

Defying US threats, Turkey vows to deploy Russian air-defence system

By Keith Jones
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Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, vowed Wednesday that Washington's ever-escalating threats will not deter Ankara from proceeding with the purchase and deployment of the Russian-made S-400 air defence system.

Speaking two days after a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow at which the S-400 purchase and the potential for expanding Russian-Turkish military-strategic ties were among the principal topics of discussion, Erdogan did not just reiterate that the S-400 purchase was "irreversible." He said that due to "constant" "provocations from the US" the delivery of the S-400 could well be brought forward from July.

Earlier Wednesday, Erdogan's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, warned that if the US carries through on its threats to punish Turkey for exercising its sovereign right as a NATO state to choose its own weapons and weapon-systems, Ankara could buy a second S-400 air-defence system from Russia.

Referring to Washington's offer to sell Turkey Patriot missiles, but only if it abandons the \$2.5 billion S-400 deal, Cavusoglu told Turkey's NTV, "If they don't sell the Patriots, we could buy a second S-400 system or another one from someone else." He added that Turkey could also purchase Russian fighter jets, if Washington cancels its order to buy the US-made F-35 stealth fighter.

Erdogan and Cavusoglu's remarks came in response to a column entitled "Turkey Must Choose between the US and Russia" that the Republican and Democratic leaders of the US Senate Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees published in the *New York Times* Tuesday.

Republican Senators Jim Inhofe and Jim Risch and Democrats Jack Reed and Bob Menendez wrote that if Turkey proceeded with the S-400 purchase in defiance of Washington, it would "have profound consequences" for the "country's place in the world, its relationship with the United States and its standing in NATO."

They went on to list a long series of punitive actions that Washington could, and in most cases they said, would, take if Ankara did not bow to US demands that it abandon the S-400.

The list began with the cancellation of Turkey's order to purchase more than 100 F-35s. This and the ouster of all Turkish companies from the jet-fighter's production chain are guaranteed, they asserted, should Ankara deploy the S-400. "Turkey," they continued, "will be sanctioned as required by US law," under the anti-Russia Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

Adopted in 2017, CAATSA provides for sanctions of varying scope and severity. But the senators indicated Turkey would face the full brunt of possible punitive measures. Economic sanctions they vowed, would hit "Turkey's economy hard—rattling international markets, scaring away foreign direct investment and crippling Turkey's aerospace and defense industry."

Tuesday's column represented bipartisan Congressional support for the ultimatum US Vice President Mike Pence delivered at an event last week, attended by Foreign Minister Cavusoglu, to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of NATO.

Indeed, the headline the senators chose for their column was meant to echo Pence's claim that "Turkey must choose," between "remain(ing) a critical partner" in NATO and close US military-security partner or buying the Russian-made S-400. In the latter case, declared Pence, the US "will not stand idly by."

The US claims Turkey's deployment of the S-400 would undermine NATO and US-Turkish military interoperability and enable Russia to gain intelligence on the functioning of the F-35. Whilst there are no doubt military-technical, as well as financial reasons, behind Washington's opposition to Ankara's S-400 purchase, it is only a flashpoint for more significant and intractable geopolitical differences.

Washington is determined to break the shaky alliance Ankara has forged with Russia and Iran in recent years, and to reduce Turkey to its traditional role as a pliant US client state anchoring American imperialism's military-strategic interests in the Middle East, southeastern Europe, and the Black Sea.

The Turkish bourgeoisie, including for most of the past 17 years that Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have led Turkey's government, has supported and sought to profit from the never-ending wars of aggression the US has mounted or fomented since 1991 in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa.

But to its consternation, Washington has repeatedly ignored and thwarted the interests and ambitions of its supposed junior partner.

Matters came to a head during the Syria war. Erdogan eagerly supported the US drive to overthrow Bashar-al Assad's Baathist regime and helped arm the Islamist militias Washington used as its shock troops in the first years of the war. But Ankara recoiled when the US, in response to the defeat and collapse of its Islamist allies, made the Kurdish YPG—an offshoot of the PKK against which Ankara has been fighting a bloody counter-insurgency war in south-east Turkey for the past 35 years—its main proxy army in

its regime-change war in Syria.

While maintaining its support for Assad's Sunni Arab opponents, Ankara struck a shaky alliance with Assad's chief allies, Moscow and Tehran, on the basis of their common interest in limiting and rolling back US power in Syria.

As Turkey's S-400 purchase attests, the subsequent attempts of the US to bully and coerce Turkey into pulling back from closer ties with Russia and Iran have only served to antagonize Ankara and strengthen its determination to lessen its dependence on Washington.

That said, Erdogan's overriding objective is to establish a buffer zone in northern Syria, as a first step to smashing the YPG-led proto-Kurdish state in Syria (the Rojava Republic).

During his visit to Washington for last week's NATO foreign ministers meeting, Cavusoglu insisted that Turkey remains committed to the US-led war alliance and voiced support for NATO's plans to counter Russian "aggression," including by mounting a provocative naval exercise in the Kerch Strait, the passageway between Crimea and the Russian mainland that separates the Black and Azov Seas.

However, Washington's ever-escalating threats and provocative actions against Turkey—but also across the Middle East, including its encouragement of Israeli aggression and its illegal and incendiary drive to embargo and crash Iran's economy—are giving Ankara pause.

Speaking at a Turkish Heritage Organization function in Washington earlier this week, Gulnur Aybet, one of Erdogan's senior advisers, warned that the US was pushing Ankara into Russia's strategic embrace. "If the United States continues to approach Turkey with a zero-sum game," said Aybet, "then the doors which are currently open for the future of (US-Turkish) relations could turn toward another partner, and that is Russia."

In its conflict with Turkey over the S-400, Washington claims to speak in the name of NATO as a whole. But NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg acknowledged last week that under NATO rules the decision to buy the S-400 is Turkey's and Turkey's alone to make. Moreover, although they have their own geopolitical differences with Turkey, the major European powers have conspicuously failed to second the US threats and bullying over the S-400 issue.

According to many analysts, Erdogan and the AKP regime are still hoping—despite US imperialism's ever more aggressive and reckless actions in its attempt to staunch the erosion of its world power—that Washington will not follow through on the more severe of its threatened reprisals, for fear of precipitating a complete breakdown in the three-quarters of a century-old US-Turkish military-strategic partnership.

Washington, as the senators' *New York Times* op-ed highlighted, is confident that it can seriously damage the Turkish economy. In August, Trump's decision to double US tariffs on Turkish aluminum and steel imports precipitated a collapse in the value of the Turkish lira, and helped tip Turkey into its first recession since 2009.

Eight months later, with its economy being battered by both high-inflation and recession, Turkey is even more vulnerable.

Erdogan has promised Turkish big business that his government

will implement "economic restructuring," i.e. slash social spending, cut corporate taxes and otherwise boost investor returns. But Wednesday's announcement by his finance minister of what was billed as first steps to tackle the economic crisis was panned by much of domestic and international business as inadequate and a retreat from taking "tough decisions."

Meanwhile, Erdogan and his AKP, which suffered significant losses in Turkey's major cities in the March 31 local elections, are pressing the national electoral commission to set aside the results of the election for mayor of Istanbul and order a revote. Erdogan has justified this demand with claims the elections were marred by "organized crime" and the patently anti-democratic claim that a 13,000-vote margin of victory given the size of Istanbul's electorate is irrelevant.

The US has signaled that it might yet seek to leverage the election controversy to fan opposition to Erdogan and his government within Turkey and internationally.

The Western press, spearheaded by the *New York Times*, has been lionizing the AWP's main electoral opponent, the CHP-led Nation Alliance, as a democratic antidote to the authoritarian, Islamist Erdogan.

That Erdogan is a vicious enemy of the working class, who has run roughshod over democratic rights is indisputable. But the CHP is a rightwing, ultra-nationalist party that supports the brutal oppression of the Kurds and is allied with the Good Party, a split-off from the fascist MHP. Like the Kurdish nationalist HDP, which backed its candidates in the March 31st elections in Istanbul, Ankara, and the other major cities of western Turkey, the CHP is distinguished from the AKP principally by its even more pronounced orientation to US imperialism, NATO, and the European Union.

The confluence of geostrategic, economic and political crisis rocking the bourgeois Turkish Republic underscores the urgency of the working class constituting itself as an independent political force in opposition to imperialism and all the rival parties of the bourgeoisie and fighting for a workers' government and the Socialist United States of the Middle East as the only means of securing the social and democratic rights of the working people, including the democratic rights of the Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities.

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