



# Containing the US-Turkish Crisis After the S-400s

*By Nicholas Danforth*

With Turkey insisting it will take delivery of Russian S-400 missiles as planned and the United States insisting this will trigger serious sanctions, there is every reason to fear that a real crisis is coming. For policymakers in both countries who appreciate the value of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, now is the time to start thinking about how to contain the fallout if that happens. The risk is that both sides, having gotten to this point by systematically misunderstanding the other, could easily react to a crisis by making it much worse.

Over the past year, it became clear that neither the United States nor Turkey fully grasped the degree of mutual hostility in their relationship—or at least the consequences of that hostility. Many in Washington appeared convinced, until quite recently, that the Turkish government would ultimately abandon the S-400s, perhaps after having leveraged the planned purchase for U.S. concessions. In Ankara, meanwhile, many appeared equally convinced that U.S. objections could be managed, perhaps through dealing directly with President Donald Trump to avoid sanctions. Both countries, in other words, believed that the other would back down and only belatedly realized they were dealing with an equally committed counterpart.

Ankara failed to appreciate how thoroughly it had alienated the U.S. Congress and generated a bipartisan consensus around taking a tougher stance toward Turkey. Washington failed to realize that its actions had not merely angered Turkish policymakers but in fact convinced them of the need to take an adversarial approach toward the United States. If not managed carefully, a crisis over the Russian S-400s could lead

both sides to take provocative steps that would exacerbate this mutual hostility, transforming a broken alliance into an enduring confrontation.

The perception that U.S.-Turkish relations are now perpetually in crisis mode has perhaps paradoxically encouraged a certain complacency in both capitals about the potential stakes. Those in Washington who feel that the United States is no longer benefitting from its current relationship with Turkey have not fully reckoned with the challenges an openly adversarial one might bring. Those in Ankara who are certain that the United States is already an adversary seem unprepared for the consequences of actually making it one. Recognizing these risks should encourage policymakers to respond with restraint in any new crisis, thereby avoiding a worst-case scenario and preserving the possibility of rebuilding U.S.-Turkish relations in the future

## Mutual Misperceptions

Remarkably, it took almost two years of Turkey and the United States repeatedly stating how serious they were on the S-400 issue for either side's message to get across.

There were certainly reasons for this misunderstanding. Having seen Turkey walk away from a planned purchase of Chinese missiles in 2015, the United States was inclined to suspect the S-400s were another attempt at signaling displeasure rather than a concrete procurement plan. The release of Andrew Brunson, the U.S. pastor jailed in Turkey, in the summer of 2018 strengthened the impression in Washington that Ankara would ultimately fold in the face of serious pressure. And, as long as Turkey



was expected to eventually abandon the S-400s, U.S. military planners were hesitant to discuss the disruptive possibility of removing it from the F-35 joint strike fighter program, thereby reinforcing Turkish suspicions that the whole issue might blow over. Turkey has also seen Washington back down before, such as when it ended a visa ban in December 2017 while State Department employees were still detained.

Domestic politics in both countries undoubtedly contributed to the misunderstanding as well. President Trump has created unprecedented confusion about how U.S. policy is actually made in his administration, and he continues to give President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan mixed or misleading messages in their personal conversations. President Erdoğan, in turn, has shown a distinct preference to hear what he wants to hear and put an undue personal faith in Trump. Turkey has also prioritized communication with sympathetic interlocutors in the United States, disregarded the role of U.S. public opinion, and systematically censored the kind of honest reporting that would reveal the limits of this approach.

At a deeper level, though, the two countries [assumed](#) that, when push came to shove, each was too important for the other to risk alienating. This led Turkey to conclude that if it proved its commitment to pursuing a more assertive and independent foreign policy—through military action in Syria’s Afrin or increased defense cooperation with Russia—the United States would be forced to relent, abandoning the policies it found provocative and resetting the relationship on terms more favorable to Turkey. The United States’ thinking mirrored this, reflecting the conviction, perhaps more understandable for a superpower, that, when finally forced to choose, Turkey would realize the value of their friendship and return to being the good ally Washington wanted.

## Deepening Distrust

The current impasse reveals how damaging it could be if these assumptions prove false. In Washington,

certainly, and likely in Ankara, some will continue to hope that showing even greater resolve will finally force the other side to come to its senses. Their policy proposals will overlap all too well with those of colleagues who have already concluded the other side will never come around. As the number of officials in both capitals who see the other country as a strategic threat grows, so do the odds that this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Recent reporting suggests how far this thinking has already progressed. An article on proposed legislation to lift Congress’s arms embargo on Cyprus, for example, [quoted](#) an advocate of the proposal as saying this would strengthen the efforts of Greece, Israel, and Cyprus to form a “front line against Turkish anti-Western authoritarianism, Russian aggression, and terrorism spreading throughout and from the Middle East.” Days later, an article on why Turkey might deploy the S-400s on its southern coast [quoted](#) a Turkish think tank analyst as saying that Ankara “feels increasingly threatened in the Mediterranean by U.S. and Israeli support for Cyprus.”

The Turkish analyst Şaban Kardaş [recently argued](#) that Turkey fears it is being “subjected to a new U.S. double containment policy alongside Iran,” and “cornered as part of an “axis of the sanctioned.” This, he suggests, will lead Turkey to “develop new coping mechanisms to manage those new pressures” by further improving ties with Russia. The United States’ current approach toward Turkey is not one of containment, but this idea is beginning to have advocates in Washington. Ankara’s “coping mechanisms” are almost certain to strengthen their hand.

## Next Steps

There are excellent reasons for Turkey and the United States to resolve the S-400s crisis. So far, however, all of Washington’s proposed solutions have involved Turkey not buying the missiles, and all of Ankara’s proposals have involved Washington not imposing sanctions when it does. If another alternative cannot be found, or a delay secured, there will be a crucial

moment after the S-400s arrive in Turkey and U.S. sanctions come into effect. At that point there will almost certainly be a scramble among Turkish and U.S. politicians to suggest retaliatory steps that should be taken. The most aggressive suggestions, however marginal the figures voicing them, will undoubtedly create headlines.

Resisting such calls will, at the very least, maintain the possibility of an eventual reconciliation. For those who like to compare U.S.-Turkish relationship to a marriage, this would be the time for both sides to resist their most vindictive impulses and strive for an amicable divorce. For those who [prefer backgammon](#) metaphors, this would be the time in the game to stop trying to win and focus on avoiding the gammon.

In concrete terms, this would involve the United States maintaining sanctions and removing Turkey from the F-35 program without imposing any additional punitive measures. Turkey, for its part, could discretely deploy the S-400s and refrain from rushing to announce [additional arms deals](#) with Russia. A joint decision to compartmentalize negotiations on Syria, however dysfunctional these are in their own right, would also help mitigate the damage.

Ideally, this would be the moment when each side, having demonstrated its resolve, can pause to appreciate that the other side has as well. This should encourage policymakers to abandon their hopes of using brinksmanship to reset the U.S.-Turkish relationship and accept that the status quo, however frustrating, is still better than outright rivalry.

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