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**Erdogan's Threat on Nuclear Militarization**

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**In a recent speech, Turkish President Erdogan made his first public reference to the possibility that Turkey might opt to nuclearize its army. Turkey has attributed growing importance to the attainment of independent military capabilities, given in part that Iran has long range missiles and Turkey does not. This problematic situation joins the US-Turkey crisis, which undermines Turkey's certainty that NATO would come to its aid if it needs military help. Although Turkey's present nuclear infrastructure is negligible, Erdogan's declaration feeds into the grave concern of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.**

In a speech in Sivas, Turkey, on September 4, 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated, "Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But [they tell us] we can't have them. This, I cannot accept," adding that "we have Israel nearby, as almost neighbors. They scare [other nations] by possessing these. No one can touch them." This was Erdogan's first direct, public reference to the possibility that Turkey might decide to seek a nuclear military capability.

This statement reflects in part Erdogan's view that achievement of a nuclear capability is a manifestation of the level of development of a state. Indeed, in the same speech he noted that "almost all the developed countries" have nuclear capabilities, although this is not true of military nuclear capabilities. For a long time, Erdogan has attributed much importance to development of the Turkish defense industry (including for export purposes) and attainment of independent military capabilities; in this context, Ankara's attempt to condition military purchases from external sources on knowledge sharing is significant. In the past, Erdogan has made specific reference to the problematic situation whereby Iran has long range missiles while Turkey does not. Recent years have seen progress in Turkey's missile building capabilities, even though Turkey obligated itself to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which restricts the export of missiles with a range of more than 300 km, and therefore in theory was supposed to show less interest in progress in this direction. The crisis between Turkey and the United States over the purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia and the consequent July 2019 freeze on Turkey's participation in the F-35 project has further clarified for Ankara the problematics of relying on external providers to attain advanced military capabilities.

As a NATO member since 1952, Turkey is protected by a nuclear umbrella, yet even during and after the Cold War, Ankara had doubts about the commitment of other NATO members – most notably the United States – to Turkey. Turkey is one of the few European states with US tactical nuclear weapons still on its soil. Estimates say that in the Turkish Air Force base in Incirlik there are approximately 50 B-61 nuclear bombs under US command. After the July 2016 failed attempted coup in Turkey, which included an attempted rebellion from inside the base, the external supply of electricity to the base was cut off altogether for a few days. Consequently, more voices in Washington called for finding alternatives to Incirlik, both for using other regional airbases for operational purposes and for consideration whether it was wise to continue to maintain tactical nuclear bombs in Turkey.

Erdogan's recent declaration departs from previous statements on the nuclear issue, as this is the first time he has hinted that Turkey might develop a military nuclear capability. Turkey already has a civilian nuclear program, with plans to build some 20 electrical reactors; the first is currently under construction and will be operated by the Russian government company Rosatom. According to critics of the project, the cracks that have already appeared in the concrete poured for the reactor strengthen the claim that no nuclear reactor must ever be built on Turkish soil as the region is prone to earthquakes. In talks with other states, including Japan, about constructing further nuclear reactors, Turkey insisted on reserving the option of uranium enrichment open, despite the fact that it has no such capability at present. This insistence has aroused the suspicion that Turkey also intends to develop future nuclear capabilities of a non-civilian nature.

Erdogan's recent statement should also be viewed in the broader context of the crisis in US-Turkish relations and the anti-American sentiments in the country, which existed beforehand but were inflamed by Ankara's accusations that the United States was involved in the failed attempted coup and by Washington's support for the Kurdish forces in northern Syria. This has eroded the already-limited trust Turkey had that NATO would come to its side in a crisis. Moreover, not only does Ankara have less trust in the guarantees it already possesses, but its defiant policy toward the United States in fact further undermines them. In addition, Ankara also believes that the global status of the United States is waning, and therefore Turkey must prepare for a multipolar international system.

Furthermore, Erdogan's statement should be viewed as part of his broader critique of the current international system and the need for Security Council reforms. In this light, one may see his claim – that states with nuclear capabilities place unfair obstacles in the path of states without them, thus creating a sort of nuclear OPEC – as part of his overall

approach that “the world is bigger than five.” Already in 2012, Erdogan accused the international community of hypocrisy in its criticism of Iran’s “peaceful nuclear program” along with its reticence about Israel’s “250 to 300 nuclear warheads.” In May 2018 he asserted that the “main threats against our country and region are nuclear weapons,” and therefore called for nuclear disarmament. While Turkey is unhappy with the Iranian nuclear program, its stance differs radically from the Israeli and Saudi position: Ankara thinks that the Iranian nuclear issue should be approached through negotiations, and it opposed the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Erdogan will presumably revisit the nuclear issue as part of his criticism of the “unfair” international system in his forthcoming speech at the General Assembly later this month.

Given the Iranian effort to attain nuclear weapons, Erdogan’s statement on the nuclear issue feeds a central fear, namely, that the Middle East will become home to several nuclear powers. For its part, Turkey has signed all key treaties dealing with weapons of mass destruction, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the IAEA Additional Protocol. Moreover, its nuclear infrastructure is negligible, and the public nature of Erdogan’s reference to a military nuclear capability may actually make it more difficult for Ankara to go that route, because any action it now takes will be scrutinized with added suspicion. Nonetheless, the change in the rhetoric emerging from Ankara – from criticism of Israel and the call for nuclear disarmament, to the threat to join the circle of states with military nuclear capabilities – cannot be ignored. It is a clear warning sign not only to the states of the region but also to the global powers.