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Russia and Turkey intensify military cooperation over US objections

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's surprise visit to Moscow on August 27 marked growing bilateral military cooperation between Turkey, a NATO member state, and Russia. In Moscow, he advanced plans to buy Russian anti-aircraft missiles and, possibly, fighter jets, fuelling tensions with Turkey's imperialist allies in Washington and Europe.

Despite Erdogan's trip, Turkish-Russian relations remain extremely tense. This unscheduled meeting between Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin came amid the confrontation in Syria between Turkish army forces and Russian-backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad government's forces in Idlib. Washington and Ankara are developing plans to violate Syria's territorial integrity and invade northeastern Syria to establish a "safe zone" there.

On August 19, after the Assad regime accused the Turkish government of trying to save Al Qaeda-linked forces in Idlib province now under attack by Damascus and Moscow for weeks, a Turkish army military convoy came under Syrian air attack, allegedly for assisting the Islamists. While Syrian army forces recaptured the town of Khan Sheikoun from Al Qaeda-linked forces, Turkey's Murek military base in southern Idlib was surrounded by forces loyal to Damascus. There are reportedly about 200 Turkish soldiers in the base.

In Moscow, however, Erdogan and Putin sought to downplay these differences. About the Idlib flashpoint, Putin said: "Russia and Turkey cooperate closely in the Astana format along with Iran. ... The president of Turkey and I mapped out additional joint measures

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for neutralizing terrorist hotbeds in Idlib and normalizing the situation both in this zone and in the rest of Syria.”

Erdogan’s reply showed that differences between the two countries persist: “We can bring about our responsibilities concerning the Sochi agreement only if the regime halts its attacks. ... The regime’s provocations have reached the level of putting the lives of our soldiers in the region at risk.” However, the Syrian state news agency SANA reported on Erdogan’s visit to Moscow that “a military source announced acceptance of a ceasefire in the de-escalation zone of Idlib as of Saturday morning.”

Nonetheless, Washington clearly views Ankara’s deepening relations with Moscow with alarm. Before Erdogan’s visit to Moscow, Washington issued an official statement withdrawing its offer to sell Turkey Patriot missile defence systems, after Turkey purchased Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles. “We have consistently told Turkey that our latest offer of PATRIOT would be withdrawn if it took delivery of the S-400 system. Our PATRIOT offer has expired,” a US State Department official told CNN on August 22.

On June 6, acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan wrote a letter to his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, threatening to break off military cooperation with Turkey, notably over the F-35 fighter program, and to subject Turkey to a wide range of sanctions.

After the shipment of the first batch of Russian-made S-400 air defence systems to Turkey in July, under a contract signed in December 2017, Washington suspended Turkish participation in the F-35 program. On Wednesday, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper indicated that the only way Turkey was getting F-35s is if it returns its S-400 missile defence system to Russia.

Esper’s statement was a response to Erdogan’s comments on F-35 fighter jets as well as on Russian made planes. On the way back to Ankara from Moscow, asked if Turkey was interested in buying Russian Su-35 or Su-57 jets, Erdogan replied, “Why not? We didn’t come here for nothing.”

Erdogan and Putin attended the inauguration of the MAKS-2019 International Aviation and Space Salon near Moscow. The same day Erdogan and Putin met, a second batch of S-400 air defence systems had been delivered to Murted Airbase in Ankara. Significantly, Erdogan and Putin focused on consolidating bilateral military cooperation.

In this regard, Russian President Putin told Erdogan: “We have shown you various products, both military and civilian. They not only demonstrate Russia’s aerospace capability but also offer a variety of cooperation opportunities. We know about Turkey’s

high-tech development plans,” he said. He added, “Of course, we could join forces in the areas where our capabilities are especially strong and sought after.”

Erdogan replied: “Today we have taken a closer look at Russia’s defence industry. I would like to express satisfaction at the fact that today we also saw Russian-made engines for passenger airliners, combat aircraft, helicopters and other aviation equipment. We also watched demonstration flights of combat aircraft, including the Su-34, Su-35 and Su-57. We have also been updated on Russia’s space activities and the measures you are taking to boost your space industry.”

At the MAKS-2019 Erdogan asked Putin whether Turkey could buy Russia’s Su-57 fifth-generation jet fighter. “Yes, you can,” Putin replied.

According to the Al-Monitor web site, the director of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, Dmitry Shugaev, told reporters at the MAKS air show that the two countries have been discussing the sales of the Su-35—a competitor of the F-35—and the Su-57, as well as Russian electronic warfare systems. In the meeting, Putin also said Russia is “ready to offer flights on Su-30SM fighters to Turkish pilots.” If this materializes, that would reportedly mark the first joint trainings of Russian and Turkish military pilots.

As a sign of tightening relations between their two governments, Putin proposed that Erdogan send a Turkish astronaut to the International Space Station in 2023, the centenary of the Turkish Republic and a scheduled presidential election year.

Despite the ongoing disputes over Syria, the increasingly close relations between Turkey—a member of NATO since 1952 and a key Western ally during the Cold War—and Russia, the main target of US imperialism together with China, demonstrate that none of the major conflicts between Ankara and its Western allies, which culminated in a Washington and Berlin-backed failed 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan, are resolved.

The Western powers, especially the US, deemed it entirely unacceptable that Turkey had turned towards closer relations with Russia and China, amid growing conflicts with the US and other NATO allies over strategic issues, including their backing for the Syrian Kurdish militias, the Kurdish nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The coup failed because Erdogan, alerted by Moscow, was able to make a timely appeal to his voters to come into the streets to defend him. It was afterwards that the Turkish government began to discuss buying the S-400 missile system.

On August 7, Turkish and US military officials agreed to build a “safe zone” in northern Syria, east of the Euphrates, to be controlled by Turkey in coordination with the United States. Despite the uncertainty as to the exact conditions of the “safe zone,” Ankara’s main aim is to smash the Kurdish-led proto-state there and chase the YPG militias out of the region.

“Turkey has no time and patience and it wants a safe zone to be built along the eastern Euphrates line, along Syria, as soon as possible,” Erdogan said in İstanbul on Saturday, adding, “Three weeks later, there is a last chance, when we are holding a meeting in the US [with President Trump] on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session.”

Although his government initially condemned preparations to build an illegal “safe zone” in northern Syria by Ankara and Washington, Putin tried to smooth over these tensions. During the meeting with Erdogan, he said, “The creation of a security zone on the southern borders of the Republic of Turkey will help ensure the territorial integrity of Syria itself,” adding, “We understand Turkey’s concern over the security of its southern borders. We believe these are legitimate concerns.”

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