

Turkey's perennial strategic importance and the S-400 Saga

Turkey's inter-state relations have been volatile for the last few decades, and it has been the centre of much public attention, largely owed to its strategic geographical importance, its increasingly hawkish behaviour, and its impressive economic growth. Most recently, the issue regarding the procurement of the Russian S-400 missile system has been dominating the news and is seemingly pushing the already strained U.S.-Turkey relationship to the limit. Talks of US-sanctions and the possible removal of Turkey as a member state of NATO have been circulated, especially by alarmist media. The following paper highlights the sobering reality behind Turkey's decision and argues that there is a discernible pivot away from past dependencies on partnerships of conveniences with the U.S. and other NATO members, towards arrangements and common projects with Russia and China respectively. Nevertheless, it does not mean the end for Turkey's NATO membership or its strategic relationship with the U.S. Turkey is simply pursuing Realpolitik.

The S-400 Saga

Historically, Soviet military efforts focused extensively on their air defence systems due to their threat profile in which NATO bombers, and the fact that Moscow was quite close to a potential front, played a huge role. The Soviet Air Defence Forces were a branch of the military, on par with the army, navy and air force, which highlighted their importance. Staying true to the proverb "necessity is the mother of invention", the Soviet Union devised highly reliable and menacing anti-air and missile defence systems while the U.S. focused less on their defensive capabilities and more on their power projecting offensive systems.¹ The S-400 Triumf missile system, which has been in service since 2007, is based upon the S-300 series of missile systems, which has been in service since the late 1970s. In fact, the S-400 has originally been introduced as another, further developed variant of the S-300 called the S-300

PMU-3. Compared to the former variants the radar, missiles and resilience to electronic warfare capabilities have been significantly improved. The S-400 is a highly capable, autonomous and mobile system against aircraft, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones with a coverage range of up to 400 km against some targets, with a hit probability against aircraft of 0.9, albeit at a maximum range of 120 km, meaning that nine out of ten missiles will hit the enemy aircraft and advanced anti-jamming technologies, to name just a few features. "The S-400 is among the most advanced air defence systems available, on par with the best the West has to offer," according to Siemon Wezeman, senior researcher with Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's arms transfers and military expenditure programme.²

In addition to that, the S-400 is at least twice as cheap as the U.S. system Patriot-2, according to UK military expert Richard Conolly, adding that "the Russians and before them the Soviet Union were always leading in missile technology [...] the reason for that was that the Americans and the West produced better aircraft."³ China expressed interest early on and signed an order for the S-400 system in 2014 as the first foreign buyer. The first S-400 regiment has already been delivered in the beginning of 2018.⁴ India has signed an S-400 deal worth 5 billion USD in October 2018 and ignored U.S. political pressure and threats of possible sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act - delivery will begin in 2020.⁵ Russia is also in advanced talks with Saudi-Arabia and Qatar regarding the procurement of the system.^{6,7} Iran, Egypt and Iraq have shown interest in obtaining the system as well.

Ever since the Gulf War, Turkey had to regularly ask NATO allies to provide adequate air and missile defence, first due to the threat of Iraq's Scud missiles, later over fears regarding the Iranian missile program and currently because of the

constant threat the Syrian Civil War poses to Turkey's territory. NATO allies responded by supplying and stationing their air and missile defence systems, the U.S. Patriot or Italian/French Eurosam SAMP/T, or by providing early warning systems and making assurances.^{8,9} That imperfect situation regularly led to dissatisfaction on both sides. Turkey, becoming increasingly irritated with having to rely on other states for its protection in the aerial domain, formally started the so-called T-LORAMIDS program in 2007, a 3 billion USD worth long-range air and missile defence systems program. The Chinese offer of HQ-9/FD-2000 won against the U.S. Patriot system, Russian S-300 and the Italian/French SAMP/T and Turkey has been in advanced negotiations with the Chinese since 2013, but the deal rumoured worth 3.4 billion USD was cancelled in 2015, also in part due to the reluctance of China to provide technology transfer to Turkey.^{10,11} All the while, Turkey regularly expressed interest in buying the Patriot missile system early in the Obama Presidency. The U.S. refusal to sell the Patriot missile system eventually led Turkey to the S-400 missile system and Russia, which also offered a better deal that included technology transfers, which the U.S. was not willing to consider since it would allow the buyer insights into how the system operates exactly, which would conversely mean that it would eventually provide a country with the means of replicating it, enabling it to produce its own system.¹² In September 2017 the S-400 deal worth around 2.5 billion USD between Turkey and Russia was signed. The delivery date has been moved up from the first quarter of 2020 to the second half of 2019. On 17 July 2019 the first shipment arrived, and the system is scheduled to begin operations in the last quarter of 2019. It also seems that the S-400 batteries will be under full control of the Turkish Armed Forces with no Russian advisors in the loop.^{13,14}

On 17 July 2019, after the first Russian shipment arrived in Turkey, the White

House issued the following statement effectively ending Turkey's participation as an F-35 partner for the time being: "Unfortunately, Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defence systems renders its continued involvement with the F-35 impossible. The F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities. [...] The United States still greatly values our strategic relationship with Turkey. As NATO Allies, our relationship is multi-layered, and not solely focused on the F-35. Our military-to-military relationship is strong, and we will continue to cooperate with Turkey extensively, mindful of constraints due to the presence of the S-400 system in Turkey."¹⁵ Turkish F-35 personnel were given a deadline until 31 July 2019 to leave the country. Turkey had been designated for the manufacture of a variety of F-35 parts and that production will move to the U.S. and other F-35 partners in the near future. Vice Admiral Mat Winter, who is the program's executive officer for the U.S.-led F-35 Joint Program Office, revealed in an interview that the Joint Program Office had endorsed keeping Turkey as an F-35 partner stating: "The facts are that Turkey produces 844 parts for me, and they are quality parts, affordable parts, and delivered on time," he said. "Turkey's industrial establishment for F-35 is one of my best partners, and they do great work."¹⁶

President Trump expressed sympathy regarding Turkey's decision, mostly blaming the Obama administration for the botched Patriot negotiations.¹⁷ It remains to be seen if and what kind of sanctions will be imposed on Turkey under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. Section 231 namely states that the President shall impose five or more of the twelve possible punitive measures on a person that engages in a significant transaction with the intelligence or defence sectors of the government of the Russian Federation.

It is important to note that Turkey's relationship with Russia in recent years is aptly described as volatile. After the downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 in the

Turkey-Syria border area after an alleged violation of Turkey's airspace, Russia imposed sanctions on Turkey and Putin spoke of "a stab in the back by the accomplices of terrorists."¹⁸ By June 2017, most of the sanctions were lifted again and today the showcased friendship between Putin and Erdoğan seems to indicate a much-improved, albeit unstable relationship. Besides the S-400 deal, both countries are cooperating in Syria, in the Transcaucasian Region, in the energy sector, be it the already finished TurkStream natural gas pipeline or the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, which will be Turkey's first nuclear power plant and regarding political issues such as Venezuela, in disputes with the U.S. Notwithstanding, Russia and Turkey are historical adversaries and their interests particularly clash in the Black Sea and the Middle East. In addition to that, Turkey regularly reaffirms its support for Ukraine's sovereignty.¹⁹

NATO and U.S. officials continue to emphasize that the S-400 system will not be interoperable with NATO's Integrated Air Defence System already in place. Interoperability is a concept aimed at facilitating a common framework of cooperation among the heterogeneously equipped militaries of the world, especially within alliances. In short, successful joint action necessitates compatibility of communication channels, military procedures and tactics as well as simply using standardized ammunition. Russian weapons systems naturally are not compatible with their American counterparts. It would require extensive technical cooperation and data sharing to establish interoperability between the various systems, namely for the S-400 to work together with NATO's own systems, which neither side is interested in for obvious reasons. Hence, Turkey plans to operate the S-400 system stand-alone. The U.S. is extremely worried that the deployment of the S-400 system on Turkish soil might lead to Russia being able to gather sensitive information about the F35's advanced capabilities if both systems would be active close to each other, which would nullify years of research efforts and billions of dollars pumped into the Joint Strike Fighter program. Turkey tried to rebut

those fears by assuring that the F-35s and S-400s would be operated geographically separated.²⁰ On the other hand, one could argue, that the Russians should be similarly worried about the U.S. and NATO being able to learn the strengths and weaknesses of its missile system.

The S-400 deal is just one of many issues stressing the complicated inter-state relations. Other focal points straining the U.S.-Turkey relationship are the refusal of the U.S. to extradite Fethullah Gülen, the dubious 2016 Turkish coup d'état attempt which Turkey links to the Gülen movement within the Turkish Armed Forces and the CIA and Turkey's stance on Israel. In addition to that, the U.S.-support for the People's Protection Units (YPG), a mainly Kurdish militia leading the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Syrian Civil War, which has substantial ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), involved in a decades-old armed conflict with the Turkish State, Turkey's incursion into Syria and of course Turkey's rapprochement to Russia and China are highly controversial. In addition to those purely political issues, one should also consider business matters besides the moderate trade volume of about 25 billion USD between the U.S. and Turkey. Erdoğan recently hinted at a possible "re-evaluation" of 10 billion USD worth of existing orders for Boeing, saying: "I've told Trump in Osaka even if Turkey is not buying the Patriot missile system, we are buying Boeing. [...] We are good customers. But if it goes on like this, we'll have to rethink about this deal."²¹ Turkey's relationship with the European Union and the other NATO member states is equally ambiguous and partly strained, as seen very recently in the on-going dispute regarding drilling rights in Cypriot territorial waters²², even though there is a mutual understanding of political dependency, highlighted in the EU-Turkey refugee agreement.

Turkey's Perennial Strategic Importance

On 12 March 1947, marking the beginning of the Cold War for some, President Truman held a speech before a joint session of Congress, which would be known henceforth as the Truman Doctrine. The

U.S. granted financial aid in the amount of 300 million USD to Greece, which was still embroiled in a civil war and 100 million USD to Turkey in order to prop them up and to prevent them from succumbing to communism.²³ Turkey joined NATO on 18 February 1952 together with Greece, just three years after the formation of the military alliance and both countries became a bulwark against Soviet expansionism in the upcoming decades.

After the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus in 1974 the U.S. imposed an arms embargo on Turkey on 5 February 1975, which many pundits see as a watershed in their interstate relationship.²⁴ Reminiscent of today's situation, the ban included millions of dollars' worth of military equipment already paid for. Consequently, Turkey closed most American military installations. In an insightful letter to President Gerald Ford, the 76th National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States requested that the U.S. "clearly and unequivocally seek to reverse this Congressional blunder and impress upon Congressional leadership the overriding strategic importance of Turkey" and stated emphatically that "Turkey [...] commands the air, sea and land approaches to the oil-rich Middle East [...] and [...] the U.S., with Turkish cooperation, has created an indispensable [sic] network of bases on Turkish soil [...] capabilities which cannot [sic] be matched elsewhere in the region."²⁵ It was also at that time when Turkey begrudgingly realized that an assertive nation state must not depend on the benevolence of others regarding the delivery of arms and the functioning of weapons systems. Thus, it became evident that one of Turkey's core national interests, being able to wage war when it is in its national interest irrespective of other countries concerns, would require the immense effort of building a solid domestic defence industry, which it subsequently did in the following decades. The Congressional ban was lifted in 1978. The strategic importance of Turkey for the U.S. and NATO in general, has not changed.

Turkey acts as a gateway to Europe from the Middle East and vice versa. During the cold war its advantageous location

allowed for deeper penetration into Soviet territory and – together with Greece – had been appraised as a bastion against communism and protecting NATO's south-eastern flank up until this day. It is situated in a hotbed of contemporary conflicts, Syria, Iraq and Iran are among its neighbours. The Turkish Straits, connecting the Black Sea with the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, have been of utmost importance in global affairs for centuries, currently regulated by the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits. NATO and the U.S. make extensive logistical use of Turkish air bases and air space for their missions, e.g. Turkey as a key ally in the military intervention against ISIL, and as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Turkey has the second-largest army within NATO, around 355.000 active-duty personnel, almost as much as Germany and France combined. Turkey contributes actively to NATO missions, e.g. in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. also continues to have approximately 50 nuclear weapons stationed at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey for use by U.S. and Turkish aircraft despite continuous calls for relocation.²⁶ Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, keeps reaffirming NATO's commitment to Turkey, at the Aspen Security Forum in July 2019 he emphasized: "Turkey is contributing to many different NATO missions and operations in the Balkans and Kosovo and also in Afghanistan. So, I'm not underestimating the difficulty related to S-400, but I'm saying that Turkey, as a NATO member, is much more than S-400." Asked about calls for kicking Turkey out of NATO he replied: "Turkey is an important NATO member. And no ally has raised that issue at all, because they, we all see that we are dependent on each other. Then there is a disagreement on the issue of S-400. [...] we need to minimise the negative consequences and also highlight, as the White House does in the statement today, that the partnership the Alliance, the role of Turkey in NATO is much broader than F-35 or S-400."²⁷ In addition to constant reassurances by both sides – NATO and Turkey – Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty should be pointed out, which stipulates that "any Party may cease to be a

Party one year after its notice of denunciation has been given to the Government of the United States of America, which will inform the Governments of the other Parties of the deposit of each notice of denunciation." However, the treaty does not entertain the possibility of expelling a party from NATO, which would make a legal justification for such a precedent incredibly challenging. Currently, there is no apparent reason for Turkey to think about exiting the alliance, since its membership only offers advantages and strategic clout, amplified by the fact that NATO reaches its decisions by consensus.

Reaping the reward: Turkish drones, missiles, tanks, attack helicopters, warships and fighter jets:

Turkey is adamantly pursuing national military research efforts and continuously boosting its defence industry.²⁸ In 2010, Turkey initiated the development of a fifth-generation Turkish fighter jet, provisionally labelled TAI TF-X, which should replace the ageing fleet of General Dynamics F-16 Fighting Falcons in the Turkish Air Force starting in 2029. The backbone of the Turkish Air Force has been envisaged as comprising of a fleet of Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II being supplemented by the indigenous TAI TF-X. In 2017, Turkey, France and Italy started cooperating on a joint "Long Range Air and Missile Defence Program", which will not yield fit-for-service results until at least 2025.²⁹ On 3 August 2019, Mustafa Varank, Minister of Industry and Technology in the Republic of Turkey, said, that its domestically developed next-generation high precision cruise missile SOM, which can be launched from land, sea and air and has been intended for use on the F-35 Lightning II as a launch platform, it can be used with the TAI TF-X, and the Turkish "Akinci" UAV (still under development) which will be a high-altitude long-endurance unmanned armed aircraft scheduled to enter service in 2021. In addition to that, Turkey plans to sell their SOM missiles to countries in the F-35 Lightning II program irrespective of their own status regarding the program. Surprisingly, Turkey now also rivals the U.S. and the U.K. as the world's most prolific

user of combat drones, according to a review by 'The Intercept' of reported lethal drone strikes worldwide.³⁰ Turkey mainly operates indigenous drones, around 100 Bayraktar Tactical UAS and ten TAI Anka UAVs, which were introduced in 2013 and 2014 respectively and are also scheduled for export. In cooperation with Agusta-Westland, nowadays part of Leonardo, an Italian company and the ninth largest defence contractor in the world, Turkey has developed an attack helicopter called TAI/AgustaWestland T129 ATAK, which has been introduced to the Turkish military in 2014. Turkey has also been developing a main battle tank in cooperation with South Korea. "Altay", as their national tank is being called, will enter service in 2021. The main contractor plans on producing a total of 1.000 main battle tanks. The Turkish Navy has already been strengthened by indigenous warships developed as part of the MILGEM project, an ongoing national warship program. Turkey's military spending increased between 2007 and 2017 by 48 % in real terms.³¹ Turkey is well on its way to acquire 70 % of equipment and supplies from their national industry by 2020.³² All these efforts indicate the extensive bolstering of Turkey's military strength by successful national research and development efforts.

Conclusion

The acquisition of some S-400 air defence system units and possibly the acquisition of an alternative fifth-generation multi-role combat aircraft, be it of Russian or Chinese descent, should not be seen as Turkey turning its back on the alliance, and it definitely does not mark the beginning of the end of Turkey's NATO membership, even though increased isolation within various NATO bodies is observable. Time and again, Turkey and the U.S. have clashed over various disputes, but the underlying basis of the strategic military alliance has not been in serious jeopardy yet and, concerning the S-400 dispute, a convincing American offer of the Patriot system with the subsequent parallel operation of two missile defence systems and a re-admittance to the F-35 program seems possible, since in high politics nothing is set in

stone. Having established that there are no explicit legal provisions for expelling a member of NATO and considering the potential rippling effects of such an unprecedented decision, it seems highly unlikely at this point in time that Turkey will exit NATO and give up its influence within the alliance voluntarily in the foreseeable future, much to the detriment of alarmist sentiments and headline-grabbing pundits. Moreover, one should not underestimate Turkey's successful defence research and development efforts. Turkey is reaping the rewards of its decades-long endeavour which is now yielding combat-ready results in the form of indigenous drones, missiles, attack helicopters, warships and tanks. President Erdoğan stated in February 2018: "In many fields of the defence industry, we now have national technologies. We successfully eliminate many internal and external threats by means of domestic and national production."³³

Furthermore, considering Turkey's geographical location in a volatile, regularly adversarial neighbourhood and its own intensifying regional ambitions, especially directed southwards to the Middle East, it is obviously of vital strategic interest for Turkey to become more self-reliant and assertive in the military realm, and, regarding the S-400 issue, to be able to reliably protect its territory from potential attacks in the aerial domain without depending too much on ephemeral assurances by allies. Turkey appears to follow its *raison d'état* consistently and it is important to note that it ostensibly does not want to choose between either side, be it Russia, the U.S., the EU or China, it simply acts flexibly according to its best interests; that is why Turkey's foreign policy may seem turbulent and inconsequential to some but appear as a manifestation of Realpolitik to others.

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Layout: Medienbüro Meyer