



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# Turkey-Russia Defence Cooperation: The S-400 Deal Ordeal

September 22, 2017

*Written by: Arhama Siddiqa, Research Fellow*

*Edited by: Najam Rafique*

**“They’ve gone crazy just because we made a deal on the S-400. What were we supposed to do, wait for you forever?”<sup>1</sup> This was stated by President Erdogan on September 12, 2017 after Turkey opted for the purchase of Russia’s S-400 air**



**defence system. According to Erdogan, "Signatures have been made for the purchase of S-400s from Russia. A deposit has also been paid as far as I know."<sup>2</sup>**

The Pentagon has already reproved the move. In a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Treasury Secretary, Maryland Sen. Ben Cardin, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations, warned that the deal dishonoured a bill signed into law in July, 2017<sup>3</sup> that imposes sanctions "on any person that conducts a significant transaction with the Russian Federation’s defence or intelligence sectors."<sup>4</sup>

However, President Erdogan said that Turkey- which has the second largest standing army in NATO after the United States- was allowed to make military purchases based on its defence needs.

"Nobody has the right to discuss the Turkish republic's independence principles or independent decisions about its defence industry...we make the decisions about our own independence ourselves, we are obliged to take safety and security measures in order to defend our country."<sup>5</sup>

The \$2.5 billion deal is Turkey’s first major weapons purchase from Moscow and comes in the background of a crisis in relations with several Western states. It also appears to stem in part from unwillingness by NATO members to sell Ankara certain arms. For example in March 2017, Germany refused approval for military exports which included Leopard tanks, automatic rifles and other

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2017-09-13/what-did-they-expect-turkey-pivots-nato-signs-russia-missile-deal>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/europe/turkey-russia-missile-deal.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/text>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theglobepost.com/2017/09/15/turkey-russia-s-400-us-sanctions/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/turkey-says-it-has-bought-russias-s-400-missile-defense-system-2017-9>

equipment, on grounds that the weapons could be used to oppress the local population. Moreover, back in 2015, Turkey looked set to buy China's export version of the FD-2000 long-range air defence missile system for \$3.4 billion, but backed out after pressure from NATO.<sup>6</sup> In this case as well, NATO officials have expressed unease over the purchase of missiles which are incompatible with the alliance systems.

The S-400 is a defensive strategic weapons system. Two S-400 batteries should be delivered before the end of 2018, while another two should be constructed in Turkey later. The Russian defence system can hit aircraft, drones, as well as cruise and ballistic missiles up to 400 kilometres away and features a radar that can track targets at 600km.<sup>7</sup>

This deal would mean much more than a battle tank purchase. The primary objective of such a purchase would be protecting Turkey's critical national infrastructure and top-priority economic, military and government facilities from air and missile threats. Furthermore, if a broader technology transfer takes place, Ankara will gain important knowledge in missile production. Additionally, this would pave the way for further Turkish-Russian defence cooperation.

It is important to note that sceptics curved their lips in disbelief when in August 2016 President Erdogan voiced an optimistic expectation for Turkish-Russian relations to rapidly surpass the levels of cooperation enjoyed before the 2015 crisis that began with Turkey downing a Russian SU-24 fighter bomber in November 2015.

Grounds for pessimism were present - too much damage had been inflicted on the bilateral relations in the still bitter rhetoric voiced in the aftermath till August 2016. But irrespective of concerns, Turkish-Russian reconciliation started to gain impetus after the countries' two presidents met in St. Petersburg on August 8, 2016. From then, Turkish-Russian state-to-state interaction has improved most during the past year and neared strategic cooperation in the fields of regional security and military relations.

Unexpected alliances have also resulted because of the revival of friendship between Turkey and Russia. In December 2016, Turkey, Russia and Iran signed a tripartite agreement to join efforts to reach a peaceful settlement in Syria that shortly afterward resulted in the Astana process which ultimately bolster the Geneva peace talks on Syria. This newly emerged triumvirate built on Turkish-Russian, Turkish-Iranian and Russian-Iranian bilateral ties, has proved itself a result-generating working

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/12/us-turkish-ties-continue-to-deteriorate-.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.atimes.com/geopolitics-drives-turkeys-acquisition-russian-missile-defense/>

mechanism balanced by mutual compromise and concession. The most substantial evidence is cooperation on the Syrian de-escalation zones.

With the second-largest army in the alliance, Turkey holds a massive strategic importance for NATO, due to its geographical proximity to Iraq, Syria and Iran. But relations have worn in recent months. Ankara is particularly furious about Washington's support to Kurdish YPG fighters battling the Islamic State group in Syria. It sees the YPG as an extension of the militant Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a three-decade rebellion in Turkey's southeast. Meanwhile, European disparagement of Erdogan's rule is not going down well in Turkey. Germany has said it would restrict some arms sales to Ankara, as diplomatic relations grow sour over the Turkish security crackdown following last year's failed military coup.

It is evident that the Turkish president is trying to make his country more independent from NATO. The present deal also underscores what many in the West see as an increasingly cosy relationship between Russia and Turkey. It should also be kept in mind that deals of such weapons system are agreed upon only on condition of solid strategic reasons and a long-term plan for military cooperation. Hence, the world may very well be witnessing the making of a new strategic reality and a new strategic security zone in Europe.