

US escalates threats against Turkey, leverages election controversy

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5 April 2019

US Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used the presence of Turkey's foreign minister in Washington this week for a NATO foreign ministers' meeting and events marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the trans-Atlantic imperialist alliance to ratchet up US threats against Turkey.

In a public address Wednesday, Pence delivered an ultimatum to Ankara. Washington, he vowed, "will not stand idly by" while Turkey, a NATO member since 1952, "threatens the very cohesion of this alliance" by buying the Russian S-400 air defence system.

Spelling out that Washington will dramatically downgrade the US-Turkey military-strategic partnership, if not ultimately move to expel Turkey from NATO, unless Ankara bows to Washington's diktats, Pence declared: "Turkey must choose. Does it want to remain a critical partner in the most successful military alliance in history or does it want to risk the security of that partnership by making such reckless decisions that undermine our alliance?"

For his part, Pompeo, according to a US State Department readout of their meeting, told Turkish Foreign Minister Melvet Cavusoglu that Turkey faced "potentially devastating consequences" if it expanded its military incursion in Syria against the Kurdish YPG, without Washington's blessing.

The readout did not say what those "consequences" would be. But the Washington military-security establishment has insisted the US continue to deploy military personnel alongside its Kurdish YPG allies in northern Syria, at least in part as a warning to Ankara that should it attack them it could find itself in a military clash with the US. President Trump, it should also be recalled, threatened in January that the US would "devastate Turkey economically" if it attacked the Pentagon's Kurdish allies.

In the readout, State Department spokesperson Robert Palladino, also demanded Turkish President Recip Tayyip Erdogan and the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) drop their challenge, under the provisions of the country's electoral laws, to the initial vote-count of last Sunday's mayoral elections in Ankara and Istanbul. "Acceptance of legitimate election results" are "essential for any democracy," wrote Palladino.

With delivery of the first S-400 batteries to Turkey slated for June and Ankara spurning a US offer to instead buy its Patriot missile system, Washington has already begun to take retaliatory action. Reuters reported Monday that the US has suspended delivery to the Turkish military of parts and equipment related to the deployment of the F-35 stealth-fighter.

Other US actions, according to State Department officials, could include removing Turkish companies from the F-35 production chain, halting other US arms transfers to Turkey, and making Ankara a target of the draconian anti-Russia 2017 "Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act."

The latter contains a quiver of measures, escalating from travel bans and asset freezes targeting select individuals to punishing trade sanctions. Apart from the invocation of the Countering America's Adversaries Act, US officials have not revived, at least publicly, Trump's threat of damaging Turkey economically. However, there is no doubt that the Turkish economy, now mired in recession for the first time in a decade, is highly vulnerable. The Turkish lira plummeted last August when Trump doubled US tariffs on Turkish aluminum and steel imports to force the release of an American pastor accused of participating in the failed July 2016 military coup.

The US threats notwithstanding, Turkey is adamant that the S-400 purchase is irreversible.

In response to Pence's ultimatum, Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay tweeted that it is the US not Turkey that now confronts a choice: "Does it want to remain Turkey's ally or risk our friendship by joining forces with terrorists to undermine its NATO ally's defense against its enemies?"

"Terrorists" is the term Ankara uses to refer to the YPG, the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdish nationalist PKK against which it has fought a brutal counterinsurgency war in southeast Turkey for the past 35 years.

Officially, NATO does not have a position on Turkey's plans to buy the S-400, as military purchases are the purview of the member states. But the US is adamant that Turkey is jeopardizing both US-Turkish relations and NATO with the purchase, and has rebuffed Turkey's appeals for the setting up of "a technical working group" to ensure that the Russian-made defence system does not threaten NATO's operations and weapons systems in Turkey.

Undoubtedly, there are significant military and economic issues bound up with US-Turkey clash over Ankara's plans to purchase the S-400. But it is a flashpoint for even larger geopolitical conflicts arising from Washington's three decades of ruinous wars in the Middle East—wars that have blown up whole societies and set the region's imperialist-imposed state system ablaze—and its ensuing turn to “strategic conflict” with Russia and China.

The Turkish bourgeoisie, including under the AKP, has sought to profit from the US-led and fomented wars. But it has repeatedly found that what it considers its core strategic interests have been ignored and damaged by the actions of the US and European imperialist powers. This is above all true in regards to maintaining the integrity and unchallenged dominance of the Turkish ruling elite over the Turkish Republic and preventing the strengthening of the geopolitical position of its Kurdish bourgeois rivals within any of the adjacent states.

Erdogan eagerly supported the US regime-change war in Syria. However, to Ankara's dismay, the US responded to the failure of its first proxy army, the Islamist rebels, by partnering with the PKK-aligned YPG.

Ankara's overriding objective is to establish a buffer zone between the YPG-controlled enclave and Turkey, and ultimately destroy the proto-Kurdish state.

Washington, on the other hand, is determined to maintain the enclave as a territorial base for continuing its bloody drive to unseat the Assad regime, to break the shaky alliance of convenience Erdogan has struck with Russia and Iran to roll back US influence in Syria, and to prevent Ankara from being drawn closer into the orbit of China, which in recent years has emerged as a major economic partner of Turkey.

Further enflaming tensions with AKP-ruled Ankara are the repeated US attempts to cut Erdogan down to size, if not remove him. These include Washington's backing of the abortive July 2016 coup, the doubling of the aluminum and steel tariffs, and now alongside Pence and Pompeo's threats, the brandishing of the election issue—which, whatever the immediate outcome, indicates it is plotting to make Erdogan's bourgeois rivals the front for a US-orchestrated regime-change campaign.

Turkey, meanwhile, continues to insist that it wants to maintain close ties with the US. Toward that end it has supported a slate of aggressive new US actions against Russia. Like the rest of NATO, Ankara has backed Washington's repudiation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the provocative naval exercise NATO has vowed it will mount in the Kerch Strait, the passageway between Crimea and the Russian mainland separating the Black and Azov Seas.

Speaking after Pence at the same meeting marking NATO's founding, Foreign Minister Cavusoglu insisted Turkey remains committed to the US-led war alliance. He condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and its “aggression” in the Black Sea, a reference to last year's clash with Ukrainian naval vessels.

“We have been working with Russia,” said Cavusoglu, “but it doesn't mean that we are undermining the alliance and we agree with Russia on everything. There is no shift on our foreign policy.”

Ankara is hoping it can counteract or at least reduce the impact of US belligerence, by strengthening ties with Europe, especially Germany. Not coincidentally, Germany was also denounced by Pence in his Wednesday speech, for partnering with Russia in the Nord Stream Two natural gas pipeline project.

Turkey and Germany have just announced plans to strengthen economic ties, with a top German official declaring, “It is in Germany's interest to see that Turkey's economy is doing well.”

Significantly, the very day that Washington demanded Erdogan forego any legal challenge to the election of opposition mayors in Ankara and Istanbul, the *New York Times* published an editorial hailing last Sunday's nationwide local elections as proof that “Turkey's political opposition”—led by the CHP (the Republican People's Party) and the Kurdish nationalist HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP))—“has shown it is alive and capable of pushing back.”

The *Times*, like the pseudo-left in Turkey itself, is promoting the CHP-led, HDP-supported Nation Alliance as the “democratic” opposition to the authoritarian Islamist Erdogan.

That Erdogan is a vicious enemy of the working class is indisputable. But the principal difference between the AKP and its bourgeois opponents is the latter's even more pronounced orientation to the US and European imperialist powers.

The traditional party of the Kemalist elite that ruled Turkey for eight decades ending only during the first decade of the current century, the CHP is implicated in all its crimes. These include four bloody coups, the sponsoring of fascist violence against the working class and the left in the 1970s, and the brutal repression of the Kurdish population.

True to its history, the CHP backed the failed 2016 coup. Yesterday, the prospective CHP mayors of Ankara and Istanbul, respectively, Mansur Yavas and Ekrem Imamoglu, showed their true democratic colours by making tweets honouring the death anniversary of the colonel who founded the fascist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party).



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