

## Analysis

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**Summary:** Ankara is giving mixed signals regarding the award of an upcoming missile defense system. Will it be awarded to a defense contractor in a NATO ally country, as has traditionally been the case, or will it be awarded to a Chinese company? The authors argue that some Turkish decision-makers may not fully understand the ramifications of this decision on new and old alliances.

## Turkey's New Missiles of October: Defense Modernization or Political Statement?

by Dr. Ahmet Han and Dr. Can Kasapoğlu

### Introduction

The developments surrounding Turkey's procurement of a Long Range Air and Missile Defense System (T-Loramids) is becoming yet another potential point of friction between Turkey and its Western allies on foreign and security policy. Ankara's early decision to start contract negotiations with the China Precision Machinery Export Import Corp (CPMIEC), a company that is under U.S. sanctions, for its HQ-9 system raised concerns over Turkey's transatlantic commitments. Turkey, a member of NATO since 1952, normally meets its defense needs through U.S. and European contractors. The other two bids under consideration are Raytheon/Lockheed Martin with the Patriot PAC-3 and Eurosam with the Aster-30 Block-1. The European consortium was also cleared for contract negotiations, so the declaration to start the process with CPMIEC has caused some concern among the NATO allies. On August 26, 2014, the Undersecretariat for Defense Industries asked all bidders to extend their offers until December 31, 2014, possibly in the hope of receiving improved bids. This marked the fifth such extension of negotiations with China.

The situation became all the more curious when, on February 19 2015, Turkish Defense Minister Ismet Yilmaz said that the Chinese system "will not be integrated" with existing NATO systems, a statement that was interpreted as demonstrating a preference for the Chinese system. More confusingly, on March 1, the daily *Sabah* reported that negotiations with the Chinese on technology transfer for the HQ-9 system were going awry. Interestingly, the possibilities for technology transfer were one of the main arguments for "going Chinese," alongside joint production and lower-cost options. The *Sabah* report argued that cancelation of the deal and initiation of a new process based on co-production was back on the table. Although the project was first declared an off-the-shelf deal, the co-production option has been considered since 2013.

An alternative policy could be a split-off strategy, with Turkey showing interest in the U.S. PAC-3, or even the THAAD system, as an off-the-shelf deal, and the European Aster-30 Block-1 option as a limited technology transfer and co-production project for the Air Force's missile defense role and/or the Navy's TF-2000 Anti-Air Warfare Frigates. Yet, since arms sales



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are subject to Congressional approval in the United States, the possible trajectory of U.S.-Turkish relations would be a critically important consideration for the completion of such a deal.

In any case, assuming they are not totally perplexed themselves, it seems like Turkish decision-makers are trying to bargain for maximum advantage. Under the circumstances, however, Ankara's actions are hard to interpret.

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### Bitter Memories

Since the U.S. arms embargo of the mid-1970s, development of indigenous capability has been a top priority for Turkish defense industry, which may provide the Chinese a competitive edge. In fact, T-Loramids is not Turkey's first attempt to acquire a national missile defense system. In 1997, Turkey initiated negotiations to co-produce the Israeli Arrow system, but the deal was not finalized in the face of U.S. opposition based on the Missile Technology Control Regime. Although later Washington shifted its position, Turkey's financial crisis in 2001 dealt the project a fatal blow.

Ankara's strategic motives on the issue may be traced back to 1990s, when Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed a formidable threat to Turkey. Throughout the Cold War, Turkish defense planners had seen the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems through the strategic framework set by the balance of power between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Yet, the Iran – Iraq War, the al-Anfal operation, and the 1991 Gulf War had bitterly proved that there was a threat closer to home. During both the 1991 Gulf

War and Iraq War of 2003, Turkey asked NATO to provide Patriot systems, but it was only able to receive those assets after contentious discussions and foot-dragging. From a Turkish perspective, this merited legitimate questions regarding NATO's commitment to Turkey's defense. This was somehow reminiscent of the Kennedy administration's removal of the "other missiles of October" back in 1962, without consulting Ankara.

### The Middle Eastern Fray

In 2012 as the Syrian Civil War threatened to spill over, Turkey again found itself in need of Patriot batteries. Considering that the existing Syrian arsenal of missiles are capable of delivering both conventional and WMD warheads and remembering that, especially prior to the chemical deal of September 2013, WMD warhead threat was real, Ankara's demand was reasonable. Although the Alliance displayed greater solidarity in 2012 compared to previous occasions, for Ankara, regional context affirmed the need for its own missile defense capabilities. It is important to note that NATO confirmed the detection of hundreds of Syrian short-range missile launches over the past two years, confirming the real nature of the threat.

Even though Turkish decision-makers are careful not to name it, Iran is obviously another reason for the Turkish desire for indigenous missile defense capabilities. While geography restrains Tehran's ability to rely on its tactical ballistic missiles in a conflict with Turkey, relatively longer-range short-range ballistic missiles and medium-range ballistic missiles pose an actual threat. Coupled with the Iranian nuclear program and regional rivalries, the nature of the threat is hard for Turkey to ignore. Even though Turkey's staunch opposition was an important reason why Iran was not directly named as "the threat" in the declarations of NATO's Lisbon Summit of 2010, the deployment of the NATO radar facility at Kürecik, as per the new missile defense strategy, further alarmed Iran, which views the facility as a direct threat. As a consequence, Iranian missiles reportedly expressly targeted Turkey and threatened to hit the NATO member. In this context, Turkish decision-makers seem to want more latitude, a "strategic depth" of sorts, when it comes to choosing their alternatives vis-à-vis dealing with Iran.



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Furthermore, the debate about the status of the Kürecik facility and existing indirect intelligence sharing arrangements, especially the United States with Israel, confounds the Turkish government's domestic anti-Israel rhetoric. The fact that this rhetoric hinges on arguments about Turkey's ability to shut down the radar facility is testimony to the domestic connotations of the issue.

### **Intricacies of the Choice: Is Going Chinese a Long and Winding Road?**

For Turkey, the procurement of a Chinese system involves several major drawbacks ranging from purely technical and tactical to political. The former includes a lack of transparent tests and an unproven combat record, as well as the integration and interoperability issues. Within the NATO missile defense planning, especially after 2010 Lisbon Summit, the Patriot and Aster lines are designed to operate as the last layer of defense in the multi-layer network. This necessitates a perfect link to NATO satellites, the Aegis system, and different sea and ground based radars (i.e. AN/TPY-2, Smart-L, AN/SPY-1), as well as being operable with other higher altitude/longer range interceptors (the Standard Missile line, THAAD, Patriot, the Aster line). If Turkey opts for the Chinese system, its missile defense infrastructure could not operate as the last layer of defense as it will not be interoperable with the NATO system. NATO authorities and U.S. officials have repeatedly made it clear that the CPMIEC systems would not be integrated into NATO systems. Judging from Yılmaz' announcement in late February that "the Chinese system will only be integrated with the national infrastructure," Ankara should be aware of that situation. This sort of a missile defense capability as such will reduce efficiency, harming the integrated approach that today's threat environment invariably necessitates. Moreover, existing Turkish infrastructure could hardly

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afford being crowded-out of the NATO system; replacing lost capabilities would be costly and take time, and the regional environment is anything but conducive for accommodating such capability gap. Additionally, any option currently on the table for T-Loramids would not be able to intercept ballistic missiles, so it would not provide full coverage for the threats the country faces. Therefore, Turkey would still need the NATO missile defense umbrella to ensure protection.

Some analysts have expressed concerns about the decision-makers' understanding of the full range of technical incompatibilities, or lack thereof, and even the full range of political consequences of the decision. While it is Turkey's sovereign right to choose any system, "going Chinese" in this context would potentially have serious ramifications. CPMIEC is under U.S. sanctions for violating the "Iran, North Korea, and Syria Non-Proliferation Act." If Turkish companies start cooperating with CPMIEC, they would have real difficulties participating in joint projects with a U.S. connection, including the high profile Lockheed Martin F-35 multirole fighter development program in which Turkey is an active development partner. Furthermore, it is hard to foresee how such a choice, and the path-dependency that it is likely to create, would transform Turkey's relations with NATO. In the not unlikely event that the choice is interpreted as being guided by political preferences reflecting altering commitments, the ramifications might be serious for Turkey's relations with its allies.

### **What Lies Beneath?**

If the potential partnership with China is intended to signal to the West that Turkey has other options, it should be kept in mind that Turkey's declared regional foreign policy priorities do not necessarily agree with those of these presumed new partners. Syria is a case in point. There is an inescapable implicit structural link between such politico-military choices, like the one involving T-Loramids, and foreign policy. They cannot be either treated within the confines of military-technical or commercial considerations or taken lightly, as the Chinese and some on the Turkish side may be inclined to think. By playing its hand high, Ankara may be trying to get a better bargain in terms securing a lower cost and co-production. However, mixed signals from Ankara are not helping to strengthen its negotiating position. As



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expected, so far it did not lead to a sweetened deal. Ankara may also be trying to influence its allies' foreign policy preferences.

It is not easy to say what Ankara's end game is, particularly given its recent meanderings in international politics. Alongside what seems to be a real lack of understanding of the full array of military, technical, and political consequences of the missile decision on the part of some political figures, it might be argued that Ankara is using a mixed hedging strategy. On one hand, driven by a desire for self-sufficiency, it is trying to force the West to offer a better deal. On the other, it is also signaling that it is able and at times willing to pursue an "independent foreign policy" less constrained by existing alliances. This would be in line with the prevalent government discourse regarding Turkish foreign policy that claims to be more independent and assertive, especially to its domestic audience. However, it is not exactly clear how Turkish decision-makers envisage compensating for the inescapable dilemmas introduced by such a mixed approach. How far is Ankara willing to go with this game of chicken if its Western allies do not bow to its demands and priorities regarding the T-Loramids project? Without a doubt, this project illustrates the very intersection point between the Turkish government's defense modernization priorities and its political orientation and commitment to the NATO alliance.

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