F-35s to Turkey. In my opinion, suspending F-35 deliveries to Turkey or removing Turkey wholly from the project is unacceptable because it is not only contradictory to the specific rules that were initially defined within the scope of the deal, but it also the general principles of ethics. President Erdoğan defines it as a "seizure"; I may well go beyond by calling it "aggravated fraud."

It is alleged that the US fears that Russian involvement in Turkey's air defences, operating alongside the F-35, could

enable Moscow to extract useful intelligence. Frankly speaking, I do not believe that this is genuinely the American government's concern. The Turkish government proposed to form a joint commission to clarify any technical issues regarding the S-400's deployment, but the US has failed to give a response to this proposal. President Trump initially declared this to be "not a bad idea", but this approach was later blocked by certain circles. NATO also cannot respond to this proposal because of America's reluctance.

Furthermore, S-400 systems have been deployed in Syria and Israeli F-35s are flying over them. If the S-400s in Syria cannot extract intelligence from Israeli F-35s, how could Turkish ones possibly achieve this? It seems that the problem is not stemming from the concerns about intelligence or strategic preponderance in the region, but rather, comes from the arms trade.

Arms Trade

According to a recent report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), total international trade in arms is now worth about \$100B. The report estimates that the US now accounts for 34% of all global arms sales, which are at their highest level since the late 1990s. The report also shows that Russia's share in the global arms industry accounts for 22%. The amount of total military expenditure is about \$1.7 trillion.

One should bear in mind that the arms trade does not simply mean buying weapons. This commercial activity indirectly creates a kind of continuity, if not a dependence, in bilateral relations since it also necessitates the future purchase of spare parts and maintenance. In the current situation, a NATO country is purchasing an air defence system that is at least three or four times stronger, in terms of deterrence, than the US's air defence system. Once the system is installed in Turkey and demonstrated to work, other countries will likely attempt to purchase other systems from other sources, including Chinese defence systems.

Let us approach this issue from a broader perspective. Today, there is an ongoing trade war between the US and China. Moreover, in 20 years China and India will be the top two economic powers in the world, thanks to the production and trade of goods based on advanced technology. The US is trying to respond to these considerable challenges in all fields. Most evidently, it utilises strong trade barriers to mitigate the advantages of other countries. In addition, it tries to prevent other countries from taking bigger shares in industries which the US traditionally dominates, using all methods at its disposal. We have already witnessed this type of strategy being implemented against US competitors in various industries, such as IT or the automotive sector. The impetus behind the struggle against Chinese cell phone brands or German car manufactur-



Deputy Spokesperson of U.S. Department of State, Robert Palladino speaks during a press briefing on Turkey's attempt to purchase S-400 missile systems from Russia at the State Department in Washington, United States on March 5, 2019. (Yasin Öztürk Anadolu Agency)

ers is the same motive that drives the struggle against non-American weapons systems.

That is why Turkey's attempt to buy the S-400s caused concern and anxiety in the US. Here, we should remember that President Trump's letter stating that Turkey was removed from The Generalised System of Preferences reached Ankara on the same day that NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, said "I do believe that we shouldn't provide F-35s if there is an S-400 in Turkey."

Hostile Groups and Lobbies in the US

The deployment of the S-400 missile system is a necessity that only serves to bolster Turkey's air defence. However, most Americans do not have any idea why Turkey wants to purchase S-400 air defence systems. In fact, they would probably agree with Turkey's reasoning upon hearing their argument. Following the 2003 Iraq War, Turkey wanted to purchase Patriot systems, but the American side created numerous problems for the purchase. Turkey had tried to defend itself temporarily with Patriot batteries, which had been borrowed from other NATO countries. Now, Turkey intends to permanently meet the deficit in its air defence.

On the other hand, there are certain groups and lobbies in the US trying to make trouble for Turkey. For instance, CAATSA was purposely mooted by groups, which I have previously referred to as "the opponents of Turkey". Foremost is the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ). Members of FETÖ are very active in the corridors of the US Congress. In addition, there are some lobbies that have been traditionally hostile towards Turkey, particularly in regard to Turkey's independent foreign policy. Those opponents

are uniting to create an uproar by inappropriately highlighting CAATSA sanctions despite their inapplicability to the Turkish state. The Act is designed to be applied against America's adversaries, not its allies.

Relations between the President and the Congress

Despite Congress's bipartisan pressure to impose CAATSA sanctions on Turkey, President Trump initially resisted. There are strong parallels between the disagreement between Trump and Congress on S-400s and the arms embargo that was imposed in 1974. At that time, when President Nixon had to resign to avoid impeachment for the Watergate scandal, the arms embargo decision against Turkey was taken by the great majority of the Congress, despite the disapproval of the new President. Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State, tried to thwart the embargo by saying that "it would weaken the south-eastern flank against the Soviet Union." However, these attempts did not stop the Congress.

While President Trump tried to stop sanctions against Turkey on the grounds of national security, it was very difficult to get a positive result since Congress favoured the imposition of sanctions. Hence, the Trump administration imposed CAATSA sanctions on Turkey on December 14th, 2020, shortly after both the House of Representatives and

Senate passed the National Defense Authorisation Act, requiring the President to impose sanctions if enacted. Thus, the State Department announced that the US had imposed full blocking sanctions and visa restrictions on the Republic of Turkey's Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB).

Conclusion

The US government is well aware that it needs to be a leader in trade and economy if it is to maintain its global leadership. To do so, it seeks to keep its leadership in the arms trade, as well as in other industries. Without question, weapons play an entirely different role in trade relations because being a leading trade partner of a country in defence-related industries provides a real opportunity to influence that country's foreign policy. To overcome such an influence, Turkey's national defence industry should be strengthened, and trade partners diversified.

Turkey, as a NATO member located in a turbulent region, is in need of an effective deterrent air defence system. So far, western allies, including the US, have not met Turkey's needs. Hence, Turkey is aiming at strengthening its national defence by finding a lasting solution, namely, obtaining S-400 systems and F-35 aircraft. These two weapons can be used simultaneously without being integrated, which means that deployment of S-400 systems in Turkey should not be considered as a threat to NATO or the US. On the contrary, securing Turkish territories and air spaces by these systems would make a vital contribution to peace and stability in the region.



(Ismail Hakkı Demir - Anadolu Agency)