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Turkey between NATO and Russia: The Failed Balance

Turkey's S-400 Purchase and Implications for Turkish Relations with NATO

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Turkey's purchase of a Russian S-400 air defense missile system has raised questions concerning Turkey's alliance with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the country's future intentions. Nonetheless, a break with NATO is unlikely, as alliance dependence is still applicable for both Turkey and other members. Turkish government circles have cast the recent purchase as a means to gain more autonomy from and/or better bargaining power with Western allies. However, the purchase of S-400s will not bring about the desired outcomes. Instead, it will generate a dual dependency characterized by vulnerability to Russia and an increased need for assurances from NATO. Turkey also seems to have reached the limits of its bargaining power, as the United States is placing more weight on punitive measures. The only explanation left for the purchase is the possibility that President Tayyip Erdoğan may be seeking a domestic rally effect via a confrontation with the United States to prevent possible challengers to his leadership from gaining momentum.

Russia is scheduled to deliver S-400s to Turkey in July 2019. Turkey and the United States are engaged in a high-level debate concerning the ramifications of the deal on the NATO alliance. Chairmen and ranking members of both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees of the US Senate delivered a bipartisan message via op-ed to assert their objection to Turkey's acquisition of both a Russian S-400 missile system and American F-35 advanced fighter aircraft, as well as to state their determination to activate sanctions against Ankara if Russia delivers the missiles. In response, the Turkish minister of defense voiced Turkey's

disagreement over the severity of risks of using S-400s and F-35s together and added that the US sanctions should target its enemies rather than an ally such as Turkey. The Turkish minister of foreign affairs also reiterated that the S-400 issue is a "done deal" and may not be annulled. Another confrontation took place between US Vice-President Mike Pence and his Turkish counterpart, Fuat Oktay. The two accused each other of risking the alliance via developing an affinity with each other's adversaries, Russia and the Syrian Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units), respectively.



This tension between the governments has refueled the debate on “Turkey breaking up with NATO.” Indeed, analysts and journalists in the United States have been questioning Turkey’s ties with the alliance for a long time.

Alliance Dependence Prevails

The question is whether these confrontations are a prelude to the end of Turkey’s NATO membership. Alliances are sustained not with perfect policy harmony, but instead are based on alliance dependence among the parties. Unless alliance dependence ceases, the tensions between Turkey and other NATO members serve to advance inter-alliance bargaining and do not necessarily signify alliance termination. Thus, a break between Turkey and NATO would be the extreme of all possible outcomes of the S-400s imbroglio.

Alliance endurance is determined by alliance dependence, which is based on indispensable security benefits. Thus, other than the termination of the need for these indispensable security benefits or the existence of a better alternative, a divergence in policy preferences among allies — even a major divergence — may not be a sufficient reason to end an alliance. Every strongly worded statements in the media made by high-level officials or diplomatic confrontations do not necessarily signal the end of an alliance. Media and analysts tend to overestimate the severity of crises in alliances without clear criteria for defining them.

In terms of alliance dependence, Turkey would not put the peace and deterrence provided by NATO at risk in a volatile neighborhood. This approach includes Russia-originated threats. Despite conjunctural cooperation between Turkey and Russia, the chances for a new strategic axis centered on the two countries is improbable. Rather, NATO is an important asset for Turkey, even in developing its relations with Russia, as membership eases the threat of domination by Moscow. As a NATO member, Turkey can rely on deterrence that

discourages regional adversaries from engaging in a full-scale military campaign against Turkey. This deterrence is no less important than having particular weapons, such as S-400s. NATO also supports inter-alliance peace between Turkey and Greece, thereby sustaining a delicate balance to prevent the Aegean dispute from turning into a military confrontation. Turkey has a long-term policy of participating in the international organizations that Greece joins in order to maintain parity. Leaving the most crucial one — NATO — would put Turkey in the difficult position of confronting the alliance alone. Lastly, Turkey would not want to give up the NATO nuclear umbrella, given that some of its neighbors possess (Russia) or are striving for the capability of developing (Iran) nuclear weapons.

From NATO’s perspective, Turkey’s departure from the alliance and the possibility of Ankara becoming an adversary would be a significant setback. A Turkey that acts in unison with Russia in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean would be strategically disadvantageous for NATO. Besides, in addition to the ethnic and religious background of Turkey’s population, it has a broad geographic reach that could not be replaced by another NATO ally. As a country with a Muslim-majority population, Turkey provides political legitimacy to NATO missions in Muslim countries, as seen in Afghanistan and Libya. Turkey still contributes to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and NATO’s peacekeeping operation in Kosovo.

S-400s for Autonomy and Domestic Concerns

In Turkey, government circles primarily cite political reasons in justifying the purchase of S-400 air defense missiles from Russia when they could have purchased alternatives from NATO members. All the arguments share three intersections: having closer relations with Russia, thereby making Turkey more autonomous vis-à-vis NATO; using this as a bargaining chip; and/or making the purchase for domestic purposes.

Government circles point at US reluctance to supply necessary high-tech weapons to Turkey (e.g., US Congress restrictions) and to the strict control over their use and transfer of technology. Bringing in Russia as an alternative supplier breaks the Western monopoly over arms sales and enables Turkey to negotiate a better deal with reluctant allies.

Domestic concerns related to foreign policy are also voiced by analysts close to the government. NATO allies are regarded as unreliable due to their perceived support of the July 15, 2016, coup attempt that targeted President Erdoğan, whereas Russia swiftly declared its support for Erdoğan. Thus, Russia is expected to back Erdoğan in the case of another coup attempt and, more importantly, S-400s would be a useful instrument in protecting Erdoğan from a domestic attack, particularly from the air forces. Besides, confrontation with the West delivers a rallying effect for President Erdoğan and provides an excuse for economic downturn in domestic politics. Seeking more autonomy in the international arena and making sovereign decisions concerning weapon purchases unite people behind Erdoğan. This is especially true during a time in which nationalism is on rise in Turkey.

Not More Autonomy but “Dual Dependency”

The purchase that was intended to bring more autonomy to Turkey could paradoxically lead to a “dual dependence” on both Russia and NATO, defined by a vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia and an increasing need for assurances from NATO. This would be the exact opposite of the intended outcome.

Turkey – Russia relations are currently fragile and transactional. After a Turkish Air Force fighter jet shot down a Russian Su-24 aircraft violating Turkish airspace near the Syria – Turkey border in November 2015, trust became a casualty of their bilateral relations. Even after Turkey apologized, contentious and confrontational developments in bilateral relations continued.

Russia did not reverse all sanctions after the apology, as a reminder of their displeasure. Moscow, furthermore, did not reinstate visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and still upholds some punitive measures, such as blocking the import of some Turkish agricultural goods. On this shaky ground, Turkey may not be able to maximize its interests through its relations with Russia.

Turkey’s purchase of the S-400s is not the right path to pursue the intended outcome of strategic autonomy. It is wrong to believe that when Turkey receives the S-400s it will simultaneously receive total control over them. These weapons are not like Bolshevik rifles used in Turkey’s Independence War after World War One. As a sophisticated weapon system, the producer reserves the possibility to meddle with and hinder the use of the system. In practice, the use of this system will be open to Russian influence and manipulation.

Turkey is solely focused on US concerns about the risk of Russian radars spying on F-35 aircraft. However, Russia may manipulate the weapon system in a manner that is counter to Turkey’s intentions. The weapon system may stop providing security in a time of dire need or target aircraft without Ankara’s authorization. Turkey may need further assurances from NATO to avoid vulnerabilities and limit possibly hostile Russian actions. Worse, the presence of S-400s on Turkish soil would make NATO assistance costlier.

Limited Space for Negotiation with the United States

The Turkish administration expected to make a grand bargain with President Donald Trump when he was elected into office; however, the prospects of using S-400s as a bargaining chip to bring about meaningful results are limited. Turkish government circles expected that – given his business background – President Trump would be open to negotiations concerning the following disputes inherited from the Obama administration: the YPG’s

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role in Syria, Fethullah Gülen's presence in the United States, and the violation of Iran sanctions by Turkish banker Mehmet Hakan Attila. S-400s could be an important bargaining chip to reach concessions on these three major disagreements, especially considering the strong reactions of the United States to Turkey's previous deal attempt for Chinese missiles.

From Trump's inauguration to the present, however, the United States has shown itself ready to levy punitive measures in negotiations with Turkey. In October 2017, the United States suspended the issuance of visas to Turkish citizens due to a dispute over the incarceration of US diplomatic personnel in Turkey. As the fragility of Turkey's economy has become more apparent, the United States has relied on more severe measures.

As a reaction to the incarceration of American pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey, the United States applied individual sanctions to two Turkish cabinet members and doubled tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Turkey. At present, the two countries seem to be running toward an even more damaging confrontation over the S-400s.

The punitive measures that the United States announced in response to Turkey's S-400 deal are unprecedented in post-Cold War bilateral relations. The United States has not only threatened Turkey with the introduction of CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions, which aim to halt Russian defense sales, but also to terminate Turkey's participation in the F-35 advanced fighter aircraft program. The former brings considerable risks to Turkey's already fragile economy, whereas the latter not only deprives Turkey of F-35s, it would also be detrimental to Turkish defense firms. Additionally, the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, a piece of bipartisan legislation, was introduced and advanced in the US Congress. This act would extensively favor the Greek side within the

Turkey–Greece balance in the Mediterranean, as it suggests lifting the arms embargo on Cyprus and deepening security cooperation with Greece.

Domestic Concerns May Encourage Risky Moves

Results of recent local elections and the rerun of the Istanbul mayoral elections have turned attention to domestic politics in Turkey. Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor-elect in Istanbul, has emerged as a national political figure and is now regarded as a possible alternative to President Erdoğan. Additionally, intra-party opposition within the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has become more apparent with the emergence of other potential challengers such as Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu. President Erdoğan may risk the detrimental effects of US sanctions to create a rallying effect and thereby attempt to prevent possible adversaries from gaining momentum.

Unless there is a sudden change in Turkey's position, the negotiations seem likely to move forward on the delivery of the S-400s in July by Russia and the implementation of sanctions by the United States. The latter may create a path dependency for Turkey, which may become more reliant on the Russian defense industry. Having no access to NATO's supply of crucial weapons, Turkey may be forced to buy more Russian-produced arms. Currently, there are also debates in Turkey about buying Russian Su-35s or Su-57s in case of the cancellation of F-35 deliveries.

US sanctions will not only affect Turkey's economy negatively but also provide a scapegoat (United States and NATO) for the Turkish economic crisis. Such a situation may cause an irreparable rise in anti-Western sentiment among the Turkish people. Public opposition in Turkey may bring limitations to future collaboration – even those based on mutual interest – between Ankara and other NATO allies.

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