Commentary No. 30
September 13, 2019

Could Turkey defect from NATO to Russia?

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Summary

In July Russia shipped the first components of an S-400 air defence system to Turkey. The deal has been controversial, with the United States claiming that Turkey's operation of the S-400 will allow Russian technicians to collect intelligence on the F-35 'fifth generation' stealth jets being flown by NATO. I argue that the key to understanding Turkey's drift away from its NATO allies and closer to Russia is to recognise the Turkish leader's perception of internal and external threats, and how Russia has outflanked NATO in addressing these inter-related threat perceptions.

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Threats at home and abroad

> Russo-Turkish relations are a startling illustration of how quickly politics can change. A few years ago, the current *rapprochement* between Russia and Turkey looked improbable.

The two states backed different sides in the Syrian civil war and their policies with regards to Syria brought growing tensions. In 2015 the Turkish military shot down a Russian fighter jet for allegedly infringing Turkish airspace and then, in 2016, an off-duty Turkish police officer assassinated the Russian ambassador in Ankara. Within NATO there were serious concerns that tensions might escalate into military conflict.

A longer-term perspective revealed a different Turkish relationship fraying. In the post-Cold War world shared values mattered more than ever in many NATO capitals. Many of Turkey's allies criticised Ankara heavily for what they saw as the authoritarian and

repressive turn in Turkish politics, pointing to the government's actions in response to protests at Gezi Park in 2013, its hard-line response to an attempted *coup d'état* in 2016, and the outcome of the 2017 referendum on amendments to the constitution.

Some of Erdogan's critics within NATO underestimated how threatened he felt domestically. He saw threats coming from both inside and outside Turkey's borders. Internally, the long-standing threat the government perceived from Kurdish insurgency was compounded by the 2016 coup attempt. The Turkish military has a history of intervening in politics and, from Erdogan's perspective, the sight of Turkish military jets buzzing overhead and tanks on the streets can only have deepened his insecurity. Externally, Turkey's ally the United States was supporting the Kurdish YPG militia in Syria. Erdogan wanted the Americans to share his perception that the YPG were terrorists who supported his domestic rivals, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); instead the Americans armed the YPG.

Russian guile

Russia effectively exploited Erdogan's insecurities. With Russo-Turkish relations at a low ebb, the Russians froze development of the "Turk Stream" gas pipeline and imposed a damaging trade embargo on Turkey. Russia may have also intimated that it would provide support to the YPG. This only showed Erdogan how much he needed good relations with Russia to stanch both domestic discontent (provoked by lost trade) and international threats (support for the Kurds) – and he moved to repair relations.

The Kremlin soon capitalised on Erdogan's apology for the death of the pilot of the shot down fighter jet. Following the attempted coup, it was Russia not the US that reassured Erdogan. Russian President Vladimir Putin promptly phoned Erdogan and made clear that Russia opposed the conspirators. A year later in Syria, while Ankara and Moscow disagreed about Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy, Russia tacitly supported the Turkish military's cross-border actions against the YPG. The Russian and Turkish presidents were now in frequent contact. At the end of 2017 the two countries signed a deal on Turkey's purchase of the S-400 system.

For Russia, repaired relations with Turkey served two goals.

> First, Russo-Turkish cooperation undermined NATO, with whom Russia's relations were strained and whose post-Cold War existence has long vexed it.

Secondly, and equally importantly, it helped ensure Russia's use of the Turkish Straits without which the Russian navy lacks warm water access to the oceans (albeit also requiring passage through either the Suez Canal-Red Sea or the Strait of Gibraltar). Russia managed to address both its own and Erdogan's interests.

Cold Turkey for Washington

The United States tried to dissuade Turkey from purchasing the S-400 system. Whereas Russia both applied pressure and adequately addressed Erdogan's threat perceptions, the Americans largely resorted to pressure. Washington threatened to halt the sale of F-35 jets to Turkey, but this may not have been as powerful a bargaining chip as the Americans thought. The jets carry a hefty price tag and at least part of NATO's enthusiasm stems from the lucrative business of manufacturing them rather than their technical superiority.

The Americans responded to the initial deliveries for the S-400 system by removing Turkish parts-suppliers from the F-35 programme, halting the sale of the stealth jets to Ankara, and may yet impose sanctions on Turkey in line with an Act signed into law by Donald Trump in 2017. While security may explain some of this, the United States still appears to assume that pressure will work with Erdogan.

More significantly, after the attempted coup in 2016, the Americans refused to extradite Fetullah Gulen to Turkey. Erdogan accused Gulen, a Turkish dissident living in the United States, and his supporters of orchestrating the coup attempt. Whether or not the accusation is true, the signal Washington sent to Ankara was that it did not take Erdogan's perception of internal threats seriously.

Will Turkey defect?

The strategic significance of Turkey defecting would be colossal. For NATO, Turkey provides the second largest military among its members and a vital gateway to the Middle East. For Russia, Turkey provides confidence of having access through the Turkish Straits in the event of war and achieves a long-term goal of fracturing NATO. Some analysts think that the history of recurrent wars between the Turks and Russians militates against the two getting too close, and that this will keep Turkey in NATO, although the argument isn't all that compelling all the while internal threats to Erdogan are perceived as stronger than the prospective threat from Russia.

> Ultimately, Turkey's drift away from its NATO allies does not necessarily entail its embrace of Russia.

That said, Russia will be keen to press its advantage and media reports suggest that it will offer to sell Ankara Su-35 fighter jets as substitutes for the lost F-35 acquisitions. Turkey gains leverage from toying with both Russia and NATO and has the capabilities to go it alone if need be. It has enough measure of Russia's longer-term geopolitical ambitions to make a formal alliance between Ankara and Moscow unlikely. Moreover, while Turkey's divergence from liberal values suggests that defection from NATO is a genuine possibility, intimating that it might defect probably serves its interests better for the time being.

The publication is supported by the Belarus Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Germany). The content of the publication represents the views of the author only.



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