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**Is Turkey Swerving Eastward?  
The Air Defense System Deal with China and the Crisis with NATO  
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Turkey's September 26, 2013 announcement that the Chinese company CPMIEC had won the tender for the purchase of a long range air defense system came as a surprise to Turkey's NATO partners – even though prior rumors had indicated this would be the decision – and was met with much disapproval. The Chinese manufacturer outbid American companies (the makers of the Patriot system), a Russian company (the maker of the S-300 and S-400), and an Italian-French consortium (the maker of the SAMP/T Aster-30). While Turkish President Abdullah Gul said that the decision was not final and the deal had yet to be finalized and signed, the terms of the tender obligate Turkey to move ahead with China. Thus, it seems that it will take more than the current level of condemnation by NATO members to persuade Turkey to change its mind. Moreover, the decision was made at the Defense Industry Executive Committee, chaired by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and this indicates his full support for the decision.

According to Turkey, three main reasons led it to opt for the Chinese bid. First of all, finances: the price quoted by the Chinese company was some \$1 billion less than the others (the Turks stipulated a maximum of \$4 billion for the deal; the Chinese bid came in at \$3.4 billion). Second, China is willing to include the transfer of technology and some of the production to Turkey as part of the deal, something Turkey has been very keen on in recent years, given its desire to strengthen its self-reliance in the defense realm. Finally, expected delivery: Turkey estimates that China will supply the systems in a relatively short period.

Critics of the Turkish decision are concerned about several issues. Buying the system from China means that Turkey will be limited in its interoperability with the defense systems of other NATO members, which is liable to affect Turkey's defensive

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capabilities; it also raises the concern about friendly fire due to the lack of synchronization with the alliance's friend-or-foe identification systems. Second, the Chinese system has reportedly not been tested under real conditions and is inferior to the Russian S-400 proposed to the Turks. Third, NATO officials are worried not only that the systems, once in place, could serve for intelligence gathering by the Chinese espionage, but that even at the stage of joint development the Chinese would have access to information and data NATO members would rather not reveal. Furthermore, CPMIEC is subject to American sanctions for violations of the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act. In response to some of these reservations, Turkey claims it is planning to develop an independent friend-or-foe identification system, and that there is no comprehensive requirement that NATO members purchase defensive systems compatible with those of other alliance members. In fact, the proponents of the deal point to Greece, also a NATO member, which bought the S-300 from Russia (note, however, that this was a compromise purchase after Turkey vetoed the intention of the Republic of Cyprus to buy the system, which instead was placed on Greek soil).

At the broader political level, Ankara is criticized for its willingness to cooperate in a sensitive strategic field with one of the biggest competitors of Turkey's longstanding close ally, the United States. In practice, the possibility of Turkey working with China in the military realm as a counterweight to or substitute for the United States is not new. In the late 1990s Turkey bought rockets and imported rocket technology from China (known in Turkey as the T-300 Kasirga and J-600T Yildirim) after talks with the United States on purchasing an advanced rocket launcher system fell through. In 2010, Turkey held joint aerial maneuvers with China after Washington canceled its participation in an exercise with Turkey in response to Ankara's rejection of Israel's participation. The upgrading of the Turkish army's armored vehicles (FNSS ACV) was also a joint Turkish-Chinese project.

At the same time these moves, including the newest deal, should not be viewed as proof that Turkey and China are establishing strategic relations, as they have fundamental political and strategic differences of opinion preventing any real partnership. Among these are China's efforts to subvert international steps against the Assad regime; Turkey's enormous trade deficit with China (currently about \$18 billion annually); and Turkey's critique vis-à-vis China's policy with regard to its Uyghur minority (a population of some 10 million, according to Chinese official statistics), which shares ethnic, cultural, and historical ties with the Turkish people. In the background are also the complex historical relations between the nations that for decades cast China's image in Turkey in a negative light. In addition, recent developments, especially the escalating tension between Turkey and Syria, have highlighted Turkey's dependence on NATO. Despite some cooling in the relationship with the United States, partly due to Turkey's disappointment with

America's decision not to intervene militarily in Syria and a chill between Erdogan and President Obama, NATO nations hurried to deploy Patriot missile batteries near the Turkish-Syrian border after it seemed that relations were deteriorating. It is also clear to Turkey that until it makes progress in the long process of developing independent anti-missile defenses it will remain highly dependent on NATO members on this issue.

Therefore the explanation for the deal must be found in the particular current circumstances and complementary interests of Turkey and China. First, there is Turkey's desire to develop an independent technologically-advanced defense industry, which is probably Ankara's main reason for choosing China as its defense system supplier. This goal is entirely comprehensible to Beijing, which has been driven by similar considerations since the founding of the modern Chinese state. Both nations view the American and European refusal to transfer to Turkey manufacturing technology connected to anti-missile defense systems as a way to perpetuate the superiority of the developed nations over the developing nations and leave the latter's dependence on the former firmly in place. Second, given Turkey's complicated relationship with the United States and the West – for example, Turkey's anger over the US refusal to act in Syria, the hurdles the European Union has set for Turkey's acceptance into the EU, and the suspicion that NATO members are exploiting Turkey's dependence on them in the realm of air defense – it is convenient for Ankara to show that it has an alternative of sorts to its alliance with the West. As for China, even if it is aware of the limits to its relations with Turkey, the current deal serves its interests well by creating an opportunity to gain a foothold in the Middle East weapons market, widen the split between Turkey and the United States, and strengthen its ties with an important regional power.

This development has some implications for Israel. Despite the difficulties Turkey has raised in recent years regarding the relationship between NATO and Israel, Israel would like to see Turkey continue being a loyal NATO member. Thus, the current development will likely arouse concern in Jerusalem. Additional evidence of the difficult state of Turkish-Israeli relations is that Turkey has currently chosen to pursue procurement independence via a partnership with problematic actors such as China instead of cooperation with Israel. Finally, the Turkish choice of the Chinese defense system shows that even if the system's quality and performance are inferior to those of its competitors, it is still good enough so that a nation that sees itself as threatened would choose it. This implies improvements in the Chinese defense industry and the possibility of it entering the Middle East military arena as an important player.