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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

15 January 2019

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16.01.2019

US, Turkey clash over Turkish plan to buy Russian S-400 missiles

Amid intensifying negotiations between Turkey and the United States over Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria and Turkey's threats to invade the country, a US technical team is visiting Turkey today and tomorrow. The US team is expected to stress that Turkey's purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems is unacceptable to Washington.

Previously, Washington had indicated that it could respond to a Turkish agreement with Russia to buy S-400 surface-to-air missile systems by blocking Turkey from buying F-35 warplanes, and would bring Turkey's relations with the United States and the NATO alliance to a breaking point. The S-400 purchase would have vast military ramifications. By obtaining its first long-range air and anti-missile defence system from Russia, Turkey could conceivably close its skies to NATO fighters if necessary.

On December 18, the day before US President Donald Trump tweeted his announcement of the withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops from Syria, the State Department informed the US Congress of a proposed \$3.5 billion deal to sell Turkey Patriot anti-ballistic missile systems made by Raytheon.

Washington has long urged Turkey to cancel its plans to purchase the Russian-made S-400 anti-ballistic missile system, but Turkey has replied that it would buy Patriot systems from Washington, but not on the condition of cancelling the purchase of S-400 system from Russia.

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On January 10, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared that Turkey would never accept US pressure to drop its purchase of S-400s from Russia to deploy Patriots. “The U.S. made its first offer for the Patriots. But we are not in a position to change our deal with Russia on the S-400s. We have an immediate need to cover air space. In fact, we may purchase Patriots in the future as well. ... The S-400s are an accomplished deal. We never break our promises.”

Turkey’s attempts to purchase air defence systems has long been a sore point in Ankara’s relations with NATO, especially with the US. Ankara first decided to buy a long-range air defence system from a Chinese state-run company in 2013. Under US pressure, the Turkish government was forced to scrap the \$3.4 billion programme altogether in November 2015.

After the project was cancelled and the Turkish air force shot down a Russian bomber on November 24, 2015, threatening all-out war with Russia, Ankara expressed its intention to independently develop a missile defence system. This aim was not realised, however. After Russia retaliated by escalating its military posture and imposed economic sanctions against Turkey, however, Ankara tacked back toward Russia, agreeing to purchase the S-400 air and missile defence system.

The decisive factor in Ankara’s shift closer to Russia and China was its violent hostility to Washington’s cultivation of the Kurdish nationalists as proxies in the Syrian war. As the Islamic State (ISIS) militia grew in Syria and invaded Iraq, the imperialist powers turned to the Kurdish nationalist groups as a proxy ground force against ISIS. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could not adapt himself to these sudden, violent shifts in imperialist war policy, and Ankara’s imperialist allies rapidly came to see him not as a “strategic partner,” but as an unreliable one.

The imperialist powers responded in July 2016 with an attempt to organise a military coup in Turkey to oust and murder Erdoğan. A section of Turkey’s military launched an abortive putsch out of NATO’s Incirlik air base, encouraged by Washington and Berlin. The failure of the coup attempt undermined Ankara’s relations with the NATO imperialist powers.

Ankara opposes Kurdish autonomy in Syria, fearing that it will provoke demands for Kurdish autonomy in eastern Turkey. To crush Kurdish nationalist forces still backed by Washington, Erdoğan has twice ordered the Turkish army to launch bloody invasions of Syria: “Operation Euphrates Shield” (in August 2016) and “Operation Olive Branch” (in January 2018), directed against the US-backed YPG.

In recent months, the Turkish government has threatened a new outright military occupation of large parts of Syria, targeting the YPG and other Kurdish forces, that could provoke war with Syria and a direct clash with US forces.

After Erdoğan's threats, the Trump administration announced a withdrawal from Syria that flowed directly from an agreement reached between Trump and Turkey's president during a telephone conversation on December 18.

As the WSWS previously [noted](#): "While Washington is no doubt anxious to avoid a potential military confrontation with Turkey, a member of the NATO alliance, the Trump White House has taken other measures aimed at restoring US-Turkish relations, which have been strained since the abortive July 2016 military coup, which enjoyed covert backing from Washington."

Despite the Turkish government's repeated attempts to work out a deal with Washington to coordinate their policies, however, disagreements continue to mount. The conflict over a potential Turkish S-400 purchase comes just shortly after Trump threatened Turkey with economic destruction on Twitter if it attempted to attack the Kurds.

Whatever the outcome of the dispute within the US ruling class, Turkey seems determined to launch a bloody military occupation in north Syria. Its preparations for a possible operation east of the Euphrates river in Syria are continuing "intensely," Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said on January 11, on a visit to Turkey's border with Syria.

"We have Manbij and the east of Euphrates [River] ahead. Necessary plans have been made regarding this. Our preparation continues intensely," Akar said.