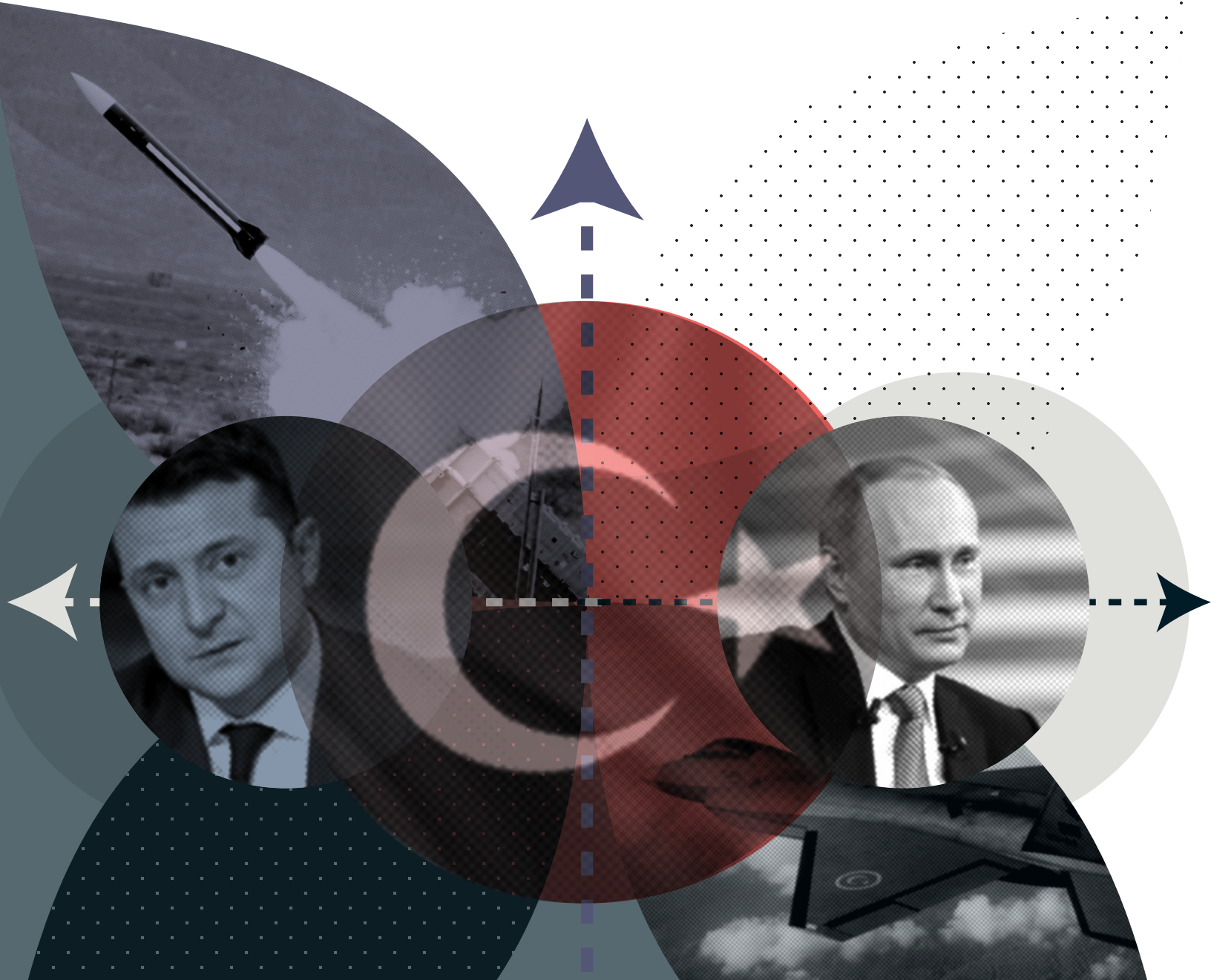


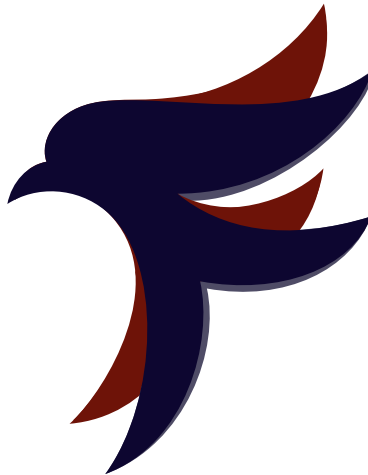
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

# TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS

Aaron Stein





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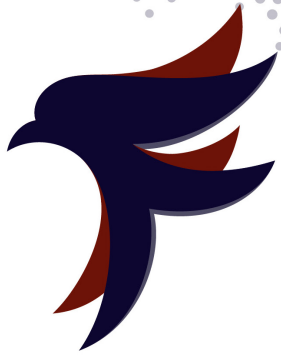
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# **TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS**

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# INTRODUCTION

On October 26, 2021, Ukraine's Ministry of Defense released video of a TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) striking a separatist D-30 howitzer in Russian-occupied Donbas. The strike was Ukraine's first confirmed use of the now ubiquitous TB2, the Bayraktar-manufactured drone that the Turkish military has used to great tactical effect in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Turkish-Ukrainian defense relationship is understudied, but it could become an important factor in how Russian elites view North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) support for non-member Ukraine, and be used to justify an invasion to assuage Moscow's concerns about a US-allied military presence along its borders. The Turkish support for Ukraine is not the main driver of Russian discomfort about the future of Ukraine. The TB2 is also not a decisive game changer, and the use of UCAVs is almost certain to have little impact on how Russian leadership weighs risk during debates about the efficacy of armed conflict in a neighboring state. Nevertheless, Turkish-Ukrainian defense ties are worthy of deeper study, precisely because Ankara's relationships with Kyiv and Moscow have a secondary impact on American interests in Eastern Europe.

The Turkish-Russian relationship is marred by bureaucratic distrust, which is papered over by a very functional leader-to-leader dynamic that enables the two Black Sea neighbors to cooperate and manage numerous regional conflicts. The Turkish-Ukrainian dynamic, in turn, is part of a broader Turkish effort to establish itself as an independent actor, committed to pursuing a foreign policy that often clashes with much of the NATO alliance.<sup>1</sup> This paper will explore Turkish-Russian and Turkish-Ukrainian relations; the reasons for Turkey's efforts to "fence sit" and establish itself as a neutral political actor in the Black Sea; and what these efforts portend for US interests in the region.

Ankara's relationship with Moscow is multifaceted and often misunderstood. Turkey was a bulwark against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but Turkish national elites have always been aware of the country's close proximity to its larger neighbor, and have sought to manage ties with the leadership in Moscow.<sup>2</sup> In the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkish elites have debated Ankara's role in the world, the country's alliance with the United States, and how best to maximize Turkish interests in the former Soviet space. In general, there

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Onur İşçi, *Turkey and the Soviet Union During World War II* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).



is a consensus in Turkey that Ankara has considerable economic and political interests in deepening its relationships with all of its neighbors, including Russia. Turkey's current ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) adopted this basic philosophy, but fused elements of it with Islamist tropes about colonialism and identity in the Middle East. As the AKP has radicalized, it has sought common cause with elements of the far right in Turkish politics, the MHP, and the group's argument that Ankara's alliance with the West is detrimental to the country's future and that Turkey should explore deepening ties with Russia and the ethnic Turkic states along its periphery.<sup>3</sup>

Turkish domestic politics changed considerably after a failed coup attempt in July 2016. The attempted putsch further isolated current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and justified his complete overhaul of government. The result has been the erosion of Turkey's liberal institutions and the emergence of an authoritarian state, dependent on the fiat of the country's president. At the same time, Ankara's relationship with the United States and the European Union has cratered, following severe disagreements about strategy and tactics to defeat Islamic State in Syria and over Ankara's own democratic failings back home.<sup>4</sup> The Turkish-Russian relationship has flourished during the same period; especially

since Russian President Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to call Erdoğan after putschists tried to kill him. The leader-to-leader relationship has since flourished, giving way to joint efforts to manage conflict in Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Turkish decision to purchase the Russian-made S-400 air and missile defense system.

The origins of Turkey's relationship with Ukraine stem, in part, from the S-400 purchase, and the subsequent actions Western states have taken to mitigate the threat this system poses to the F-35. Turkey was a Tier 3 member of the Joint Strike Fighter consortium and was slated to coproduce 100 F-35As and had explored purchasing a smaller number of F-35Bs for use by the Navy. During Ankara's discussions with Moscow for the S-400, the United States warned Turkish officials that finalizing a purchase agreement — and then taking delivery — of the S-400 would result in Turkish expulsion from the program.<sup>5</sup> Ankara ignored these warnings.

In parallel, the October 2019 Turkish invasion of Syria resulted in a series of human rights abuses. The Turkish-supported opposition committed these atrocities, leading Western countries to impose a series of arms embargoes on Turkey because of the use of Western-origin equipment in the invasion. The embargo extended to the US Congress, which has halted support for Turkish

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3 Ömer Taşpınar, "Foreign Policy After The Failed Coup: The Rise Of Turkish Gaullism," Lobe Blog, September 2, 2016, <https://lobelog.com/foreign-policy-after-the-failed-coup-the-rise-of-turkish-gaullism/>.

4 Aaron Stein, *The US War Against ISIS: How America and its Allies Defeated the Caliphate* (London: IB Tauris, 2021).

5 Aaron Stein, "The Russian Missile that could end the U.S.-Turkish Alliance," *War on the Rocks*, March 12, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/the-russian-missile-that-could-end-the-u-s-turkish-alliance/>.





Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach meets with the Turkish Minister of Defence, Mr. Hulusi Akar. (NATO)

Foreign Military Sales (FMS) approvals. The Congressional embargo has stressed the Turkish fighter fleet, which in combination with the removal of the country from the F-35 program, has prompted two interrelated and seemingly contradictory Turkish actions. Turkish elites have signaled that they could cooperate with Russia on 5th generation fighter technologies and, perhaps, buy three squadrons of a Flanker variant for shorter-term operational needs. The second, and perhaps contradictory act, has been to look for non-Western suppliers for defense equipment that Ankara needs to sustain its own indigenous defense programs. Ukraine has emerged as a critical supplier, including for certain unmanned systems and for turbofan engines for jet powered drones and aircraft.

These two actions are in contradiction with one another, but also demonstrate how Turkish leaders are comfortable compartmentalizing

the country's international relationship to pursue policies that elites have decided are in its best interests. The Turkish-Ukrainian relationship is almost certain to continue. The two sides have a mutually beneficial defense industry relationship. Ankara will have to balance any such cooperation with Kyiv with its very real interests in managing ties with Moscow. Russia and Turkey can, in theory, manage their disagreements about Ukraine, precisely because each side has an interest in retaining functioning relations. Turkey's NATO membership, however, creates secondary issues for the United States. Moscow can point to NATO support for Ukraine — to include Turkish support for Kyiv — as a reason for future military action. Turkey would not face direct repercussions for its relationship but would instead benefit from the actions Washington would take to bolster alliance security.

# THE ARMS EMBARGO AND THE OPENING WITH KYIV: RUSSIAN MISSILES AND UKRAINIAN ENGINES

The Turkish relationship with Ukraine has its roots in Ankara's entente with Moscow. Turkish security elites have identified long-range air and missile defense as key priority for decades. Ankara's interest in procuring the US-made Patriot air and missile defense system began in the early 1990s, following the first Gulf War.<sup>6</sup> Turkish elites viewed Iraq's ballistic missiles a real threat to US assets based inside Turkey and felt as if NATO systems deployed in Turkey to counter this threat were sent too late. Turkish leaders have balanced this desire for missile defense with the country's broader defense industrial goals. The Turkish government has sought to develop an indigenous defense sector, using industrial offsets to build key capabilities. This policy began in the late-1970s, following an American embargo on FMS sales following the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus. The relationship frayed considerably during this period and, in 1980, Ankara sought and

received concessions from Washington during the negotiations for the US-basing agreement in Turkey.<sup>7</sup>

In return for continued US access to Turkish bases, the United States agreed to use offsets to help establish an independent Turkish defense industry. Ankara's intended goal was to eventually replace Washington as its supplier of choice, in favor of a more autarkic defense sector that could support the armed forces. This arrangement would, in theory, insulate Ankara from any future embargo and protect the military from any future rupture with the United States. Turkey's agreement with General Dynamics and General Electric for co-production of the F-16 established the Turkish aerospace industry.<sup>8</sup> Turkey's best-known manufacturer, Baykar, produces the TB2. This company has benefitted from its close relationship with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The company's chief technology officer, Selçuk Bayraktar,

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6 Clyde Haberman, "Turkey's Role in Air Assault Sets Off Fear of Retaliation," *The New York Times*, January 20, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/20/world/war-in-the-gulf-turkey-turkey-s-role-in-air-assault-sets-off-fear-of-retaliation.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=20BCD324143A8282889CFDB66F06727A&gwt=pay>.

7 "The Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement — U.S. Interests and Turkish Needs," United States General Accounting Office, May 7, 1982, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/id-82-31.pdf>.

8 Robert J. Cole, "General Dynamic Jet Contract," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/08/business/general-dynamics-jet-contract.html>; Ahmet Ilbas, "Offsets in International Weapon Acquisitions: The Turkish Experience," MA Thesis, Air Force Academy, March 2002, [https://www.academia.edu/4905175/Offsets\\_in\\_International\\_Weapon\\_Acquisitions\\_The\\_Turkish\\_Experience](https://www.academia.edu/4905175/Offsets_in_International_Weapon_Acquisitions_The_Turkish_Experience).



Manufactured by Raytheon, Patriot systems are utilized as long-range, high-altitude defense mechanisms. source: [www.raytheonmissilesanddefense.com](http://www.raytheonmissilesanddefense.com)

is Erdoğan's son-in-law. The munitions for the TB2 are manufactured by Roketsan, a state-owned company established in 1988 to produce under license components for the Stinger missile.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the Cold War, Ankara was also a direct beneficiary of the peace dividend. As part of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, NATO instituted the "Cascade Program" to transfer surplus equipment in excess of CFE requirements to third countries. Turkey and Greece benefited considerably from this program, acquiring tanks and artillery that was once destined for

Central Europe.<sup>10</sup> The Turkish military has also sought to modernize these tanks, creating an industry around vintage American systems. The large number of Turkish tanks has also insulated the armed forces from a troubled co-production program with South Korea for a localized version of the K-2 main battle tank. The procurement process has been delayed for years. Turkey has been unable to procure favorable co-production terms for the engine and transmission.<sup>11</sup> Ankara's troubled procurement process for the next-generation main battle tank closely mirrored negotiations with the United States for the Patriot air and missile defense system.

<sup>9</sup> Roketsan Missile Industries Inc, Global Security, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/roketan.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> "NATO Arms Exports to Turkey and Greece: Inconsistencies Revealed," British American Security Information Council, July 1995, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/31235/1995NATOarms.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Episkopos, "Turkey's Altay Tank: Will It Really Be Ready for War This Year?," *The National Interest*, June 10, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/turkey-s-altay-tank-will-it-really-be-ready-war-year-187369>.

Ankara has had an interest in Patriot since the first Gulf War. Despite this interest, Ankara never managed to reach an agreement with Lockheed Martin and Raytheon — the two main producers of Patriot — and negotiations have continued for decades. The Turkish position is that the United States government and private industry have not been willing to provide Ankara with a satisfactory level of technology transfer. The American position, in contrast, is that the US has worked strenuously to include favorable offsets to Turkey, but in the absence of a signed agreement for purchase, formalized discussions for local offsets have never truly begun. To account for this, US officials structure the export of Patriot to Turkey as a phased purchase. In response to frequent Turkish requests to expedite the transfer of equipment, the US would send to Turkey an “off-the-shelf” Patriot system to meet immediate operational requirements. The two-sides, then, would create a back end of the agreement timeline to arrange for future Patriot sales.<sup>12</sup> This back-end time would be used for the two sides to reach a series of secondary agreements for contractors in Turkey to produce certain Patriot components. Ankara has never accepted this arrangement.

The Turkish F-16 fleet is tasked with protecting the country’s borders from aerial attack. During times of crisis, Turkey has requested

NATO assistance and the deployment of foreign Patriot batteries on its soil. During the first Gulf War and in the run-up to the coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkish officials have suggested that the Alliance was slow to deploy Patriot to Turkey and that the slow, deliberative process underscores how Ankara cannot rely upon NATO to rapidly move to defend its interest. The final deployment of Patriot came during the Syrian civil conflict. In response to the Syrian civil war, Turkey requested that the NATO alliance deploy air and missile defense systems to defend the country’s border. In 2013, the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands deployed the system at three different sites.<sup>13</sup> However, by 2015, these low density and high demand assets were withdrawn and replaced with missile defense systems from France and Spain. Turkish officials found out about the withdrawal from the German press, rather than through official allied channels. The withdrawal, viewed from Ankara, was seen as another indicator of Western hesitance to fully defend Turkish interests.

The Obama administration secured congressional approval for the export of 13 Patriot batteries, with a mix of the PAC-3 and PAC-2 launchers and missiles.<sup>14</sup>

The deal broke down, however, after Turkey selected the Chinese FD-2000 anti-aircraft

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<sup>12</sup> Author Interview, US Department of Defense Official, Washington, DC, January 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “Four Patriot batteries operational in Turkey,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, January 30, 2013, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_94291.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_94291.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Turkey — Patriot Advanced Capability-3 Guided Missiles, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, September 9, 2009, <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/turkey-patriot-advanced-capability-3-guided-missiles>.





system in 2013.<sup>15</sup> The selection caught much of the NATO alliance off guard. Turkish officials suggested that the purchase of the Chinese system was not political, but was instead solely linked to the low-cost bid and the Chinese willingness to produce much of the system inside Turkey. Ankara also has a history of cooperation with China on the production of ballistic missiles that is often overlooked. Turkey's tactical ballistic missile, the Bora, is a licensed Chinese design now being made locally.

American and European pressure, however, forced Ankara to cancel the Chinese FD-2000 deal. Following the collapse of this agreement, Turkish officials indicated that they would not open its air and missile defense tender for multiple bids again, but would instead negotiate with individual suppliers. Russia had always sought to export either the S-300 or, more recently, the S-400 missile system to Turkey. Ankara, however, had ruled out Russian bids, citing high costs and inadequate offsets. The Turkish position changed in 2016. In July, a putschist faction of the armed forces revolted against the

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<sup>15</sup> Ece Toksabay, "Chinese firm under U.S. sanctions wins Turkish missile deal," Reuters, September 27, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-defence/chinese-firm-under-u-s-sanctions-wins-turkish-missile-deal-idUSBRE-98Q0SC20130927>.

state. The coup included Turkish F-16s, which ended up bombing Ankara.<sup>16</sup> After the coup plot failed, Russian President Vladimir Putin was quick to call and reassure Erdoğan of Russian support for the elected government. The elected elite in Turkey viewed the US response, in contrast, as inadequate. There are also elements within Turkey that believe the United States is ultimately responsible for the coup because the alleged mastermind, Fethullah Gülen, is in exile in Pennsylvania. Ankara has demanded his extradition, but the evidence provided has not met the Department of Justice's evidentiary standards.

In the weeks following the failed coup, Ankara moved ahead with an invasion of northern Syria. The United States had formed a close partnership with the Syrian Kurds to fight the Islamic State. The main Kurdish militia, the Peoples' Protection Units, is an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK has been fighting inside Turkey since 1984. The group is listed in Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. Turkish officials accuse the United States of supporting terrorism and have justified three separate invasions of Syria on the basis of fighting terrorism. These interventions, however, have hindered the US-led war against ISIS, raising tensions between Ankara and much of the Western alliance.

The Erdoğan-Putin relationship is functional

and interests-based. Almost immediately after the failed coup, the two sides began to discuss the export of the S-400 system. In contrast to Turkey's post-1978 policy of offsets, President Erdoğan waived upfront offsets and accepted a Russian offer to ship an off-the-shelf S-400 system and continue negotiations on certain offsets after delivery. The Russian side was in a good position to rapidly export the system. The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) was at the tail end of a modernization period, wherein units had received S-400 to upgrade aerospace defenses. Putin, therefore, was in a position to send to Turkey a S-400 that had been meant to be sent to the VKS, without undermining operational readiness. This swift delivery timeline met Turkish delivery demands. Putin also suggested that Russian industry would be willing to allow localized production of certain components, but Russian military and intelligence officials have suggested that any offset would be limited to ensure that the system was not compromised by a NATO member. The Russian side also offered financing options for the \$2.5 billion purchase.<sup>17</sup> The Russian proposal was similar to the American offer for Patriot. The critical difference, however, was that Erdoğan softened his demands for offsets, which then allowed for the rapid finalization of the export contract.

The Turkish government has never explained its shift in policy. This shift is asynchronous with historic policy and at odds with

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<sup>16</sup> Arda Mevlutoglu, "Exclusive: all the details about the air ops and aerial battle over Turkey during the military coup to depose Erdogan," *The Aviationist*, July 18, 2016, <https://theaviationist.com/2016/07/18/exclusive-all-the-details-about-the-aerial-battle-over-turkey-during-the-military-coup/>.

<sup>17</sup> "Turkey, Russia sign agreement on loan for S-400 systems purchase," *TASS*, December 29, 2017, <https://tass.com/defense/983660>.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the International Aviation and Space Salon in August of 2019.

Erdoğan's historic position on arms sales. There is speculation that Erdoğan was seeking to punish the United States for its policies in Syria and, from the point of view of much of the Turkish political elite, a failure to condemn the July 2016 coup attempt. As the deal was being finalized, the United States warned Turkey that its purchase of the S-400 would violate the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). This legislation was passed in 2017, in response to Russia's interference in the 2016 election. The sanctions are designed to punish Moscow and outline mandatory secondary sanctions on any country that conducts a "significant transaction" with

Russian state-owned defense industries.<sup>18</sup> The manufacturer of the S-400, Almaz-Antey, is one such manufacturer. Therefore, Turkey's purchase of the system would run afoul of US secondary sanctions. In parallel, US Congress included language in successive National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) that warned Turkey that the purchase would end up with Ankara being barred from the F-35 consortium. This message was transmitted to all levels of the Turkish government, including in leader-to-leader interactions with Erdoğan. The Turkish government pushed ahead anyway. The United States eventually imposed CAATSA sanctions in December 2020, following a Turkish test launch of the

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<sup>18</sup> Jarod Taylor, "U.S. Sanctions and Turkey's Purchase of Russia's S-400 Air Defense System," July 12, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/u-s-sanctions-and-turkeys-purchase-of-russias-s-400-air-defense-system/>.





Turkish Air Force General Dynamics F-16C Fighting Falcon Solo Turk (REG: 88-0029) taking off for a practice display. (Adobe Stock)

S-400 in October. Ankara was removed from the F-35 consortium in July 2019. The removal cost Turkish manufacturers some \$12 billion in supply contracts. The loss of the aircraft also upended the Air Force's future fighter plans. The TuRAF had planned to purchase 100 F-35As, in order to retire RF-4Es currently in service, along with some aging F-16s. Turkey would complement these aircraft with a mix of locally produced aircraft, including an advanced and a second propeller driven

trainer. Turkey is also pursuing an indigenous, low-observable fighter dubbed TF/X. This fighter was to replace Turkish F-16s, leaving a 4.5+ generation Air Force for a high-end fight, mixed with lower-end assets (to include armed drones) for Turkey's fight against the PKK.

The Turkish Navy had also expressed interest in two F-35B squadrons for deployment on the TCG Anadolu, an amphibious assault



ship being built in cooperation with Spain's Navantia. The Anadolu will have a ski jump for short take-off and landing flight operations. The loss of the F-35 has forced the Air Force to life extend older F-16s in much the same way that the United States Air Force has done to extend flight hours.<sup>19</sup> In Turkey's more modern F-16s, this process is dependent on US-origin equipment, which requires Congressional approval. The US Congress has blocked all major arms sales to Turkey for close to three years.<sup>20</sup> This move has further hindered the TurAF's modernization efforts. The FMS blockade came after Turkey invaded Syria in October 2019 and amidst congressional consternation about the Trump administration's initial refusal to impose CAATSA sanctions on Turkey. The United States has also refused to sign off on Turkish exports of locally produced systems that include US equipment.<sup>21</sup>

The combination of the F-35 program removal, the levying of CAATSA sanctions, the FMS embargo, and the US refusal to sanction the export of certain controlled items to third countries has reinforced the view in Ankara that Turkey needs an autarkic defense industry, independent of US links for critical items. The TF/X project has also assumed greater importance than was initially envisioned. The plans for TCG Anadolu have also changed. Turkish policymakers are

now suggesting that the Anadolu and its future sister ship, Trakya, will use a mixture of propeller and jet powered armed drones to project drones. For the jet powered drone, dubbed MIUS, and TF/X, Ukraine has emerged a potential supplier for turbofan engines. In the short term, Turkey plans for the TF/X to use the same engine as the F-116. The F-110 engine is already assembled and serviced in Turkey and TuRAF personnel have decades of experience maintaining the engines. The TB-3, which Baykar suggests will be a carrier compatible version of the TB-2, will have a sturdier landing gear, satellite communication, and foldable wings. These plans suggest that Turkey envisions future carrier operations in contingencies that resemble its previous use of drones. A small contingent of slow flying, lightly armed drones does not offer reasonable carrier protection. The TB3 is also vulnerable to capable air defenses, so its utility in high-intensity combat is questionable. However, Ankara has used drones to great effect in low-threat environments. This niche capability could be of value for counter-terrorism operations or low cost close air support in conflicts that resemble Turkey's drone deployment in Libya.

Ukraine is in discussions with Turkey for engines for the MIUS and TF/X project. The selection of the engine for the TF/X has been

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19 Arda Mevlutoglu, "F-16Vs Instead of F-35s: What's behind Turkey's Request?," *Politics Today*, November 22, 2021, <https://politicstoday.org/f-16vs-instead-of-f-35s-whats-behind-turkeys-request/>.

20 Valerie Insinna, Joe Gould, and Aaron Mehta, "Congress has secretly blocked US arms sales to Turkey for nearly two years," *Defense News*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2020/08/12/congress-has-secretly-blocked-us-arms-sales-to-turkey-for-nearly-two-years/>.

21 Anwar Iqbal, "US blocks delivery of Turkish gunships to Pakistan," *Dawn*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1611685/us-blocks-delivery-of-turkish-gunships-to-pakistan>.



2020 photo of TCG Anadolu of the Turkish Navy during its construction in Istanbul. (Wikimedia Commons/2020Istanbul)

marred by delays and Turkish disagreement with Rolls Royce over offsets. The GE F110 is only intended to be a stop gap for the initial production of test aircraft. In November, Turkish procurement officials announced that they would proceed to a second round of tenders for the TF/X engine. Ukraine's Ivchenko-Progress, according to *Defence Turkey*, is the leading contender to win this tender. The company produces a myriad of turbofan engines and, currently, is cooperating with Turkey's state owned TRMotor on the Auxiliary Power Unit and Air Turbine Start System for the TF/X.<sup>22</sup> Turkey intends for this partnership to produce a new engine, dubbed the T-141. For the MIUS, Ankara has expressed some interest in the AI-25

Turbofan engine for the A model, followed by the larger AI-322-30 for future MIUS variants and, potentially, a Naval version of the Hurjet trainer.<sup>23</sup> Ukraine, in tandem, has purchased an unknown number of TB2 drones and, in December 2021, announced that licensed production had begun at local factories.

The TF/X program has been marred by delays. Ankara claims that the first flight will take place in 2025, with serial production beginning in the early 2030s. The program may face future delays, so the timeline remains optimistic. In the interim, Ankara has approached the United States for the sale of 40 block 70 F-16s and an additional 80 upgrade kits for its block 50 F-16s to upgrade them to block

22 İbrahim Sünnetçi, "SSB, MMU/TF-X Motoru Geliştirme Projesi Faz-II Asaması İcin Yakında İhale Acacak!," *Defence Turkey*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.defenceturkey.com/tr/icerik/ssb-mmu-tf-x-motoru-gelistirme-projesi-faz-ii-asamasi-icin-yakinda-ihale-acacak-4854>.

23 Yusuf Çetiner, "Baykar Puts In An Order For AI322F and AI25TLT Jet Engines From Ukraine For MIUS," *Overtdefense.com*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.overtdefense.com/2021/11/12/baykar-puts-in-an-order-for-ai322f-and-ai25tlt-jet-engines-from-ukraine-for-mius/>.



TF/X rendering (Turkish Aerospace Industries)

70 capabilities.<sup>24</sup> The negotiations began in October 2021, but will have to be approved by Congress. The Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Robert Menendez, has indicated that he opposed the sale.<sup>25</sup> Turkish officials have threatened to “look elsewhere” if this deal is not approved. Ankara has previously suggested it could purchase the Russian Su-57,<sup>26</sup> or either the Su-35 or Su-34. Russian officials have expressed a willingness to collaborate with Turkey, either as part of the TF/X project, or for a commercial sale of aircraft. As of now, the future of Turkey’s front line fighter is

unclear. The TF/X may be delayed and not produced in significant quantities for well over a decade. The expected cost of these aircraft, too, are reported to be \$100 million per unit.<sup>27</sup> This cost far exceeds the F-35A, raising further questions about the quantities that Ankara could purchase if the aircraft is produced at scale.

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24 Mevlutoglu, “F-16Vs Instead of F-35s: What’s behind Turkey’s Request?,” <https://politicstoday.org/f-16vs-instead-of-f-35s-whats-behind-turkeys-request/>.

25 Abraham Mahshie, “Menendez Opposes F-16 Sale to Turkey Despite its Promise to Buy Russian Jets if Sale Falls Through,” *Air Force Times*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.airforcemag.com/menendez-does-not-support-f-16-sale-to-turkey/>.

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# A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT: ANKARA'S BALANCING ACT

Turkey and Ukraine have overlapping interests that make cooperation on defense items valuable to each country. Ukraine produces items Turkey cannot and is willing to export them to Ankara. Turkey produces systems that Ukraine does not, such as unmanned aerial vehicles, and these systems provide military value in Kyiv's fight against Russian-backed separatists. Turkey's relationship with Russia is similarly multi-faceted. Turkey has purchased the S-400 and is using the threat of deepening defense cooperation with Moscow to try and coerce Washington into supporting its short-term fighter requirements. However, Ankara is simultaneously trying to break free of its reliance on US-origin defense equipment. This policy choice has, since the break down with Washington following the S-400 purchase, become more urgent for Ankara. This precarious position stems from Ankara's own choices. The 2017 decision to purchase the S-400 set in motion a series of secondary events, which hastened Turkey's interests in partnering with Kyiv for engines. This partnership, however, is not inherently anti-Russia in intent. Turkey also has a functional relationship with Moscow and has sought to preserve it to manage regional crises.

Ankara, however, is acutely aware of its need to have functional relations with the United States. The Russian build-up in Ukraine has,

therefore, given Turkish policymakers a tool to try and tout its anti-Russian bonafides. The centerpiece of this argument is Ankara's relationship with Kyiv. The United States has some interest in supporting Turkey's defense industrial relationship with Kyiv, but should understand the limits of the TB2. The small Turkish drone has considerable value in Kyiv's clashes against Russian backed separatists. However, in a true shooting war with Russian forces, the drone could be destroyed on the ground or picked off by orbiting fighters or Russian air defenses. The small number of drones does not alter the balance of power. The TB2, in this sense, is functionally irrelevant in a high-intensity conflict.

Russia has sought to use the threat of force in Ukraine to force the United States into making a number of concessions in Europe. Russian demands are rife with "poison pills" that make it appear Moscow is creating a narrative to support military action already decided upon. However, the Russian proposals also stem from a series of grievances Moscow has leveled against the United States and NATO for years. The most obvious grievance is a sense of betrayal in Moscow about NATO expansion. The Russian side has also expressed deep — and continued — reservations about US and NATO support for the deployment of missile defenses in Europe. This decision stems from the US abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile





During his working visit to the United States, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with President of the Republic of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan September 2021. (Office of the President of Ukraine)



Treaty in late 2001.<sup>28</sup> This decision paved the way for the introduction of two Aegis Ashore sites in Poland and Romania. These systems use the MK-41 launch system to launch the SM-3 interceptor. The MK-41's naval heritage means that the system can also launch the Tomahawk cruise missile. The United States does not have any plans to deploy Tomahawk at the Aegis ashore sites, but Moscow is prone to worst case scenario thinking. In more recent years, Russia has taken this paranoia a step further, developing the ground launched 9M729 cruise missile (SSC-8) in violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). This missile — along with the strategic range RS-26 ballistic missile<sup>29</sup> — is meant to serve as an intermediate range, nuclear capable strike system to mimic the missions assigned to the SS-20.

These two strike systems are slated for targets in Europe and can counter US missile defenses. In response to the Russian INF violation, the United States has launched its own missile program to develop INF-range missiles for deployment in Europe. Russian President Putin has overtly signaled displeasure with unrestricted US missile deployments in Europe, arguing that the decreased flight times from forward deployed missiles (backed by unrestricted missile defenses) is destabilizing. Against this backdrop, the Turkish role is minimal and almost entirely

non-existent. However, in early December, the Ukrainian ambassador to Turkey tweeted a picture showing a model of Ankara's newest drone with Ukrainian insignia on the tail and a long-range precision-guided missile hanging off the fuselage. The Turkish-made Stand-Off Munition, or SOM, can be carried by Turkey's newest drone: the Akinci. This drone is powered by two Ivchenko-Progress AI-450S turboprop engines. This missile is already available for export. The Azeri armed forces displayed a SOM cruise missile at a military parade and *Defence Turkey* reports that the missile has been integrated on Azeri Su-25 Frogfoot ground attack aircraft.<sup>30</sup> The SOM cruise missile has a 250 kilometer range, which is far less than the US Tomahawk or the JASSM-ER. The weapon, however, could be deemed a risk to Russian staging points near the Ukrainian border.

Kyiv has an obvious interest in acquiring an affordable air arm, capable of delivering precision-guided munitions. The Turkish-made Akinci can carry more munitions than the TB2 and can be easily serviced in Ukraine. The introduction of the SOM cruise missile, however, risks running afoul of Russian demands that NATO refrain from introducing long range missiles in Ukraine. The United States has no interest in coercing its NATO ally from halting cooperation with Ukraine, but it is worth truly thinking about how third

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Akinci drone on display at Teknofest 2019 (Wikimedia Commons/ Talha Işık)


party arms sales could negatively impact US interests. Ankara ultimately relies on its NATO membership to manage its relationship with Moscow. Ankara can safely assume that it is relatively immune from direct escalation with its neighbor, precisely because the US guarantees its security. However, Turkish political elites also have an interest in managing its relationship with Moscow. Thus, in times of bilateral tension between Washington and Moscow, Turkey's interest is to remain neutral. Ankara, however, will not shirk its NATO commitments. This is also against its interests. Turkish policy, therefore, is to refrain from supporting US actions that are outside of the NATO framework. This means that Ankara will resist US requests to move naval vessels into the Black Sea, unless those deployments are part of a NATO exercise with a Black Sea power. This also

means that Turkey is unlikely to request any overt US response to escalation in Ukraine. This policy is different than the likely response from NATO members Poland and Romania.

For the Ukraine situation, more specifically, Ankara can pursue a variation of this “fence-sitting” policy. Ankara can continue to export defense items to Kyiv, while simultaneously engaging Moscow, and resisting any US calls to independently support any coercive actions against Russia. Instead, Turkey is more likely to operate within the alliance, but resist calls to join US or EU calls to impose sanctions in response to an invasion. These sanctions would undermine Turkish economic policy, which depends on cooperation with Russia on issues ranging from energy to agriculture to tourism. It is not in Ankara's interests to isolate Russia. For these reasons,

the US has to contend with a Turkish arms policy that risks irking Russia, but which provides both Kyiv and Washington with few tangible benefits. The TB2 and the Akinci (if it is ever exported) do not alter the balance of power. Instead, any tangible gain Kyiv attains over the Donbas insurgents is mitigated by an increased Russian commitment to the enclaves it has seized. Moscow, in short, has escalation dominance. The US, in turn, is called upon to guarantee the security of the eastern NATO states and to deploy forces to reassure allies. Turkey is an important NATO member, but it does not guarantee the security of the alliance. This reality means that the US has an interest in how allied actions impact broader alliance security.

In this case, the current level of Turkish-Ukrainian cooperation has greater positive outcomes for Ankara. The Ukrainian supply of engines has enabled the development of a larger turbo-prop powered drone and may power the next generation of Turkish air power. This relationship has helped to insulate Turkey from a downturn in relations with the United States. The future of the relationship could also further Ankara's interest in developing its own, autarkic defense industry. The Turkish support for Kyiv does enhance the armed forces' capabilities against the separatists. It does not have a tangible impact on the balance of power with Russia. Instead, the potential negative outcome from continued and deeper cooperation — to include the provision of long-range strike systems — could actually make the situation worse and give Moscow a narrative to justify military action. The United States will be embroiled in the outcome of this tripartite

balancing act. Washington guarantees Turkish and NATO security, protecting Ankara from escalation with Moscow. The Russian armed forces are certain to retain military overmatch against its smaller neighbors. Absent a credible US guarantee, Ukraine may forever be susceptible to Russian military coercion. The Turkish role, in this scenario, is beneficial for certain contingencies, but also not determinative in shifting the asymmetry of power. 



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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