Defense One

Why Turkey Chose, and Then Rejected, a Chinese Air-Defense Missile

BY MUSTAFA KIBAROGLU, SELIM C. SAZAK

When Turkey announced its intention to buy a Chinese missile system in 2013, many in the West believed Ankara was veering away from NATO. But look at that decision—and its recent reversal—through Turkish eyes, and the situation looks a lot different. Ultimately, the episode should teach its Western allies about what Turkey really wants, and doesn't want.

Ankara's $3.4 billion program to construct the country's first long-range air and anti-missile defense system veered into controversy when it chose a Chinese state-owned company—the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation—as the preferred bidder for its long-range air and missile defense system contract. China's surprise victory over American (Patriot PAC-3), European (SAMP/T Aster 30), and Russian (S-400) competition led U.S. and NATO officials to voice concerns about security and the compatibility of the weaponry with NATO systems.

The Chinese deal seemed to be just one more indication of fraying relations between Turkey and the West. Writing in Foreign Affairs, Michael J. Koplow added it to a long list of "Turkish provocations" from voting against Iran sanctions to flinching at hosting NATO X-Band radar installations in its territory to refusing to normalize ties with Israel and complicating U.S. intelligence-sharing efforts to supporting "anti-Western jihadi groups" in Syria, HAMAS at the expense of Fatah in Palestine, and the Kurdistan Regional Government as a wholly independent entity from Baghdad in Iraq.

The missile-defense decision, however, was particularly worrisome to Turkey's Western allies. As Koplow wrote, such a deal "meant that Turkey was not only flouting the sanctions regime that the U.S. had painstakingly constructed but also that Turkey was purchasing a system that could not be integrated into the larger NATO missile defense shield."

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In reality, Ankara had neither the intention nor the capacity for such a dramatic departure from NATO's defense infrastructure. All along, Turkish officials had planned to leverage its purchasing power to gain the know-how to develop its own long-range missile system and to expand the indigenous capabilities.

Indeed, Turkey had been forthright about these intentions. It repeatedly pointed that the Chinese were offering a lower price, favorable technology transfer conditions, and early delivery on the first batch of batteries. "If Turkey opts for direct purchase of the system then it will be obliged to make new off-the-shelf purchases 15 or 20 years later. We will not settle for this. Our target is to gain national technological capability in the missile project," Turkey's chief arms procurer, Ismail Demir, said at the IDEF defense industry fair last May.

And while the move astounded its transatlantic allies, it cohered perfectly with Turkey's broader defense industrial strategy. Earlier this year, Turkish President R. Tayyip Erdogan had said that "the "plan is to completely eliminate external dependency on defence equipment supply with ongoing plans and investments until 2023 [and start developing] unique designs." The country is already investing heavily in a number of indigenous land and missile systems from the Altay main battle tank to the MILGEM littoral combat warship to the fifth-generation TFX fighter jet, as well as several co-production projects like a localized variant of the Sikorsky S-70 Black Hawk helicopter.

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Ankara was convinced that its long-range missile defense tender was going to be smooth sailing. The deteriorating security situation in Syria and Iraq was a well-founded rationale for Turkey to expand its air-defense capabilities. Turkey's defense industry was an offshoot of its alliance with NATO and it remained deeply ingrained into the transatlantic defense-industrial complex. The Western competitors in the tender already had longstanding partnerships with their Turkish counterparts. Lockheed Martin was the main contractor in Turkey's largest coproduction project—the $7.4 billion F-16 Peace Onyx program—through a joint venture with the Turkish government. Raytheon had a similar co-production arrangement with the state-owned Roketsan under the Euro-Stinger program, Aselsan, which was tapped to be one of the leading local partners in the long-range missile defense project, was a global vendor to Raytheon's Patriot program and co-producing Rapier surface-to-air missiles with MBDA. Therefore, Ankara was expecting that its Western allies would easily sign on. Instead, things devolved into an intraalliance crisis.

In fairness, Ankara did not give Beijing an easy time in their negotations. Every time there appeared a window of opportunity for some agreement between Turkey and the West, however, regional developments got in the way. In September 2014, the talks with China faltered—over technology transfer conditions—and Ankara reopened talks with the runner-up, Eurosam. Right around the same time, Washington decided to provide military and humanitarian aid to Kobani to help the Kurds push the ISIS's offensive back. Last summer, the talks with the Chinese were stalemated once again, but a

second ISIS offensive on Kobani left Turkey and the West quibbling over the appropriate response. With coalition support, Kurdish forces to recaptured Kobani on July 19. Ten days later, Erdogan gave new momentum to the missile talks by reiterating his support for the Chinese offer during his visit to Beijing. And on August 15, the U.S. countered by withdrawing its Patriot batteries stationed on Turkey's Syrian border.

What wedged Turkey apart from its Western allies was not price or performance—it was the double standards Ankara perceived in how the allies were handling Turkey's legitimate interests. In the griping of its allies over what it believed were feasible and legitimate demands, Ankara heard an undertone that it has grown tired of: Turkey can guard the camp, but not be allowed to sit in the tent. And where Ankara perceived a slight, its Western allies saw an erstwhile partner that has since become the bête noire of the transatlantic alliance. Had the West not stuck to this perception and took the time to look through Turkey's eyes, it would have been possible to find the space for a middle-ground compromise. Instead, both Turkey and its Western allies got lost in translation.

What Turkey needed was a dignified exit from its commitment to the Chinese offer and the assurance that its Western allies are not oblivious to its legitimate concerns. In this regard, **it is not a coincidence that Turkey's recent reversal came on the heels of the G20 Summit.** The Paris attacks, which came right before the summit, increased intra-alliance solidarity and led NATO to rethink its posture in the Middle East. This shift also increased the premium placed on Turkey's continued support. Ankara's bargaining position improved and the coalition's grand strategy came into better alignment with its security interests.

Turkey had neither the intention nor the capacity to go rogue on NATO. To expect a country that relies on NATO for more than half of its radar data to invest billions in a missile defense system that is not compatible with this infrastructure was not sensible. Ankara sees itself as one of NATO's more critical members. It believes that as NATO's easternmost member, it is pulling more weight than most others. What it wanted was not to leave the table but to get a better seat at the table.

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Now, with its allies sorely needing its support and better heeding its grievances, Ankara's quest for affirmation as an equal partner in the transatlantic alliance diminished and the motivations that led to its deal with the Chinese withered. Had the West offered Ankara the affirmation it needed before—in the form of better technology transfer conditions, a Foreign Military Sales agreement, a side deal or even just a pat in the back—this rapport could have been achieved years ago.

The controversy over the Chinese missile deal is a cautionary tale on how NATO should engage with Turkey. The remedy to the West's fears over Turkey is to pull it towards the West, not to push it further away by failing to heed its legitimate political, economic and security interests, and throw tantrums when it seeks to assert those interests on its own. A robust alliance cannot be premised on bringing an ally around to another's policies kicking and screaming. Such an approach only entrenches Turkey's perception of exclusion and double standards, and pushes it away from the moral and political axis of the Atlantic Alliance.

Update: An earlier version of this article mentioned an Aselsan-MBDA partnership that has since ceased; its mention has been replaced with the ongoing "Rapier surface-to-air missile" effort.

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