



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**US-Turkey Tense Relations and
Their Possible Influence on Regional Security**

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The situation in the Middle East has been developing dynamically in the recent period of time – confrontations between the US and Iran, Israel and Iran, and the civil war in Syria, etc., creating additional threats and challenges for the wider region (which includes us, too). In such a situation, the tense relations between two powerful NATO member states – the US and Turkey and the foreign policy fluctuations that can be expected from this which could cause the paths of these two countries to diverge, also causing Ankara to become closer with Moscow – remain as a significantly noteworthy issue for Georgia. Such a development of events would probably become one of the biggest challenges to our country's security.

US-Turkey Relations and the S-400 Issue

Washington and Ankara became allies after 1952 when Turkey became a NATO member state. Starting from there, the bilateral relations were almost ideal for the entire half-century (the exception being the 1974 conflict in Cyprus) when these two countries were united by their desire to contain the Soviet threat. For decades, Washington and Ankara were exercising almost parallel foreign policy courses with one another and Turkey became the main US ally in the Middle East, together with Israel.

The situation started to change after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and especially after the coming to power of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) as Turkey started exercising an independent foreign policy in the Middle East, often incompatible with US interests.

A host of issues gradually accumulated in the bilateral relations, hindering their development and creating problems for the alliance.

Ankara has long been demanding the extradition of an Islamist spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, who currently resides in America, but to no avail. Turkey accuses him and his supporters of attempting the July 15, 2016 coup.¹ Ankara is also futile in its demands for Washington to stop assisting the YPG (pro-Kurdish People's Protection Units) operating in Northern Syria.²

All this has been complemented with Turkey signing an agreement with Russia on the purchase of S-400 air defense systems. The US side has for years insisted that Turkey renounce this deal as the S-400 is technically inconsistent with Western weaponry and would be impossible to incorporate into the NATO defense system.³

¹ <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/Georgian-2661.pdf>

² <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/710>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-foreign-usa-turkey/pompeo-presses-turkey-on-s-400-missiles-purchase-from-russia-idUSKBN1HY2A6>



US officials were also stating that they did not want the S-400s to be installed near F-35s (which Washington was planning to give to Ankara) due to the fact that Russian specialists would have access to the specifications of these brand-new destroyer jets.⁴ Ankara did not satisfy this demand and Turkey already received the first batch of S-400 parts on July 12, 2019 which were delivered to the Mürted Military Airfield near Ankara by Russian cargo planes.⁵ The remaining parts of the system will be delivered to Turkey during the summer.⁶ The overall value of this Russian-Turkish contract is USD 2.5 billion.⁷

Even though Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hopes that US President Donald Trump will not institute sanctions against Turkey, representatives of the US Department of State and the Pentagon were officially stating that nothing would change in their plans regarding sanctions even before the systems were delivered to Turkey.

“We underscore that Turkey will face very real and negative consequences if it completes its S-400 delivery. The consequences include suspension of procurement, industrial participation in the F-35 fighter jets program and potential sanctions because of the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA),” said a representative of the US Department of State.⁸

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48962885>

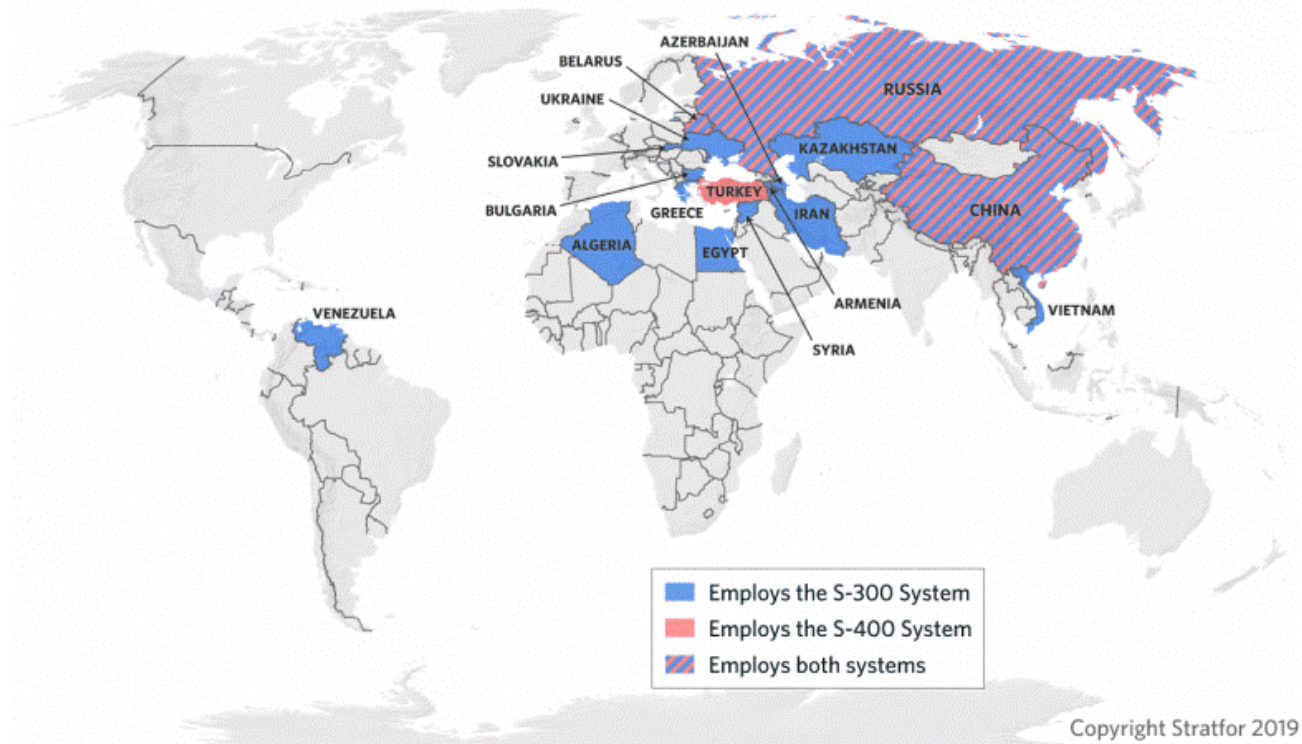
⁵ <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/07/12/turkey-russian-air-defense-system-1578293>

⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/12/europe/turkey-russia-missiles-intl/index.html>

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48962885>

⁸ <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/554573-ashsh-kvlav-apirebs-daucosos-turkets-sankciebi-tu-turketi-rusul-raketsacinaagmdego-sistemas-sheizens/>

Global Deployment of S-300 and S-400 Air Defense Systems



Overall, the talk is about stopping the supply of a 100 ultra-modern US F-35 destroyer jets to Turkey (the total value of the agreement being USD 3.5 billion⁹) as well as replacing Turkey in the production of F-35 parts (937 parts in total) with another country. Before this, the US suspended the Turkish pilot re-training program which was teaching Turkish officers to pilot F-35s.¹⁰

The Turkish economy, which already has no shortage of serious problems (high inflation, depreciation of the national currency, increased unemployment rate, large external debt and bankrupting companies), is of course the most sensitive towards the impending sanctions. On the very first day of the arrival of these systems in Turkey, the Turkish lira depreciated by 1.45%. If in the morning of July 12 one USD cost 5.67 Turkish liras, in the evening its cost had jumped to 5.75 liras.¹¹

In the case of the activation of economic sanctions by Washington, the Turkish lira will most likely depreciate even further and many fields of the Turkish economy will face serious problems as happened in August 2018 due to the US sanctions against Turkey.¹² Additionally, while the 2018 sanctions were more symbolic in nature, the situation is much more serious right now.¹³

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/12/europe/turkey-russia-missiles-intl/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48962885>

¹¹ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/>

¹² <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/Georgian-2661.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/s-400-krizi-t%C3%BCrk-ekonomisi-b%C3%BCy%C3%BCk-bir-sars%C4%B1nt%C4%B1-daha-ge%C3%A7irecek-/4863265.html>

So far, the scale and the scope of possible US sanctions is unclear.¹⁴ Yet one thing is clear – their results will be severe.

Tensions between the US and Turkey will take its military-political toll as well. This includes both the functioning of the Incirlik US Military Air Base in Turkey as well as the most radical of possibilities – the question of Turkish membership in NATO, which was posed by none other than the US Vice President, Mike Pence, on April 3, 2019, when concerning the issue of S-400s he called on Ankara to choose between NATO and Russia.

What is the Possibility of Approximation between Russia and Turkey?

Given the background of tense US-Turkish relations, a question naturally arises: what is the possibility of approximation between Ankara and Moscow, especially given the fact that Russia has become an important player in the Middle East after its intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015?

Due to a significant precondition, Ankara's distancing from Washington does not automatically mean its harmonic agreement with Moscow on all issues – Ankara and Moscow have divergent long-term goals which are in opposition to one another's interests. Due to this, they are currently tactical allies, not strategic allies.



¹⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-starts-taking-delivery-of-russian-air-defense-missile-system-risking-u-s-sanctions-and-testing-its-position-in-nato-11562920372>

It is because of these divergent interests that the two parties often hold radically different positions about a host of important international problems, be it Kosovo, Crimea, Karabakh, Syria, Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region, Transnistria or others.

These are the topics that cannot be easily revisited. For example, any Turkish government will face serious problems within the country if it shares Russia's positions about Karabakh and starts approximation with Armenia despite the position of Azerbaijan. A clear example of this was the 2009 approximation process between Turkey and Armenia, frozen due to a sharp negative reaction from Azerbaijan.¹⁵

The same is true for the years-long Syrian conflict where Ankara and Moscow, based on their national interests, support different parties of the conflict. Russia is openly helping the Assad regime while Turkey supports the Syrian opposition.¹⁶

Problems concerning Georgia, Ukraine and the Balkans should also be mentioned here. Ankara recognizes and supports Georgia's territorial integrity while Russia continues the occupation of our territories. Ankara does not recognize Crimea as a part of Russia after the annexation of the peninsula in 2014. Turkey recognizes and supports the independence of Kosovo while Russia opposes it. The central government of Bosnia and Herzegovina is an ally of Ankara while Moscow allies itself with the "Republika Srpska" which is a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet entertains separatist sentiments.

Apart from these reasons and despite the current difficulties, Turkey is a NATO member state while Russia is considered to be NATO's main adversary.

This and many other serious differences which naturally exist between the interests of these two countries cannot be easily eradicated. Moving them to the background to a certain extent or removing them from priority areas for a time can only take place as a result of great geopolitical fluctuations.

Conclusions

- US-Turkish relations are entering a serious crisis whose resolve will not be easy.
- Should the crisis deepen, Turkey will part ways with the West which would mean reduced cooperation in the fields of security, defense and the economy.
- Russia will be the biggest winner in such a case as it has been trying to create cracks in NATO unity for a long time.
- In the crisis period, much will depend on the sanctions instituted by the US and Turkish leadership as well as their reactions and also their abilities to manage crisis situations.
- Tensions in US-Turkey relations do not automatically mean ideal Turkish-Russian relations. Serious problems and differing interests still remain between Ankara and Moscow.
- These problems would only move to the background if fluctuations of global importance were to take place (issues like Turkish membership in NATO could turn out to be).
- In the case of escalating tensions between the US and Turkey, it will be important for the confrontation to be less spread towards the Caucasus and the Black Sea region.
- For Georgia, the threat of Russia and Turkey striking a deal at its expense is less probable at this stage. Yet, this does not mean that such a thing could not happen in the future. The

¹⁵ <https://dergipark.org.tr/download/article-file/639458>

¹⁶ <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/Georgian-2541.pdf>

probability of this might appear if Turkey will no longer be a NATO member state and will openly go against US and Western interests in general. In such a case, much will depend on the international conjuncture at that time and, above all, the US position.

- If the crisis deepens, it is highly probable that certain sanctions will be used against Turkey which will create even more problems for it as it already faces a dire economic situation. This, in its own right, will create complications for the economy of Georgia as well as Turkey is our top trade partner and tens of thousands of Georgian citizens work there.
- And finally, the Security Council of Georgia and its apparatus must be activated as soon as possible as they would gather up information about this and other similar issues, thoroughly analyzing them and formulating respective recommendations.