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VIEWPOINT

Turkey's S-400: Political Defiance against the West?

*Dr. Indrani Talukdar**

On 12 July, Turkey received its first shipment of two S-400 air missile defence systems from Russia. This deal was sealed in 2017. Its signing had not gone down well with the US, Turkey's oldest ally. On July 17, US Department of Defence announced that the country has suspended the F-35 stealth strike fighter programme with Turkey and would initiate the process to remove Turkey formally. By 31 July 2019, the Turkish personnel who were associated with the programme had to leave US.¹ The Turkish companies were making some of the critical parts of F 35, including the fuselage, landing gear, and other components. They were already part of the supply chain.² These eight companies³ were helping in development and production of F-35s. Also, Turkish pilots were undergoing training at Luke Air Force base in Arizona. The US sees the Russian S-400 missile defence systems as intelligence collecting platforms. During a press release on Turkey's purchase of the S-400s, the White House Statement noted that the F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities.

¹“Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment Ellen M. Lord and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy David J. Trachtenberg Press Briefing on DOD's Response to Turkey Accepting Delivery of the Russian S-400 Air And Missile Defense System”, *U.S. Department of Defence*, July 17, 2019. <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1908442/under-secretary-of-defense-for-acquisition-and-sustainment-ellen-m-lord-and-dep/> (Accessed on July 18, 2018).

² Mercus Weisgerber, “Don't Sell F-35 To Turkey If It Buys Russian SAMs: Top NATO General”, *Defense One*, March 5, 2019. <https://www.defenseone.com/business/2019/03/dont-sell-f-35-turkey-if-it-buys-russian-sams-top-nato-general/155318/> (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

³The Turkish companies which were working on the F35 programme were Alp Aviation, AYESAŞ, Fokker Elmo, Havelsan, Kale Aerospace, Kale Pratt & Whitney Engine Industries, MIKES and Turkish Aerospace companies. They worked on manufacturing products and components of the plane. Turkey was involved in the program's system development and demonstration phase as a “level-3” partner. Cem Akalin, “Lockheed Martin Opens F-35 JSF Production Base to Turkish Journalists”, *Defence Turkey*, 2018.

<https://www.defenceturkey.com/en/content/lockheed-martin-opens-f-35-jsf-production-base-to-turkish-journalists-3118> (Accessed on August 2, 2019).

The statement also said that Ankara's purchase of the S-400 undermines the commitments all the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Allies made to each other to move away from Russian systems.⁴ The US Congress is pressing for sanctions on the country while the US President Donald Trump is reluctant to impose any, and has shown a sympathetic attitude.

According to President Trump, the Obama administration should be blamed for the deal and not Ankara for its decision to go ahead with the purchase of S-400. The rationale being that in 2009, Turkey had approached the US for another set of Patriot missile defence system but requested for an offset. In December 2018, the US State Department approved the sale of Patriot⁵ MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced Missiles (GEM-T) missiles, PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement (MSE) missiles and related equipment to Turkey. However, the US had not decided on the requested offset.⁶ The offset issue between Turkey and the US has been going for almost a decade. Meanwhile, Russia has not refused the offset clause with Turkey over the S-400's.

The NATO has not openly criticized Turkey and said that it is the decision of every NATO ally as to what kind of military equipment they buy.⁷ However, the discomfort within the organization is apparent. NATO feels that Turkey is a NATO member and normally would buy weapons from an allied-country suppliers that could be integrated with NATO's defense architecture.⁸ They are concerned about the interoperability of the two systems (S-400 and F 35s), cyber security, the Russians learning the sophisticated technology of the US that might be used against them as well as the imposition of sanctions by one NATO ally over another.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has not let the US threats or the uneasiness of NATO deter him from going ahead even after the approval of the Patriot Missile Defence System with the US. In a TV interview in 2018, he said that Turkey is not accountable to US.⁹ He has accused US of discriminatory behavior against Turkey over the S-400 missile defence system deal. He has pointed out that neither America nor NATO condemned or threatened

⁴“Statement by the Press Secretary”, The White House, July 17, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-64/> (Accessed on July 22, 2019).

⁵Turkey already has Patriot missile defence systems being deployed in its soil, the latest was on 2013. In 2012, the NATO decided to deploy another set of Patriot to Turkey so that it could defend its territories from the threat coming from Syria.

⁶“Turkey – Patriot Missile System and Related Support and Equipment”, *News Release: Defence Security Cooperation Agency*, Transmittal No. 18-17, December 18, 2018. https://dsc.mil/sites/default/files/mas/turkey_18-17.pdf (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

⁷“Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu”, *North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*, May 6, 2019. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_165854.htm. (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

⁸“Turkey Signs Missile Deal With Russia”, *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-01/news-briefs/turkey-signs-missile-deal-russia> (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

⁹“Erdogan vows not to cancel S-400 deal with Russia despite likely sanctions”, *TASS*, March 6, 2018. <https://tass.com/defense/992944> (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

Greece¹⁰, another NATO member and Ankara's oldest adversary, over its purchase of Russia's S-300 missile defence system which is deployed on the soil of the Greek Cyprus (Crete) since 1990s.¹¹ Hence, NATO's argument regarding Turkey buying weapons from allied-country suppliers that could be integrated with the organization's defense architecture becomes weak. Apart from Greece, Bulgaria and Slovakia also use Russia's S-300 missile defence system¹².

Turkey's decision to go ahead with the S-400 despite US threats can be seen from three aspects—an outcome of the long time grievances nursed by Turkey a shift in Ankara's policies, and a step of defiance.

Turkey and the West have been going through a rough phase in their relationship for some time. The Iraq war of 2003 brought out the fissures between Turkey and the US. The Turkish parliament refused to allow the American forces from opening a northern front against the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. Likewise, in 2007, Turkey had requested US to take action against the Kurdistan Workers Party (KPP) in northern Iraq. The Obama administration did not take any action which angered the Turkish government. Apart from the 2003 and 2007 crises between Turkey and the West, there were other problems such as the US's refusal of the delivery of the Patriot air defence batteries at the Turkey-Syria border in 2015, US support to the Kurds on the Syrian-Turkey border, America's refusal to hand over Fetullah Gulen, the main suspect for the 2016 coup and the non-delivery of the Turkish-EU refugee deal and the non-accession of the EU membership, all of which served to create a wedge between them.

Turkey's foreign and security policies have also undergone a transition. One of the major reasons for NATO to include Turkey as a member in 1952 was to counter the Soviet Union's influence in the region. Turkey nurtured its own fears vis-à-vis the USSR¹³. However, post-Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey no longer saw Russia as a threat. Ankara's focus, with a new government under Justice and Development Party (AKP) since 2000, also shifted to building its relationship with its neighbourhood. It began the 'strategic depth'¹⁴ foreign policy.

¹⁰Greece looked for the Russian air missile defence system after the Kardak crisis in the Aegean Sea of 1995-1996. During this crisis, Athens's was unable to defend itself from Turkey. Athens's concluded that the proportional arms sales that the US made to Greece and Turkey to strike a balance between the two countries were not helping Athens. Athens signed more air defence systems with Russia in 1999 and 2004. In fact, the Russian-made air defense systems are currently an integrated part of the air defense system of Greece, a NATO member. There is a rumour that US itself had bought S-400 in 1994 to study the system to produce its own. Mehmet Alaca, "Russian S-300s used by 3 NATO member countries", *AA.com*, March 11, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russian-s-300s-used-by-3-nato-member-countries/1449436>. (Accessed on July 18, 2019). Greece, along with Saudi Arabia, is also trying to get license from Russia to manufacture Kalashnikovs.

¹¹Greece's defence system relies mostly on purchase of Russian defence equipment.

¹²Saudi Arabia and Qatar are also in the final stage of negotiations with Russia over S-400 missile defence system.

¹³Turkey had the fear that the Soviet Union would demand the return of the Eastern Anatolian provinces of Kars and Ardahan and a large part of Black Sea coast southwest of Batum. [Galila Golan](#), *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War Two to Gorbachev*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pg.32.

¹⁴Ahmet Davutoğlu, former foreign minister of Turkey, came up with the 'strategic depth' doctrine. According to him, Turkey is a West Asian, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf and Black Sea

Further, Turkey's relationship with Russia has been improving. Both are closely involved in the Syrian crisis¹⁵ through the format of Astana Peace Talks. The two countries have also strengthened their bilateral cooperation, including in the sector of defence and civil nuclear energy. The close cooperation and understanding could be seen during the Kerch incident of 2018 when the Russian Navy had arrested Ukrainian sailors who crossed the straits. During the diplomatic tensions, Kiev asked Ankara to close the Bosphorus Strait in the Black Sea so that Russia would be denied access; Turkey refused to do so. Both countries are closely coordinating their positions at the regional and global levels. The leadership personalities of President Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin¹⁶ also help in the convergence of ideas such as on the formation of a multilateral/multipolar world order and the dismantling of a unipolar hegemony.

For Russia, Turkey's support for Moscow's interests in the Mediterranean will be important—strategically, security wise and economically¹⁷. The straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles give countries like Russia access to the Mediterranean Sea for trade; hence Moscow would not want any kind of tension with Turkey. It also does not want US or NATO or EU to pressurize Ankara to take actions against Russia if the need arose from any situation in the region.

For Turkey, apart from Russia's cordial relationships with all the countries in West Asia, including with Syria and Israel with whom Ankara does not share good relationship, the fear (though far-fetched) of the return of Kars and Ardahan and a large part of Black Sea coast southwest of Batum by Russia cannot be overlooked. Though Ankara is a member of NATO and Article 5 is applicable however, the guarantee from its NATO allies to defend it from Russia if, any is, weak. The NATO would not want to have any kind of confrontation, asymmetrical or

country and can have large influence in the global level. He also rejected the view that Turkey is a bridge between the West and Islam as this would have confined the country's role as an instrument for the promotion of other countries strategic interests. His vision was an integrated and multidimensional foreign policy for the country. Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "The Davutoğlu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy", *Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)*, April, 2010, pp.4-5.

<file:///C:/Users/Dr%20Indrani/Downloads/ELIAMEPWorkingPaper8-2010-Grigoriadis.pdf> (Accessed on July 19, 2019).

¹⁵Turkey and Russia got involved in the Syrian crisis in opposite camps. Ankara supported the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad while Moscow supported the Assad regime and the president as the legitimate government in Syria. However, with turn of events, especially, the US supporting the northeastern Syrian Kurds and the refusal of the Patriot missile system at the Turkish-Syrian border by the US pushed President Erdogan to no longer rely on the US led coalition but cooperate closely with the Kremlin. The refusal on Trump administration's part to hand over the Turkish religious leader Fetullah Gulen, the main accused for the 2016 coup and President Putin to be the first one to denounce the Turkish coup brought the two leaders close, whose cooperation one could see at the Astana peace talk along with Iran. Though President Erdogan does not support the staying of President Assad in power however, the rhetoric of his removal has lowered down. President Erdogan is more focused in fighting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), seen as a larger threat to the Turkish security.

¹⁶President Putin before the G20 summit in Osaka said that 'liberalism has become obsolete'. Lionel Barber, Henry Foy and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete'", *Financial Times*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>. (Accessed on July 4, 2019).

¹⁷Syria has leased Russia the energy fields for exploration and exploitation. Also, the TurkStream gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey is important in the energy security strategy of Russia.

symmetrical, with Russia, as already the security situation in the region is fragile with Syria and Yemen crisis going on, tensed relationship between Russia and the West over the crises, the fall

out between US and Iran over the nuclear deal and the tensed relationship between Israel and Tehran as well as Turkey and Tel Aviv.

The 2007 crisis between Turkey and US, where US refused to help Ankara to contain the emerging threat from the PKK, has not been forgotten by Turkey. America's action of not providing Ankara with the protection came across as if the country is not serious about Turkey's security.

Conclusion

Turkey's decision to buy the Russian S-400 missile defence system is a step of defiance, an outcome of the long lasting grievances Turkey has been nurturing against the West (including the non-accession of the EU membership¹⁸) and also a shift in Ankara's policies. A clear and strong message has gone to the West.

Though Ankara will no longer be a part of the F35 programme, there is a toning down in the rhetoric from the US and NATO. Apart from President Trump's reluctance on the imposition of sanctions on Turkey, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on 17 July refuted rumours of Turkey getting expelled from the alliance over the S-400. He set the record straight by saying that 'Turkey's membership in NATO runs "much deeper" than the F-35.'¹⁹ The US and NATO have to be careful with their actions regarding Turkey as the country is important for the organization not only geographically but as a key ally for the organisation's interests in the West Asian region. It will be a loss for the West if Turkey moves to the Russian camp, given the tensed relations Russia has currently with the west.

Though there is toning down in threats from the US president on sanctions but the US Congress is trying to impose sanctions on Turkey under the 'Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act' (CATSA). The buying of S-400 from Russia is a kind of two-fold loss to the

¹⁸Turkey has been trying to gain access to EU's membership from a long time. However, the EU has not included the country given various reasons such as enlargement fatigue (though accession of Macedonia is going on), poor economy of Turkey (though the GDP rate of Turkey is higher than that of Greece. Ankara's is at \$789.26 billion while Athens stands at \$249.10 billion), huge demography, non-recognition of Greek Cyprus as well as non-compliance to the EU criteria. Though the non-Christian identity of Turkey is not spoken openly however, in 2003-2004 during the debates 'on the draft European Constitution', it has been argued that the European Union is a Christian entity. It has been stated, especially by Valery Giscard d'Estaing as the President of the Convention, that Turkey cannot be a part of the EU because it does not have a Christian heritage and the great majority of its population is Muslim'. "The Likely Effects of Turkey's Membership Upon the EU", *T.R. Prime Ministry State Planning Organisation*, 2004, pg. 41. http://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/The_Likely_Effects_of_Turkeys_Membership_Upon-the_EU.pdf (Accessed on July 22, 2019).

¹⁹"Nato chief says Turkey remains important ally despite S-400", *Times of India*, July 18, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/nato-chief-says-turkey-remains-important-ally-despite-s-400-deal/articleshow/70270830.cms> (Accessed on July 18, 2019).

US—a kind of non-conformity by an ally and loss of business for the Lockheed company. Whether the US Congress will be successful in imposing the sanctions or not will have to be waited. The F35 programme has already been officially cancelled. What remains to be seen is how Turkey will

manage to balance the West and Russia, given the fact that Ankara stands to lose out on NATO air exercises where F35s will be used in future which will be an important part of the security element for Turkey too, like the other NATO members.

Russia has offered Sukhoi Su-35 to Turkey. Will Ankara buy them? If it buys then Ankara stands to slowly come out of the NATO security framework and goes closer to Russia.

Will closer cooperation with Russia also mean securing a membership at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which President Erdogan has been wanting, as an alternative option of the EU or will the West be able to win over Ankara?

** Dr. Indrani Talukdar, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs.*

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