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At a Boiling Point?

Growing Tensions over Ankara's Determination to Acquire the S-400

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Turkey's insistence to move ahead with the S-400 deal with Russia, in spite of the American threat that this move would be met with sanctions, is expected to create a rift in relations between Turkey and the United States and the other allies in NATO. Reactions to this move by the administration and Congress are likely to be strong. Apart from the significance for the relations between the two countries, the Turkish step will have geopolitical implications, both in the context of the balance of power between the United States and Russia, and for Washington's ability to coordinate and cooperate with Turkey on the situation in Syria and Iraq, and on policy regarding Iran.

After the release in October 2018 of American pastor Andrew Brunson by a Turkish court in Turkey, it appeared as if relations between the United States and Turkey were on track. However, Ankara's determination to pursue the deal with Russia to acquire S-400 air defense systems (at a value of about \$2.5 billion), which is due for implementation in the second half of 2019, is at present the main cause of dispute between the two countries. While the deal will likely prompt the United States to halt the sale of F-35 planes to the Turkish military, Ankara has continued to insist on implementing the deal with Russia, even after the US administration offered to sell them an alternative package of air defense capabilities, with the focus on batteries of Patriot missiles.

It appears, then, that the hostility regarding the purchase of the Russian systems represents a significant aggravation of the tense relations between the United States and Turkey in recent years. Among the main background factors:

- a. The civil war in Syria and Turkey's bitterness at the US support for the Syrian extension of the Kurdish underground and the operational arm (YPG) that was fighting the Islamic State, in the framework of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also include Arab elements. At present, the two countries are unable to reach an understanding over how they should act after the defeat of the Islamic State and the decision by US President Donald Trump to withdraw most American forces from Syria. The central issue concerns the future of the Kurdish forces: while the administration wants to secure the safety of its allies, Turkey

- continues to see them as a threat and wants to expand its own influence in northern Syria.
- b. Internal developments within Turkey, above all the moves taken by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to extend and strengthen his political power, with significant damage to the country's democratic fabric. After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, these trends have intensified, and the extradition of preacher Fethullah Gulen from the United States, the man who is perceived by Ankara to be the instigator of the attempted coup, is included in the list of Ankara's demands of Washington. Erdogan and his supporters often use fiery rhetoric against the US administration and its regional activity in order to compose their own narrative, namely, that the source of Turkey's problems is external and largely due to outside elements who think that Turkey has grown too strong over the past decade. At the same time, Turkey faces complex economic problems and a significant drop in the value of the Turkish lira against the dollar. During the tension that surrounded the detention of Pastor Brunson, President Trump ordered the imposition of steep tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum from Turkey. However, in November 2018 Turkey was granted a six month waiver from sanctions on the purchase of oil from Iran. Overall, Erdogan often accuses the United States of failing to observe its obligations toward Turkey.
 - c. The dramatic steps taken by the Trump administration with respect to Israel, and above all recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocation of the embassy, as well as the presidential proclamation recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Turkey has strongly criticized these steps and was among the first Muslim states to oppose them. The American support of the Israel-Greece-Cyprus axis, reflected by the participation of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the meeting between leaders of these countries in March, was perceived as an anti-Turkey step.

However, for the US administration, it appears that the purchase of the S-400 from Russia is a step too far, and this has apparently been made clear to the Turks. Reports to Congress show that the administration told Turkey in late 2018 that completion of the deal would have serious consequences. Vice President Mike Pence stated in February 2019 that "we will not stand idly by while NATO allies purchase weapons from our adversaries." On March 9 the chief Pentagon spokesman stated that "if Turkey takes the S-400s there will be grave consequences in terms of our military relationship with them and with the Patriots and the F-35s." On April 1 it was reported that there is a Pentagon order to suspend all deliveries and activities related to Turkey's acquisition of F-35 fighter jets. Turkey is part of the international consortium that is developing the F-35; it has invested over a billion dollars in the project and is supposed to acquire about 100 jets. Turkish pilots were already training in the United States on the first two planes that were

scheduled to arrive in Turkey in November 2019. Not only is the continuation of the F-35 deal under discussion, but also the continued acquisition related to the F-16 planes and Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters that are already part of the Turkish Air Force. In addition, the security cooperation between the countries, particularly at Incirlik Air Base, is in danger, and there is a possibility of limiting the contacts with NATO.

Since Russia and Turkey managed to overcome the crisis between them following the downing of a Russian jet in November 2015, there has been growing suspicion in the United States and other NATO countries over the increasing closeness between the two. There is also concern that if the S-400 deal is completed, it will lead to a leak of sensitive technology, due to the possible exposure of Russia to systems used by NATO. Turkish insistence on implementing the deal reinforces the assessment by the United States and other allies in NATO that Erdogan's moves are a reflection of an intention to change Turkish orientation from the West toward closer relations with Russia, or at least Turkey's choice to take an independent path from the West. In any case, it is clear that for Russia, the sale of advanced weapons to Turkey reflects its success in inserting a wedge between Ankara and the West, and is a further reinforcement of its success in establishing itself in the region.

The administration's suspension of the supply of F-35 aircraft, together with its willingness to offer Ankara a package with alternative capabilities to the S-400, presumably reflects hope in Washington that it may be possible to stop Erdogan's tilt toward Moscow. Moreover, so far, and despite the Erdogan's confrontational behavior, the administration has been careful to manage relations with Ankara based on an interest in finding ways to avoid further deterioration as much as possible. In this framework there are ongoing close contacts with top echelons in Turkey, including regular political and military encounters at several levels, as well as frequent phone calls between the Presidents.

For the US administration, if it is no longer possible to consider Ankara an ally, this will have extremely serious strategic implications that could undermine the most fundamental assumptions regarding the regional preparations of the United States and NATO. The US has military forces, including fighter jets, in the Incirlik Air Base and at sites elsewhere in Turkey. However, at least until now, attempts by the administration to change the direction in Turkey have not succeeded. Therefore it is likely that against Turkey's stubborn insistence to implement the deal with Russia, the US administration and other NATO allies are already thinking (although it is still not clear whether NATO members will demonstrate unity on this issue) about the need to prepare for the worst scenario, in which Turkey continues to disengage from NATO, while improving its relations with Russia. The very fact of such preparations (even if not fully implemented) would have

negative consequences for the nature of security relations with Ankara, since mechanisms are already being developed to bypass Turkey.

On the other hand, it appears that at the present time Ankara is trying to downplay the importance of the decision, and present it as a security purchase arising from Turkey's immediate needs that have not been met by Western companies, but which has no significance for Turkey's political orientation. Turkish spokesmen claim that there are precedents for the existence of Russian systems among NATO members – Greece has S-300 systems, following a compromise that was reached after Cyprus acquired them and the Turks were not willing to allow them to be placed in its territory, and Slovakia has such a system since the time it was a member of the Warsaw Pact. The Turks also argue that the S-400 will be operated as an independent system with no connections to NATO systems. Therefore, they claim that this deal should not be linked to completion of the F-35 deal. As no elections are expected in Turkey for the next four years, and despite the success of opposition candidates in Istanbul and Ankara in the March 31 local elections, Erdogan could have the flexibility to change the decision at the domestic level, if he so chooses.

The bottom line is that implementation of the S-400 deal – assuming that the American administration keeps to its current position – will likely lead to a rift in relations between the US and other NATO allies and Turkey. In spite of the fears that a reaction will push Turkey even further toward Russia, it is likely that the administration and Congress will respond strongly to the move. Apart from its significance for relations between the two countries, the Turkish step could also have geopolitical implications, in the context of the balance of power between the United States and Russia, and in the context of the ability to coordinate and cooperate with Turkey over the situation in Syria and Iraq, and on policy towards Iran.