

Memo to Erdogan: You can have the S-400, or you can have the F-35, but you can't have both

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Turkey, a member of NATO and – some still believe – an American ally, has been in the news of late because of its purchase, and then its taking delivery, of the S-400 air-defense missile system from Russia. It did this in defiance of the wishes of the American government, and of every other member of NATO. The Trump Administration, backed up by members of Congress of both parties, had warned Erdogan not to go through with the purchase, insisting that Turkey would not be allowed to take delivery of the 100 F-35 stealth jets, the top-of-the-line American aircraft, that the Americans had been

willing to sell them. **“You can have the S-400, or you can have the F-35, but you can’t have both” was the repeated refrain from Washington**

The Americans have several worries. First, there is the matter of interoperability. One NATO official told *The Washington Post* that the alliance was “concerned about the potential consequences of Turkey’s decision to acquire the S-400 system. Interoperability of our armed forces is fundamental to NATO for the conduct of our operations and missions.” None of the other members of NATO have air-defense systems compatible with the Russian S-400. Even within Turkey, there would be incompatibility – lack of interoperability – between the S-400 systems and the missile defense systems now in place, including the Patriot missiles the Americans have in Turkey to protect their air base at Incirlik. The Americans had offered to sell Patriot missiles to Turkey, but Erdogan claimed that Washington had not made an adequate offer. Erdogan may well have been determined all along to buy, for \$2.5 billion, the advanced S-400 system from Russia, both to cement close ties with his new best friend forever, Vladimir Putin, and to demonstrate his willingness to defy the Americans, who clearly get on his nerves; after all, they supported the “terrorist” Kurds in Syria, and they’re in thrall to those terrible Israelis.

The second worry is even greater. U.S. officials fear that if Turkey has both the F-35 and Russia’s most advanced air defense system in its hands, then Russians may gain access to F-35 technology and later target its weaknesses. **In late May, Kathryn Wheelbarger, U.S. acting assistant secretary of defense, said that the “S-400 is a Russian system designed to shoot down an aircraft like the F-35.” She said “it is inconceivable to imagine Russia not taking advantage of that [intelligence] collection opportunity.”** The Russians might offer, as one more example of their desire to help Turkey, to make the S-400 system as effective as possible by studying

the F-35's current ability to evade the S-400 missiles, then coming up with counter-measures, which would be shared with their new Turkish friends.

Erdogan may believe that the Americans are bluffing, that they won't in the end prevent Turkey from buying the 100 F-35s, which are to be delivered at the rate of ten a year for ten years. After all, the sale, once complete, could be worth about 15 billion dollars. But Lockheed has not had trouble finding customers – including the Pentagon – for the F-35. If Turkey doesn't buy them, other potential customers are waiting.

Erdogan may also think that the Americans wouldn't prohibit the F-35 sale because this might lead Turkey to close down Incirlik, an airbase that was useful during the Cold War as a listening post into the Soviet Union, and recently has been used by the American air force for missions in the Middle East. But the U.S. military has since early 2018 already curbed combat operations flying out of Incirlik, and permanent cutbacks are in the works. In January 2018, for instance, a squadron of A-10 Thunderbolt IIs were shifted from Incirlik to Afghanistan. U.S. Air Forces Central Command officially said that the move was for the purpose of shifting focus from fighting ISIS to fighting the Taliban. But it also showed the American willingness to relocate planes to other bases. Another reason why the use of Incirlik is being re-thought is that the Turks sometimes request, without giving any explanation, that the U.S. suspend operations on the runway. It's a way for Erdogan to engage in petty harassment, to show the Americans who is boss. Furthermore, the Turks have already threatened to close Incirlik down: on February 11, 2018, Turkish **Deputy Prime Minister Fikri I??k announced that Ankara would not hesitate to close the airbase, if its long-term interests require it.**

“If Turkey's medium and long-term interests require [us] to take a step [to close the base] Turkey certainly would not

refrain from taking this step,” I??k said during a press conference, according to the Türkiye newspaper.

When asked by journalists if Turkey is currently [in 2018] considering closing the Incirlik airbase, the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister didn’t confirm or deny but he said that the decision-making mechanisms in Turkey “always hold each and ever.” [sic]

The Americans need an air base where they can operate freely, without the anxiety of never knowing when the runways might be closed at whim by a hostile host, or the whole air base might be closed, as Turkish officials have threatened to do with Incirlik.

Where might such a base be placed? One possibility is in the Sinai, in one of the already existing airbases built by the Israelis when they held the Sinai, and which could be upgraded to meet American needs. The Eitam airbase at El Goreh, in northeast Sinai, might fill the bill. Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates would all welcome such an American presence. To discourage the inevitable street protests by the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government could have its controlled media focus on the enormous rent, and additional American economic aid, the Egyptians would be receiving for use of the Eitam airbase. In Saudi Arabia (and the Emirates), the government-controlled media could truthfully depict this American airbase as providing greater security for the Saudis (and Emiratis), in facing the threat of Iran. Israel, of course, needs no convincing about the benefits of an American base in the Sinai. As for Erdogan, such a move out of Incirlik by the Americans, upending all his assumptions about who has the upper hand in Turkish-American relations, should provide a salutary lesson. One could even call it an “Ottoman slap.”

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