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Missile Defence: A View from Turkey

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On September 9th, the United States announced that it was planning a \$7.8 billion sale of 13 Patriot fire units, 72 PAC-3 missiles and a range of related hardware for ground-based air defence to Turkey. This decision, some commentators reasoned, was evidence that the US was turning to Turkey as an alternative base to the missile defence system (MDS) originally planned in Central Europe. Such assessments have proved somewhat off the mark, however. What is on sale to the Turks (a system to protect Turkey against short- and medium-range missiles), it turns out, is different from what had been on offer to the Czechs and Poles, which was a system designed to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles. The announced sale of one system, however, signalled the end of the other. On September 17th, the Obama administration confirmed that it would abandon plans for an MDS based in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Obama's decision may have come as a relief to those Polish and Czech politicians who were sceptical of the MDS to begin with, particularly in the face of opinion polls showing that majorities in each country are opposed to the project. To those who believed that the presence of American military hardware (and personnel) in Central Europe would act as a deterrent against any belligerent designs by Moscow, America's decision to scrap the offer came as a major disappointment. In Warsaw, the US administration's move was perceived as further evidence – after the lack of visible rewards for Polish engagement in Iraq and a few diplomatic snubs – that Poland was slipping down America's list of strategic priorities. Subsequent US proposals to involve Poland in the regional defence system have done little to allay such concerns. From the US perspective, ditching plans for a long-range MDS in Central Europe and making Turkey an integral part of a new regional defence system seems a matter of killing two very big birds with one stone.

First, it is a question of upgrading Washington's relationship with Ankara, which still hasn't recovered from the Turkish parliament's decision in March 2003 to refuse to open a northern front in the invasion of Iraq. The installation of a missile defence system would show that there is substance to America's strategic partnership with Turkey – a relationship made all the more significant in view of the Obama administration's urgent need to involve Turkey in an American exit strategy from Iraq.

Objectively speaking, and especially on the heels of US recognition that the threat from Iran's short- and medium-range missiles is greater than that from its still-undeveloped long-range missiles programme, the choice of Turkey as a base for a regional defence system makes plenty of sense. Because of its turbulent yet strategically important neighbourhood, Turkey has already been in the market for a missile defence shield for years. As early as 1991, during the first Gulf War, Patriot missiles were stationed in Turkey under a NATO framework as protection against possible Scud attacks from Iraq. The need for a defence shield remains. Turkey, after all, is the only NATO member

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whose entire territory is *already* within range of Iranian missiles (Tehran's newest Shahab-3 missiles are said to possess a range of more than 1,300 km).

Second, the offer of a regional missile defence system to Turkey (to protect against short- and medium-range missiles) goes a long way to allay Moscow's fears, however ill-founded or disingenuous, that a Czech- and Polish-based MDS (to intercept long-range missiles, of which Russia has plenty) could be directed against Russia. Installing the defence shield in Turkey is a signal that the US is willing to accommodate Russian anxieties.

It is one thing to deliver an anti-ballistic MDS into the hands of the Poles and the Czechs, with whom Russia has an uneasy (verging on the poisonous) relationship, and another to entrust a regional defence shield to the Turks, with whom Moscow is enjoying an historic rapprochement. The volume of trade between the two countries reached \$38 billion in 2008, making Russia Turkey's largest trade partner. For years, Russia has been Turkey's most important energy provider, accounting for 65% of its gas imports and 40% of its oil imports. Just over a month ago, on August 5th, Turkey and Russia signed a major deal allowing Gazprom to lay a new gas pipeline – South Stream – across the Black Sea. What impact this will have on the EU-backed Nabucco pipeline project is still unclear. For reasons of economic dependence alone, Turkey has gone to great lengths not to antagonise its eastern neighbour. This was apparent during the August 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia, when Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to the dismay of many of his NATO allies (America first and foremost), declared that “It would not be right for Turkey to be pushed towards any side of the conflict”.

In view of the above, Russia could never argue with any degree of credibility that a defence system placed in Turkish hands constitutes a threat to its security. And Ankara would make sure not to give Russia an excuse to do so. In late 2008 Polish President Lech Kaczynski did just that when he opined that the Russian invasion of Georgia was “a very strong argument” in favour of installing an MDS in Poland, effectively undermining American assertions that the shield's exclusive purpose was to ward off threats from Iran. What would make Moscow's complaints sound even more hollow is the fact that the Russians have previously discussed selling their own version of a defence shield – in the form of S-300 and S-400 systems – to Ankara.

A Turkish-based shield could even become a bargaining chip in US policy towards Iran, with the Americans making it clear to Tehran that they would be ready to sacrifice the project in exchange for progress on the Iranian nuclear dossier. Washington would have to take care not to antagonise the Turks in the process, however, bearing in mind the sort of damage done to the US-Turkish relationship by President Kennedy's 1962 decision – made without prior consultation with Ankara – to remove US Jupiter missiles from Turkey (in exchange for Russia withdrawing its missiles from Cuba).

Still, no one can say that it will be easy to win the Turks over to the idea of a regional missile defence shield. To do so, Erdoğan's government would have to confront an electorate that is deeply sceptical of US policies. Although Turks have warmed to America under Barack Obama, only a meagre 16% believe that it is desirable for the US to exert strong leadership in world affairs. Turkey will also have to be careful not to antagonise Moscow and Tehran, with whom it has painstakingly constructed pragmatic relations over the past decade, as part of Turkey's “zero problems with neighbours” policy. Placing US missiles on Turkish territory, inasmuch as it would mean a boost to Ankara's relations with Washington, could become a major political liability for the AKP government, both domestically and in the Muslim near-abroad.

From a broader perspective, the MDS dilemma illustrates an inconvenient truth: that Turkey's sophisticated foreign policy, commendable though it may be, is often strained when it comes to responding to fast-changing dynamics or accommodating other regional actors' conflicting interests. As Turkey's reaction to last summer's war in Georgia (or this summer's unrest in Iran) goes to show, maintaining a “zero problems” approach in a volatile neighbourhood is no easy task.

Recent comments by Turkey's foreign minister show that squaring the purchase of a missile defence shield with an increasingly important relationship with Iran might be equally daunting. Turkey's acquisition of an MDS, Ahmet Davutoglu assured, would have “nothing to do with Iran or any other country.” Which begs the question: against what – if not Iran “or any other country” – is the shield expected to provide defence? Needless to say, Turkey must do a better job of articulating its defence posture and its stance vis-à-vis the Iranian missile threat. Attuning the Iranians to the notion that good fences sometimes make good neighbours might be a good start.