

S400: A Potential Game-Changer in US-Turkey Relations?

Nagapushpa Devendra

Tensions between the US and Turkey are running high over Ankara's decision to acquire S-400 air-defence systems worth US\$2 billion from Moscow. Erdogan's refusal to back down from buying S-400 has triggered the introduction of a bill in the US Senate to bar Ankara from buying the F-35 combat aircraft and suspend the training programme for Turkish pilots. The Pentagon is expected to impose punitive measures against Ankara to send a clear message to NATO members buying weapons from non-NATO countries.

Though US-Turkey strategic ties have faced troubles in the past, in recent times these have aggravated. US military support to the People's Protection Unit (YPG), which Turkey accuses of being the Syrian arm of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), long designated as a terrorist group by the Pentagon, and US refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara blames for the failed July 2016 coup, have strained US-Turkey relations.

The S-400s Imbrolio

Turkey's military is dependent on US hardware for its operations, and the country's defence sector is closely tied to the American defence industry. Turkey's defence imports [increased](#) by US\$2.45 billion, or 59 per cent in 2018.

Washington is one of the [biggest](#) defence equipment exporters with US\$353 million worth of exports during the first five months of 2019. However, US refusal to sell its [patriot](#) anti-missile system and the delay in delivery of F-35 fighter jets led Turkey to look for alternatives.

Russia was a willing alternative with an offer to provide S-400s, considered one of the world's most advanced air-defence systems. In the past, Turkish authorities considered the Chinese [FD-2000 missile defence system](#), but its reluctance to make a technology transfer that could grant the Turkish industry the operational and technical know-how of the system, pushed Turkey towards Russia which offered a technology transfer clause. This prompted the Trump administration [to warn Turkey](#) that it "will result in a reassessment of Turkey's participation in the F-35 program and risk other potential future arms transfers to Ankara."

On the other hand, Turkey is attempting to ease tensions by [proposing to form](#) "a technical working group to make sure that this system (S-400) will not be a threat" to either NATO or the US interest. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, during NATO's 70th anniversary summit in Washington in April 2019, [tried to](#)

[convince](#) the US and the rest of NATO, that Ankara needs the S-400 system to thwart potential attacks, alleviate their fear of technological compromise with Russia. He also made it clear that Turkey is [not ready to rethink](#) the purchase of S-400.

Implications

US sanctions on Turkey can hurt the already fragile Turkish economy and this can push Erdogan to adopt a confrontational approach towards the US and its regional policies. For instance, Ankara can restrict access to its Incirlik airbase, a strategically vital launchpad for US operations in the region. Ankara has [done it before](#) (2003 Iraq war) and will not hesitate to do it again. Turkey also has the potential to prevent US naval access to the Eastern Mediterranean especially when the US is intending to strengthen its presence in these increasingly contested waters. Russia already has a [permanent presence](#) in the Eastern Mediterranean through the Syrian naval base in Tartus, while Iran too seeks to have a presence by [stationing IRGC naval forces](#) in Latakia Port, Syria.

From the defence perspective, the sanctions could also affect the US production of the F-35. Turkey produces nearly [937](#) parts for the F-35 programme and its removal will force the US defence

contractors to look for alternatives. Ankara has already been offered [Sukhoi fighter jets](#) (Su-35 or Su-57) by Russia to compensate for the loss of the F-35 planes. Russia is also keen to cooperate with Turkey on its indigenous stealth fighter, the [TAI TF-X](#) programme, which is likely to be ready by 2023.

Conclusion

Erdogan has been sceptical about Washington's approach towards the Ankara's security concerns. Turkey was forced to undertake the acquisition of Russia's S-400 after the US decision not to sell the Patriot missile batteries and the delay in supply of F-35 jets when Ankara needed them the most. Despite the fact that Erdogan seems to pursue a policy of dual dependency by cooperating more closely with the Russian defence sector, he is unlikely to abandon the strong defence and military cooperation with the US and compromise on Turkey's NATO membership. Given that Turkey's core security, economic and institutional interests are linked with the West it would be interesting to see how Erdogan manoeuvres this potential game-changer in US-Turkey relations.

(Nagapushpa Devendra is a Research Analyst with the West Asia Centre at IDSA.)