

Turkey's S-400 procurement increases US sanction potential

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Relations between Turkey and the US have been tested by Ankara's intended procurement of the S-400 air defence system. With Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's standing weakened by the results of municipal elections, *Ege Seçkin* considers the building pressures on the Turkish government

Key Points

- Turkey's determination to acquire the S-400 air defence system reflects an effort to address a strategic deficiency in its defence infrastructure, as well as the government's interest in deepening ties with Russia.
- The US Congress would be likely to follow through with its threat of sanctions if Turkey acquired the S-400, likely triggering another currency crisis similar to that in August 2018.
- The imposition of sanctions would lead Turkey to question its membership of NATO and to strengthen ties with Russia, but it is unlikely that Ankara will withdraw from the NATO treaty in the four-year outlook.

Returning from a visit to Moscow on 10 April, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence systems as "a done deal", adding that their delivery could even take place ahead of schedule, in June rather than July. This follows the conclusion of a USD2.5-billion deal with Russia in December 2017 for the purchase of one S-400 battery, with an option for a second.

Erdoğan's announcement defied a long series of gradually escalating warnings by the US against the purchase. On 9 April, the US issued its most categorical ultimatum yet, in the form of a joint op-ed published in *The New York Times* by the chairs and ranking members of the US Senate's armed services and foreign relations committees.

Likely timed to coincide with Erdoğan's Moscow visit, the op-ed suggested that if Turkey proceeded with the purchase, Congress would not only block Ankara from purchasing the Lockheed Martin F-35 multirole fighter aircraft and terminate Turkish participation in the F-35 programme, but it would also impose sanctions on Turkey under the US's Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

Coming amid an unprecedented deterioration of relations since 2016, the S-400 stand-off risks driving a deep wedge between the two NATO allies. In the absence of a policy reversal by either government, the stand-off could culminate in Turkey's eventual separation from the alliance.

S-400 standoff

Beyond the political symbolism of a NATO ally procuring sophisticated weapons systems from Russia, the US and NATO have raised concerns over the practical implications of Turkey operating the Russian system. For example, in November 2017, Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs Heidi Grant stated that “right now ... our policies do not allow us to be interoperable with [the S-400]”.

In the same interview, Grant voiced US concerns about the implications of Turkey operating both the S-400 and the F-35. Although US officials have been vocal about their objections, the specific military-technical details of their concerns have necessarily remained classified, complicating analysis in open sources and creating room for media speculation.



Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu speaks at a press conference after a NATO meeting of ministers of foreign affairs in Washington, DC, United States, on 4 April 2019. Turkey's longer-term membership of NATO is not necessarily assured. (Fatih Aktas/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

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Turkey has sought a long-range air defence capability since the 1990s. It has tried to develop systems domestically and has considered procuring systems from a range of countries. The decision to go ahead with the S-400 purchase from Russia followed the cancellation of an earlier programme, under which Turkey had selected the Chinese HQ-9

over Patriot, the Eurosam surface-to-air missile platform/terrain (Sol-Air Moyenne Portée Terrestre: SAMP/T) system, and the Russian S-300.

Turkey's determination to acquire some form of long-range air defence system goes beyond a bargaining tactic, reflecting a genuine effort to address a strategic deficiency in Turkey's defence infrastructure. In January 2019, the head of the Presidency of Defence Industries, İsmail Demir, told the Turkish *Daily Sabah* newspaper that Turkey had negotiated to purchase the Patriot as well as the S-400, which would create a layered national air-defence system. The S-400 is optimised for long-range conventional air defence; the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) is optimised for anti-tactical ballistic missile (ATBM) defence. There would therefore be an argument for procuring both, particularly for a country of Turkey's geographic size.

A range of factors is likely to drive procurement decisions, including interoperability with existing technology, technology transfer, and cost. In this case, the Russian commitment to early delivery may have been decisive, as this would allow Turkey to use the S-400's anti-aircraft capabilities as a stopgap measure to compensate for the Turkish Air Force's current low pilot-to-cockpit ratio, which is a legacy of the extensive military purges following the failed coup of 15 July 2016. Alternatively, the decision to proceed with the purchase of the Russian system may have reflected Erdoğan's broader strategic calculations and the state of relations between Turkey and the US.

Erosion of trust

The S-400 stand-off comes amid an unprecedented deterioration of relations between Turkey and the US since 2016. Two factors stand out for their effect on fuelling the Turkish government's mistrust of the US.

The first is Washington's continued refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen, a Pennsylvania-based Turkish cleric and social-religious leader alleged by the Turkish government to have masterminded the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. Although it is unlikely that Gülen was directly involved in the coup, there is evidence that the coup was organised by his followers.

Moreover, despite being known as the leading opponent of Erdoğan's government, the Gülen movement in Turkey attracts anger from across the political spectrum. Gülen has been a US resident since 1999, and Washington's refusal to extradite him has fed into a widespread belief in Turkey that the US government played a role in the coup.

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