

# ISSUE BRIEF **06.XX.19**

## Turkey's S-400 Missile Crisis: Four Possible Outcomes

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In 2017, Turkey—a NATO member since 1952—reached an agreement to purchase Russia's S-400 missile interceptor system. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan subsequently announced that Turkey would take delivery of the system in October 2019. These developments triggered a crisis between Turkey and the U.S. that has yet to be resolved, with each of the longtime allies threatening or antagonizing the other as the putative delivery date approaches.

NATO and the United States are concerned that if Turkey takes delivery and activates the S-400 system, Russia will have an opportunity to spy on NATO technology, including a new generation F-35 fighter jets. How likely is the risk of escalation if Turkey receives and activates the S-400 system? Could Turkey—with the second largest army among NATO forces—risk suspension or removal from NATO? How will this crisis shape the future of the U.S.–Turkey relations?

Some analysts assert that Erdogan is using the purchase of the S-400 system as leverage against the U.S. decision to delay the sale of NATO-based Patriot missile interceptor systems to Turkey. The reason for this delay appears to be the United States' eroding trust in Turkey in light of its rapprochement with Russia in recent years. In response to Turkey's agreement to purchase the Russian-made S-400 system, the U.S. threatened Turkey with economic sanctions and introduced the idea of Turkey's removal from NATO. In addition, the United States halted a

shipment of F-35 jets that had already been paid for by Turkey. More recently, the U.S. also threatened to stop training Turkish pilots for the F-35 program. Thus far, Turkey has not backed down, and it is uncertain what will happen next.

With Turkey in a severe economic recession, and with an economy that depends on international investors, Erdogan has little incentive to further alienate the U.S. After all, antagonizing the U.S. has serious costs for Turkey, as the crisis arising from Turkey's 2016 arrest of American pastor Andrew Brunson demonstrated:<sup>1</sup> the value of the Turkish lira relative to the U.S. dollar and euro plummeted, inflation rose, many private Turkish businesses were obliged to restructure their unmanageable debt, and the standard of living for average Turkish citizens in urban areas deteriorated. Ultimately, these problems partially contributed to the AKP's failure to win the mayoral race in any of Turkey's four largest cities in the March 2019 elections. In the sections that follow, I review four scenarios that could develop as the S-400 crisis continues.

### **SCENARIO 1: S-400 PURCHASE AND RADAR ACTIVATION**

The worst-case scenario would be for Turkey to take delivery of the S-400 system, activate it, and suffer dire consequences as a result. The S-400 Triumf system involves missiles (long-range in the case of Turkey), a mobile launcher, and a radar system. The



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radar system can autonomously detect and indicate targets. This feature potentially gives Russia access to any Turkish military asset. Consequently, there is the risk that Russians can decipher NATO-based military technology in Turkey if the Turks activate the S-400 system. Thus, the Pentagon is reportedly concerned that once the S-400 radar is activated, the Russians will be able to spy on NATO assets, especially F-35 jets' stealth technology.<sup>2</sup>

In this scenario, NATO's and the Pentagon's response could be threefold. First, Turkey could be completely removed from NATO's joint F-35 manufacturing program, through which it has paid \$1 billion for 100 jets. Second, the U.S. could impose severe sanctions on Turkey (under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act [CAATSA], which bars America's allies from using Russian radar technologies). Lastly, and more dramatically, the U.S. could use its leverage with NATO to remove Turkey as a member.

Foreign policy scholarship suggests that Turkey would suffer considerably if its partnership with NATO were to end. The reason is that NATO provides Turkey with major security benefits and deters potential aggressors. Simply put, Turkey has access to nuclear weapons thanks to NATO. Absent NATO, nothing—not even S-400s—could offer the level of security Turkey currently enjoys. To make up for the loss of security without NATO, Turkey would have to sacrifice non-military fiscal spending, which could jeopardize the welfare of many Turkish citizens<sup>3</sup> and reduce the resources used to pursue its increasingly proactive foreign policy agenda in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, NATO without Turkey is not good news for NATO, but Turkey in this scenario would be the bigger loser. Turkey, an important NATO ally, borders one of the world's most conflict-ridden regions—the Middle East. Some observers view recent increased American engagement with Israel, Cyprus, and Greece as efforts to prepare for the possible replacement of Turkish cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean region.<sup>5</sup> This may signal that Turkey's strategic importance for NATO, and for the U.S. in particular, may be in decline.

Could Turkey withstand NATO's absence and adequately develop its domestic defense industry in the short run? The likely answer is no. While the Erdogan government has adopted measures to develop the country's defense industry—in the past four to five years, Turkey's state-owned weapons manufacturer, ASELSAN, has developed and tested more missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV)<sup>6</sup> than ever before<sup>7</sup>—they heavily rely on military imports, from both NATO and non-NATO countries. For example, one of Turkey's major defense goals is to complete the construction of an aircraft carrier by 2021.<sup>8</sup> However, the carrier was developed to accommodate a version of F-35 jets that would land on it. Without the NATO-based F-35s, Turkey's aircraft carrier program would face major challenges, including prohibitively high economic costs. Overall, being expelled from NATO would lead to insurmountable financial burdens and a major cutback in Turkey's foreign policy aspirations. In addition, this scenario would cause Turkey to lose the United States' and the Western world's already eroding trust.

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### **SCENARIO 2: S-400 PURCHASE AND RADAR ACTIVATION, BUT NATO TECH REMAINS UNCOMPROMISED**

What if the S-400 system does not integrate into the NATO infrastructure in Turkey? Some military experts suggest this scenario as a possibility.<sup>9</sup> In this scenario, Turkey may have a lower risk of alienating NATO because the NATO equipment will remain secure from Russian encroachment. Nevertheless, Turkey will still lose the U.S.'s trust, since proceeding with the purchase of the S-400 will be seen by Americans as an act of defiance.

If this scenario comes to pass, Turkey-NATO relations will not worsen since the latter's technology will remain concealed from the Russians. After all, an alliance with NATO does not restrict Turkey from purchasing Russian military equipment. In fact, Greece—another NATO member—has possessed an S-300 system (the previous version of the S-400) since the late 1990s and activated it in 2015 during a joint military

exercise with Israel. Israel tested its missiles against the S-300 systems and neither the U.S. nor NATO reacted negatively.<sup>10</sup>

However, there is a key difference between the S-300 and S-400 system. The latter features advanced radar technology that can integrate into a nation's broader early warning system and is considered to pose a threat to new generation NATO stealth aircrafts such as F-35s. Thus, the technical problem is not necessarily that Turkey is moving ahead with the purchase of Russian military equipment or violating NATO rules. Rather, the major concern is the unique radar features of the S-400 that can theoretically compromise NATO technology. If NATO technology remains intact, then NATO has no legitimate grounds to accuse or penalize Turkey.

On the other hand, there is the inevitable fact that Turkey will alienate the United States in this scenario. If Turkey continues with the purchase, it will still be seen as a partner that defies the U.S. in strategic matters. It is for this reason that many American senators and military officials have recently expressed low trust in the Turkish government.<sup>11</sup> Hence, regardless of whether the activated S-400 systems compromise NATO technology, the U.S. will remember Turkey's defiance.

Retaining its NATO membership but losing America's trust is nevertheless a highly undesirable outcome for Turkish policymakers. Turkey needs both military and economic support from the U.S. Currently, Turkey is in the midst of an economic recession. Some Turkish economists and analysts asserted that the Erdogan government would have to look for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) standby agreement shortly after the March 31, 2019, local elections.<sup>12</sup> Yet without U.S. approval, an IMF agreement will not be possible and any other financial agreement with a mainstream international lender will not be easy for Turkey to secure. The U.S. is the largest voting bloc in the IMF due to its large financial contribution to the fund. Without U.S. approval, Turkey cannot secure an IMF standby agreement. In addition, as the Pastor Brunson crisis showed, when Turkey has highly strained relations with the

U.S., foreign investors see it as a sign of risk, and typically prefer not to invest in Turkish markets. Hence Turkey, in principle, needs to maintain amicable relations with the U.S. because the latter can use its influence in the IMF to retaliate.

### SCENARIO 3: S-400 DELIVERY, BUT NO RADAR ACTIVATION

In this scenario, Turkey goes forward with the purchase of the S-400 system but does not activate it. The purchase agreement between Turkey and Russia remains symbolically fulfilled. After all, the S-400 system will not suddenly start hacking into NATO infrastructure once it crosses the Turkish border. It needs to be installed and integrated into Turkey's general radar and early-warning systems. The risk for NATO sets in once the system is activated. Without integration, there is no such risk. Hence, it is up to Turkey to decide whether or when to integrate the S-400 radar system into its general radar system after delivery. By comparison, Greece took almost a decade to activate its S-300 system.<sup>13</sup>

Turkey faces two opposing challenges in this scenario. First, the Erdogan government has repeatedly stated that it has major security problems along Turkey's borders with Iraq and Syria due to the ongoing Syrian war and Kurdish militant groups such as the YPG and the PKK. Hence, the longer Turkey delays the activation of the S-400, the longer its southeastern security deficit will continue.

Second, Turkey needs to convince NATO and the U.S. that it will not activate the S-400 systems. Turkey expressed its need for anti-ballistic equipment as early as 2007; the need for a missile defense system may be real. Hence Turkey, though it wants to activate the S-400, will need to send strong signals to its Western allies that it will not. To achieve this, Turkey could consider selling the S-400 systems to a third party before activation.<sup>14</sup> As of the date of this publication, it is hard to tell whether such a move would violate the purchase agreement that Turkey signed with Russia. If it does not, this option would

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be the most straightforward way for Turkey to avoid upsetting Russia while maintaining its credibility with NATO as well as its partnership with the U.S.

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#### SCENARIO 4: NO S-400 SHIPMENT

What if Turkey decides not to go forward with its purchase of the S-400 systems? The risk, in this scenario, is losing Russia's trust. Alienating Russia may lead Turkey to lose its foothold in Syria. Erdogan has been trying to ensure that major powers such as the U.S. and Russia limit their support to Kurdish militants in Syria. The Turkish state views such militant groups as terrorist organizations that threaten Turkey's security, especially along the country's southern borders. In fact, to complicate the issue further for Turkey, as U.S. troops leave Syria, local Kurdish leaders have asked Russia and the regime of Bashar al-Assad for protection against a potential Turkish invasion.<sup>15</sup>

Turkey has negotiated with Russia to limit Russia's support for Kurdish militants in Syria. However, if Turkey reneges on the S-400 deal, there is the serious possibility that Russians will not cooperate with Turkey in Syria; an alienated Russia is likely to have a greater incentive to increase its military presence in Syria's Kurdish-occupied zones. This would make it more difficult for Turkey to mount offensive excursions into Syria against Kurdish militants. Therefore, future Turkish campaigns east of the Euphrates would be in great jeopardy with an uncooperative Russia. Not only does this prospect aggravate ongoing security issues on Turkey's southern borders, but it also suggests a lost opportunity for Erdogan to claim credit for a military operation that he promised to his electoral base.

Alienating Russia would also have major implications for the alternative missile defense system Turkey would need to depend on in lieu of the S-400. To start with, Turkey would have to rely on reportedly more expensive Patriot systems to address its security problems on its southeast border. However, when Germany, a NATO member, withdrew its Patriot missiles from Turkey in 2015, it reportedly sought to avoid further

escalation with Russia, and trusted in the capabilities of Turkish air force to fend off hostile jet assaults.<sup>16</sup> Since then, NATO countries have not shown much enthusiasm for deploying Patriots to Turkey.

Overall, a scenario in which Turkey capitulates to U.S. threats and halts the S-400 purchase will alienate Russia and result in a different set of challenges, the most important of which is the prospect of Turkey losing a foothold in Syria. Moreover, Turkey will still need a missile defense system. Delivery of such a system from China failed in 2013 when the U.S. successfully pressured Turkey to delay the deal. Despite Turkey's acquiescence to the U.S. in 2013, Raytheon—the manufacturer of the Patriot—did not transfer the Patriot technologies to Turkey, according to Turkish officials.<sup>17</sup> Since then, the Turks have come to believe that the U.S. has been delaying the sale of Patriot systems to Turkey for too long. It is for this reason that without the S-400s, Turkey is convinced that it may have to wait for many years to have a proper long-range missile interceptor system.

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#### CURRENT OUTLOOK

Turkey's economy and regional security will face insurmountable challenges if the Erdogan government and the S-400 crisis continue to alienate the United States and NATO. No scenario is as costly for Turkey as losing the support of the West. Hence, from a rational standpoint, the expectation is that Turkey will not risk doing so. However, there are no clear signs that Turkey will simply cancel its S-400 order. TASS, the news agency owned by the Russian government, claims that Turkish missile squadrons were recently sent to Russia to receive training on the S-400 systems,<sup>18</sup> while Erdogan suggested in late April 2019 that President Trump set up a joint working group to resolve the S-400 crisis.<sup>19</sup> Erdogan's move signals that Turkey has not entirely given up on maintaining good relations with the U.S. It appears possible that Turkey will neither back out of its contract with Russia nor risk alienating the United States. Instead, Turkey is likely to take delivery of the S-400

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systems in October 2019 without activating them anytime soon. After all, this is not the first time that Erdogan has risked provoking the U.S. in an attempt to gain leverage in a conflict, only to back down to toe the line with U.S. policy preferences, as the cases of the failed China missile interceptor deal and the jailing of Pastor Brunson demonstrate.

## ENDNOTES

1. In 2017, Brunson, who then lived in western Turkey, was charged with collaborating with terrorist organizations. His arrest triggered a crisis between Turkey and the U.S. The Trump administration imposed restrictions on Turkish steel goods, and threatened Turkey with harsher measures. For its part, Turkey demanded that the U.S. return Fetullah Gulen, a Turkish Muslim cleric who was deemed by Turkish authorities as the main conspirator of a July 15, 2016, coup attempt against Erdogan's government. In 2018, the crisis was resolved when Turkey acquiesced to the U.S. and released Pastor Brunson.

2. *The Economist*, "Weapons of Choice—Turkey is soon due to take delivery of its Russian missiles," March 14, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/03/14/turkey-is-soon-due-to-take-delivery-of-its-russian-missiles>.

3. Previous statistical research shows that being part of major military alliances relieves countries of heavy defense burdens. See T. Clifton Morgan and Glenn Palmer, "To Protect and to Serve: Alliances and Foreign Policy Portfolios," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 180.

4. Turkey has been sending foreign aid and engaging in infrastructure projects in these regions for a while now. See Emre Hatipoglu and Glenn Palmer, "Contextualizing Change in Turkish Foreign Policy: the Promise of the 'Two-Good' Theory," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no.1 (July 2014): 231; and Ziya Onis and Suhnaz Yilmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no.1 (March 2009): 7. Other research suggests that countries, typically, are much less

likely to send foreign aid if they have trouble allocating the resources needed to satisfy their foreign policy goals. See Tobias Heinrich, "When is foreign aid selfish, when is it selfless?" *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 422.

5. Keith Johnson, "U.S. Lawmakers Talk Turkey to Ankara," *Foreign Policy*, April, 10, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/10/u-s-lawmakers-talk-turkey-to-ankara/>.

6. In the case of Turkey, UAVs are military surveillance drones.

7. See ASELSAN, "Air Missile and Defense Systems," <https://www.aselsan.com.tr/en-us/capabilities/air-and-missile-defense-systems>; and Jeremy Chin, "Turkey Unveils Long-range Air Defense Missile System," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 31, 2018, last modified May 8, 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/turkey-unveils-long-range-air-defense-missile-system/>.

8. See a press release from the website of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan: "Ucak Gemimizi de Yapmakta Kararliyiz" ("We are determined to build our aircraft carrier"), *Turkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaskanligi*, March 7, 2017, <https://tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/78740/ucak-gemimizi-de-yapmakta-kararliyiz>.

9. Valerie Insinna, "U.S. official: If Turkey Buys Russian Systems, They Can't Plug Into NATO Tech," *Defense News*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/dubai-air-show/2017/11/16/us-official-if-turkey-buys-russian-systems-they-cant-plug-into-nato-tech/>.

10. "Report: Israel Practiced Defeating S-300 Russian Defense System in Greece," *Jerusalem Post*, December 4, 2015, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Report-Israel-trained-against-Russian-made-air-defence-system-in-Greece-436320>.

11. Keith Johnson, "U.S. Lawmakers Talk Turkey to Ankara," *Foreign Policy*, April, 10, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/10/u-s-lawmakers-talk-turkey-to-ankara/>. Also see Michael R. Pompeo, "Remarks at the 36th Annual Jewish Institute for National Security of America Awards Dinner," U.S. Department

of State, October 10, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-the-36th-annual-jewish-institute-for-national-security-of-america-awards-dinner/>.

12. Turkey is experiencing stagflation and rising unemployment as many private sector companies fail to cover debts they have to pay in U.S. dollars. Korkut Baratav, a well-known Turkish economist, argues that for Erdogan's administration, the IMF is the only reasonable route to economic recovery. See (in Turkish) "Boratav bir kez daha: IMF'den baska care kalmadi!" ("Boratav once again: There is no choice but the IMF!"), *Para Analiz*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.paraanaliz.com/2019/genel/boratav-bir-kez-daha-imfden-baska-care-kalmadi-32942/>. Attila Yesilada, another Turkish economist, suggests that unless Erdogan signs a deal with the IMF, he may risk being ousted by the rank-and-file of his own party. See Attila Yesilada "Ticaret Savaslari, kuresel hegemonya ve Turkiye'nin Payi" ("Trade wars, and Turkey's share of global hegemony"), *Para Analiz*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.paraanaliz.com/2019/dunya-ekonomisi/ticaret-savaslari-kuresel-hegemonya-ve-turkiyenin-payi-33747/>.

13. "Greece in talks with Russia to buy missiles for S-300 systems: RIA," *Reuters World News*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nuclear-greece-missiles-idUSKBN0N62A720150415>.

14. Sinan Ulgen, "It's Not Too Late to Stop Turkey From Realigning With Russia," *Foreign Policy*, April 11, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/11/its-not-too-late-to-stop-turkey-from-realigning-with-russia-s400-patriot-missile-putin-erdogan-trump/?fbclid=IwAR0oqqm5HNL1kuKGZYm23d5Jgx3Pu2R8mitlcVOH4v0xL1hb3n3tJ7N6vE>.

15. Ellen Francis, "Let down by U.S., Syrian Kurdish Leaders Look to Russia and Assad," *Reuters*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/let-down-by-us-syrian-kurdish-leaders-look-to-russia-and-assad-idUSKCN10Q18E>.

16. Robin Emmott, Sabine Siebold, and Phil Stewart, "Turkey urges NATO to keep up its Patriot defenses," October 8,

2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nato/turkey-urges-nato-to-keep-up-its-patriot-defenses-idUSKCN0S20HJ20151008>.

17. Sebastian Sprenger, "Turkey defiant on purchase of Russian S-400 anti-missile weapon," *Defense News Weekly*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nato-priorities/2018/07/11/turkey-defiant-on-purchase-of-russian-s-400-anti-missile-weapon/>; and Joseph Trevithick, "U.S. Trying to Sell Turkey Patriot Missiles to End Spat Over Russian S-400 Purchase," *The Drive*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/22204/u-s-trying-to-sell-turkey-patriot-missiles-to-end-spat-over-russian-s-400-purchase>.

18. "Turkish Servicemen to Start Training to Operate S-400 Systems This Month—Source," *TASS Russian News Agency*, May 7, 2019, <http://tass.com/defense/1057226>.

19. See, in Turkish, the release from Erdogan's press office: "ABD Baskani Donald Trump ile Telefon Gorusmesi," ("Phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump"), *Turkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaskanligi*, April 29, 2019, <https://tccb.gov.tr/basin-aciklamalari/365/105163/abd-baskani-donald-trump-ile-telefon-gorusmesi>; and a report from Reuters: "Trump, Erdogan discuss working group on Russian S-400 missile system," *Reuters World News*, April, 29 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-us-call/trump-erdogan-discuss-working-group-on-russian-s-400-missile-system-idUSKCN1S5110>.

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