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By Ulas Atesci

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As Washington threatens to punish Ankara over Russian S-400 missile purchase

US-Turkey conflict nears breaking point

Amid US war preparations against Iran, tensions between Washington and Ankara are soaring over the Turkish government's purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles in defiance of US threats.

On June 6, acting US Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan wrote a letter to his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, threatening to break off military cooperation with Turkey, notably over the F-35 fighter program, and to subject Turkey to a wide range of sanctions.

Washington claims Turkey's use of the S-400 would undermine NATO and US-Turkish military interoperability, and enable Russia to gain intelligence on the F-35.

"If Turkey procures the S-400," Shanahan wrote, "our two countries must develop a plan to discontinue Turkey's participation in the F-35 programme." He then added: "While we seek to maintain our valued relationship, Turkey will not receive the F-35 if Turkey takes delivery of the S-400." Shanahan also threatened to exclude Turkey from a Brussels meeting on the F-35 and to cancel training of Turkish F-35 pilots in America.

On Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said Turkey would nonetheless take delivery of a Russian-made S-400 system "very soon." That same day, a Turkish Defense Ministry statement complained that Shanahan's letter was "not in line with a spirit of alliance" and was "improperly worded."

While affirming that Ankara still has "the option to change course on the S-400," Shanahan made clear that US retaliation against the Erdoğan government will go far

beyond canceling Turkey's order for more than 100 F-35s, and excluding Turkish companies from continuing to participate in the consortium that is building the F-35.

"Turkey's procurement of the S-400," said Shanahan, "will hinder [Turkey's] ability to enhance or maintain co-operation with the United States and within NATO, lead to Turkish strategic and economic over-dependence on Russia, and undermine Turkey's very capable defense industry and ambitious economic development goals."

Washington is contemplating drastic methods to whip Ankara into line. Last August, its doubling of US tariffs on Turkish aluminum and steel exports led to a collapse of the Turkish lira, helping tip Turkey into its first recession since 2009. Shanahan threatened Ankara with sanctions under the 2017 anti-Russian Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

"Pursuing the S-400 purchase," warned Shanahan, "will cause a loss in jobs, gross domestic product, and international trade."

"President Trump," he added, "committed to boost bilateral trade from \$20 billion currently to more than \$75 billion, however that may be challenging if the United States imposes CAATSA sanctions. ... There is strong bipartisan US Congressional determination to see CAATSA sanctions imposed on Turkey if Turkey acquires the S-400."

On April 10, Republican and Democratic leaders of the US Senate Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees published a column in the *New York Times* titled "Turkey Must Choose between the US and Russia," criticizing Turkey's plans to buy the S-400 system and vowing CAATSA sanctions would be imposed if it did.

Ankara is trying to maneuver a path between the United States, its main military ally for three-quarters of a century, and Russia, with which it has formed a shaky alliance in recent years to counterbalance what it viewed as hostile US actions.

In its June 8 letter, Turkey's Defense Ministry calls for "finding a solution to the existing problems within the framework of strategic partnership" and "comprehensive security cooperation" and emphasizes "the importance of continuing negotiations."

Erdoğan took a less conciliatory stance. "I'm not saying Turkey will buy S-400 defense systems, it has already bought them; we've closed the deal," he told a Justice and Development Party (AKP) group meeting in Ankara on June 12. "This system will be delivered to our country next month."

Ankara also threatened trade retaliation if Washington imposes sanctions. “There are steps we will take [against the US] if they impose [sanctions] against us. These steps will be announced when needed,” Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu told the state-run Anadolu Agency on June 14. Previously, Ankara intimated that, if excluded from the F-35 programme, it might purchase Chinese J-31 or Russian Su-57 fighters.

This weekend, Erdoğan told reporters, “We will not swallow our words” on the S-400. But he nonetheless held out the possibility of reaching a deal with Washington: “All my hope is that we will have a thorough meeting with Mr. Trump at the G-20 summit.”

Serious as it is, the dispute between Washington and Ankara over the S-400 is merely the flashpoint for far deeper and intractable geostrategic conflicts.

For most of the 17 years that Erdoğan has led Turkey’s AKP government, he has backed and sought to profit from the never-ending wars of aggression the US has waged in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa since 1991. Nevertheless, US-Turkish relations have become increasingly explosive, especially since the eruption of the Syria war.

Initially, Erdoğan eagerly supported the drive the US launched in 2011 to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s Baathist regime. Turkey helped arm the Islamist militias Washington used as its shock troops in the first years of the war. But Ankara recoiled when, after the defeat of its Islamist allies, Washington made Kurdish nationalist militias—linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against which Ankara has fought a bloody counterinsurgency in southeast Turkey for the past 35 years—its main proxies in Syria.

Relations between Turkey and its traditional NATO allies unraveled still further when Washington and Berlin backed a failed 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan. The western powers, especially the US, deemed it entirely unacceptable that Turkey had turned towards closer relations with Russia and China, amid growing its conflicts with the US and other NATO allies over strategic issues including their backing for the Syrian Kurdish militias.

It was shortly after the coup—which failed because Erdoğan, alerted by Moscow, was able to make a timely appeal to his voters to come into the streets to defend him—that the AKP began to talk about buying the S-400.

In the ensuing three years, Ankara has maintained its support for Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces against the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian regime, while developing a shaky alliance with Moscow and Tehran based on limiting US power in Syria. The S-400

purchase is one of a number of arms and other commercial deals that is being touted by Moscow and Ankara as a means of solidifying their ties.

Recent months have seen intense US-Turkish talks. But there is no sign of a resolution to their conflicts, especially over Syria. Ankara has long insisted that it must extend the “safe zone” it currently controls in northwest Syria east of the Euphrates. Its aim is to smash the Kurdish-led proto-state there and chase the main US-linked, PKK-allied Kurdish militias from the region. Washington, however, continues to militarily support the Kurdish YPG, viewing the YPG-controlled enclave in northeastern Syria as an important beachhead for future operations against Damascus and the Assad regime’s Iranian and Russian backers.

According to an official from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), composed largely of ethnic-Kurdish troops, the US has sent an “aid convoy” of heavy weapons and military vehicles including 200 trucks to the northern Syrian town of Kobani, on the Turkish border. It is reportedly tasked with building “new bases” in the region.

Geopolitical differences are growing between the US and Turkey, including on US sanctions and war preparations against Iran, which is a major provider of energy to Turkey; Washington’s promotion of Israel and Saudi Arabia as its principal Mideast allies; and the US push to exclude Turkey from offshore Eastern Mediterranean energy resources.

Underlining the depth of the latter conflict, Ankara reportedly may position S-400 missiles near the Eastern Mediterranean.

Washington and the European Union (EU) powers have opposed Ankara’s efforts to get a share of that region’s energy resources. A June 14 summit in Malta that brought together France, Italy, Spain, Malta, Portugal, Greece and Cyprus released a joint declaration urging Turkey to halt “illegal” drilling in the region. It asked the EU “to remain vigilant on the matter and, in case Turkey does not cease its illegal activities, to consider appropriate measures in full solidarity with Cyprus.”

Washington and the EU see these resources as a critical alternative for Europe to Russian gas imports. Erdoğan replied: “No one can stop us from pursuing rights and interests of Turkish Cypriots in Eastern Mediterranean.” Over US and EU objections, a Turkish drill ship began offshore operations there on May 3.

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