

# US threatens Turkey over Russian S-400 air defence purchase

**Jordan Shilton****28 March 2019**

Turkish-US relations have deteriorated in recent weeks, with Washington threatening reprisals if Ankara goes ahead with the purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air defence system.

Relations between the two countries have been in a downward spiral for some time—especially since Washington made the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a “terrorist organization” and threat to the Turkish state, its main proxy army in its regime-change war in Syria, then supported a failed July 2016 coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Differences have since expanded to include an array of Mideast and even global issues. Washington is particularly alarmed by Ankara's attempts to offset pressure from its traditional western allies by forging closer ties with Russia and Iran.

Washington is adamant Turkey not finalize the purchase of the S-400, a long-range air and missile defence system, for \$2.5 billion, claiming that its deployment would disrupt US-Turkish and Turkish-NATO military-security cooperation.

In testimony before a congressional committee Tuesday, the acting US defense secretary, Patrick Shanahan, signalled that if Ankara proceeds with the S-400 purchase, Washington will block further shipments of F-35 fighter jets to Ankara and cut Turkish companies out of the F-35 project.

Asked if the Pentagon wants Turkey as an F-35 partner, Shanahan said, “We absolutely do,” then added, “We need Turkey to buy the Patriot.” This was a reference to Washington's offer to sell US-made Patriot missile batteries to Ankara for \$3.5 billion in lieu of the S-400.

If Turkey deploys the S-400 it will run afoul of US sanctions against Russia. The 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act empowers the president to impose sweeping sanctions on any individual, organization or state that enters into a “significant transaction” with the defence or intelligence sectors of the Russian Federation. Washington could also seek to intensify pressure on Ankara by refusing to grant Turkey an extension of the “waiver” exempting it from the unilateral and patently illegal US embargo on Iranian energy exports. Turkey is heavily reliant on Iranian natural gas.

Senior Trump administration officials have raised the prospect of Turkey being excluded from NATO activities,

citing interoperability concerns with the Russian-made missile system.

Erdogan has, nonetheless, repeatedly vowed that Turkey will buy and deploy the S-400. In his latest comments on the subject, made in an interview last Sunday with television broadcaster TGRT Haber, Erdogan declared that no matter what the United States says, Turkey will not reverse its position on the deal.

Erdogan's rebuke to Washington came just two days after he issued a critical statement protesting the Trump administration's decision to recognise Israel's illegal annexation of the Golan Heights. A Foreign Ministry statement subsequently declared, “This unfortunate decision... demonstrates that the US administration continues its approach to be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution in the Middle East.”

The dispute over the S-400 is a flashpoint for deeper conflicts bound up with Turkey's geopolitical and military-strategic orientation. A member of NATO since 1952 and a key Western ally during the Cold War, Turkey has been severely destabilised by American imperialism's more than quarter-century of uninterrupted war. Bordering Syria and Iraq to the south and with significant economic and political interests in the nearby regions of the Balkans and North Africa, Ankara was directly impacted by the first Gulf War, the Western-backed carve-up of Yugoslavia and NATO's bombardment of Serbia, the 2003 Iraq invasion, the 2011 air onslaught on Libya to topple Gaddafi, and the ongoing bloodbath in Syria.

The Turkish ruling elite, including under Erdogan and his AKP during their first decade in power, supported the succession of US wars and tried to advance its own interests through them. But the many shifts in US policy frequently cut across their interests and ambitions.

With Syria matters came to a head. Initially Erdogan enthusiastically supported the US fomented regime-change war in Syria and Ankara was a major co-sponsor of the Islamist militias that spearheaded the drive to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and his Baathist regime. But Turkey was incensed when, once those militias had been pushed back, the US forged an alliance with the YPG, a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), against which Ankara has waged a

brutal counter-insurgency war for over three decades. It was within this context that Turkey orchestrated a rapprochement with Russia and intensified cooperation with Iran.

For Turkey, rolling back the proto-state that the YPG has established in northern Syria remains the overriding goal of its Syria policy. Toward this end it has repeatedly sent forces into Syria, while maintaining a shaky alliance of convenience with Moscow and Tehran and cooperating with them in the so-called Astana Syrian “peace process.”

The Pentagon meanwhile continues to rely on the YPG to provide a base for its predatory operations in Syria, including by denying the Assad regime access to the country’s most important oil fields.

The American national security establishment has increasingly come to view Turkey as an obstacle to its goal of securing unbridled hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically critical Middle East. In a recent analysis published by the Arab Gulf States Institute, a Washington-based think tank, the authors argued that the Middle East is increasingly divided into three blocs: the Sunni Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia, an Iran-led alliance that includes Hezbollah, and a Turkish-led bloc. “Turkey’s role at the epicenter of a new Middle East alliance was consolidated by the 2017 boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Qatar has relied on Turkey, which maintains a military base in that country, for support against the boycott,” they add.

Within this context, Turkey’s decision on the S-400 missile defence system is seen as having far-reaching consequences. In an editorial published earlier this month, the *Financial Times*, one of the principal mouthpieces of the US and European financial elites, argued, “Turkey can still reset its relations with the West.” After noting that Erdogan “took power in Turkey in 2003, offering stable civilian leadership, a new drive for EU membership and a business-friendly approach,” the *Financial Times* went on to complain: “In recent years, Mr. Erdogan has moved towards authoritarianism, alienating western allies and adopting questionable stewardship of the economy. Choosing to purchase Russian military hardware has raised further concerns.”

Erdogan has used the dispute with Washington over the S-400 to capitalise on popular hostility to US imperialism ahead of Turkey’s March 31 nationwide municipal elections. However, he has given little indication he plans to alter his stance towards Washington after the elections. On April 8, the Turkish president is due to travel to Moscow for one-on-one talks with Vladimir Putin.

At the same time, and clearly with a view to exploiting the growing rift between Europe and America, Erdogan has announced that Turkey will renew its bid to join the European Union next month.

Commentary in pro-government Turkish media indicate the anger within elite circles over Washington’s failure to accommodate what they perceive as their vital interests, and

their fears that the country that has been Ankara’s principal military-security partner for decades can no longer be trusted. A common refrain is that if Turkey abandons the purchase of the S-400 and accepts Washington’s offer of the Patriot missiles, it could soon face additional US conditions, including making accommodations on Israel or Syria.

Turkish ruling circles also responded angrily to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s attendance at an energy summit involving Israel, Greece and Cyprus in Jerusalem March 20. Long-standing territorial disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean bound up with the Cyprus conflict, which pits a Turkish-recognised regime in the north of the island against the internationally-recognised Greek Cypriot government in Nicosia, have been compounded with the discovery of large natural gas resources under the sea floor.

That being said, Washington will undoubtedly bring tremendous pressure to bear on Ankara, including on the economic front. Just before Erdogan visits Moscow, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu will travel to a NATO foreign ministers meeting, where he is due to meet with Pompeo.

Any attempt by Turkey to move closer to Russia or China, which has invested heavily in Turkey over recent years and sought to win Ankara over to its Belt and Road Initiative, would be fraught with conflicts. Ankara’s disputes with the Western powers notwithstanding, the Turkish bourgeoisie still relies overwhelmingly on capital from Europe to invest in domestic projects, and the European Union remains far and away Turkey’s most important export destination.

As shown by last Friday’s 5 percent depreciation of the Turkish lira after Erdogan denounced Trump’s Golan decision and the crashing of the Turkish currency last August after the Trump administration doubled its tariffs on Turkey’s steel and aluminium exports, Turkey’s ruling elite is extremely vulnerable to pressure from the major imperialist powers.



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