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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

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US Sanctions on Turkey's Defense Industry Might Backfire, Here is Why!

Dr Ali Bakir*
abakir@qu.edu.qa

On December 14, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on NATO ally Turkey with the pretext of buying Russia's most advanced air defense system, the S-400. This measure came only three days after Congress approved defense legislation that mandated the imposition of sanctions. It rested on Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

As part of this section's requirement, at least five out of the 12 sanctions described in Section 235 of CAATSA should be imposed on whoever engaged in significant transactions with Russia's defense sector.¹ Trump's administration chose to target Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) and a number of its key figures, including the Head of SSB, Ismail Demir.

The sanctions targeting the SSB prohibit granting specific U.S. export licenses and technology transfer, loans more than \$10 million over a period of a year by U.S. financial institutions, export-import bank assistance, in addition to opposing international loans to the Turkish entity. It also imposes full blocking sanctions and visa restrictions on Ismail Demir and others, including SSB's vice president, SSB's Head of the Department of Air Defense and Space, and Program Manager for SSB's Regional Air Defense Systems Directorate.²

The SSB emerged in the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup. It inherited the Undersecretariat for Defence Industries (SSM) and continued its mission under the Turkish Presidency's auspices to develop a modern indigenous defense industry and modernize the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK).

From 1999 to 2018, Turkey moved from being the third-largest importer of weapons to become the 14th-largest defense exporter in the world. According to 2019 figures, the exports of the national defense sector in Turkey surged by 40.2% to reach \$3.1 billion compared to \$2.2 billion in 2018, thus increasing the total sales by 19.5% to reach around \$10.9 billion compared to \$8.8 in 2018.³

** Research
Assistant
Professor, Ibn
Khalidon Center,
Qatar
University.*

Although officials in the U.S. claim that the current sanctions are not meant to undermine Turkey's national defense industry or jeopardize the Turkish armed forces' military capabilities or combat readiness, facts may suggest otherwise.

For years, the US has been preventing Turkey from meeting its critical defense needs even when relations between the two NATO allies were pretty good. In 2012, former Turkish President Abdullah Gul complained that Washington stalled for a long time not to deliver advanced drones to Ankara.⁴

Drones were crucial to Ankara to counter-terrorism, particularly the Kurdish PKK, which is designated as a foreign terrorist organization in the US, NATO, and the EU. Washington blocked selling drones to Ankara when Turkey's army needed it most. This decision has ultimately revolutionized Turkey's drone industry under President Erdogan. In 2016 and during his speech in the Atlantic Council, Ismail Demir touched on this issue when he said,⁵ "I do not want to be sarcastic, but I would like to thank [the U.S. government] for any of the projects that it did not approve because it forced us to develop our own systems."

This step positively impacted Turkey's defense capabilities, military activism, and foreign policy capacity. It gave Ankara the upper hand in the geopolitical standoffs in theatres in the Levant region, North Africa, and southern Caucasus when some of its NATO allies seemed to be standing on the wrong side of the history in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno Karabakh by supporting terrorist group affiliated with PKK, warlord Haftar, and the Armenian occupation.

What reinforces the impression that Washington is trying to constrain Turkey and deprive it of the necessary advancement in the defense industry to defend its national security and interests in one of the most unstable regions in the world is the fact that key members of Congress, either individually or collectively, have quietly frozen all major U.S. arms sales to Turkey for nearly two years starting from 2018.⁶

The US-backed down from a done deal with Turkey, a joint program member to produce the most advanced multi-role stealth fighter jet in the world (F-35), which required Washington to deliver Ankara 30 F-35 jets⁷ even though it had already paid around \$1.5 billion so far.⁸ Washington blocked the jets' delivery and removed Ankara from the joint production program with the pretext of the S-400 system.

The S-400 saga⁹ started when the US refused to sell the Patriot missile to its NATO ally Turkey prompting Ankara to turn to Russia to acquire the S-400. The US officials argue that no NATO member should acquire Russian-made systems. They also claimed that the S-400 constitutes a security threat and can compromise the F-35 technology. Yet, they repeatedly refused Turkey's request to form a joint committee to put this claim on the test.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington had demonstrated its resolve to "fully implement CAATSA" and "will not tolerate significant transactions with Russia's defense sector." Yet, the term "significant" seems vague, which makes it susceptible to political games.

The US's main argument in this issue seems more like Swiss cheese with wholes big enough to take in the S-400 system and several Russian defense products on top of it. Several NATO allies already have Russian-made systems. Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and other members all employ various Russian weapon systems.

In fact, Greece, an EU member also, was the first NATO member to acquire an advanced Russian defense system in the 90s, the S-300. Athens tested the system operationally at the end of 2013.¹⁰ Along with the S-300, Greece owns several Russian-made systems. In 2015, almost two years before Turkey is forced to acquire S-400, Athens engaged with Russia in talks to buy new missiles for its S-300 and do some maintenance for the system.¹¹

Many U.S. allies outside the NATO alliance are also heavily engaged with Russia's defense sector, such as India, Egypt, UAE, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. None of these countries was sanctioned by the US, which calls into question the US's motives to sanction Turkey and raises questions about Washington's credibility and its double standards policy.

Several divergent views emerged recently to assess the possible impact of the new sanctions on Turkey's defense industry. Some characterized these sanctions as relatively light, with no serious impact on the defense industry because they only target the SSB and not the whole sector. However, others argue that these sanctions can undermine some of the advanced defense projects that are mainly dependent on licenses or tech components from the U.S.

Reuters estimates that this measure could affect contracts worth \$1.5 billion to \$2.3 billion, around 5% of U.S.-Turkish trade.¹² It might also discourage other interested parties and prevent them from dealing with the SSB. If these are among the real goals of the American sanctions, then depending on whether these sanctions will be expanded later and extended for more than one year, they could slow down the defense sector's rise and disrupt its progress.

This would not be a preferable outcome for Ankara. Yet, it will forcibly push it to seek more autocracy and to continue exploring ways to be more independent in the defense industry. This has been the case since the 70s. The American arms embargo on NATO ally Turkey in 1975 against the background of the Cyprus crisis had led to a significant transformation in the critical thinking of the political and defense elites in Turkey and ultimately led to the birth of the national defense industry under the SSM, and later on the SSB.

If the current US sanctions are intended to undermine the national defense industry, jeopardize the military capabilities, or combat readiness of Turkey, there is a great chance that they might backfire as history tells us.

¹ SECTION 231 OF THE COUNTERING AMERICA'S ADVERSARIES THROUGH SANCTIONS ACT OF 2017, The U.S. Department of State. www.state.gov/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/sections-231-and-

235/#:~:text=IMPOSITION%20OF%20SANCTIONS%20WITH%20RESPECT,GOVERNMENT%20OF%20THE%20RUSSIAN%20FEDERATION.

² CAATSA Section 231 “Imposition of Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries”, The U.S. Department of State, 14 December 2020. www.state.gov/caatsa-section-231-imposition-of-sanctions-on-turkish-presidency-of-defense-industries/

³ Ali Bakeer, Turkey’s Defense Industry in the Covid Age, Center for Global Policy, 10 July 2020. <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/turkeys-defense-industry-in-the-covid-age/>

⁴ Turkish Bid for Drones Stalls in Congress, President Gul Says, Bloomberg, 22 May 2012. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-05-22/turkish-bid-for-drones-stalls-in-congress-president-gul-says

⁵ Turkey no longer interested in buying US drones: Turkish official, Hurriyet Daily News, 27 May 2016. www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-no-longer-interested-in-buying-us-drones-turkish-official---99731

⁶ Congress has secretly blocked US arms sales to Turkey for nearly two years, Defense News, 12 August 2020. www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2020/08/12/congress-has-secretly-blocked-us-arms-sales-to-turkey-for-nearly-two-years/

⁷ Ejecting Turkey from the F-35 Effort Will Cost At Least Half a Billion Dollars, Defense One, 17 July 2019. www.defenseone.com/business/2019/07/ejecting-turkey-f-35-effort-will-cost-least-half-billion-dollars/158500/

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⁹ Ali Bakeer, How will the S-400 vs F-35 saga between Turkey and the USA end?, The New Arab, 23 July 2019. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/7/23/how-will-turkey-and-usas-missile-saga-end>

¹⁰ Greece conducts first test launch of S-300 missile system, Airforce Technology, 16 December 2013. www.airforce-technology.com/news/newsgreece-conducts-first-test-launch-of-s-300-missile-system-4147293/

¹¹ Greece in talks with Russia to buy missiles for S-300 systems: RIA, Reuters, 15 April 2015. www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nuclear-greece-missiles-idUSKBN0N62A720150415

¹² UPDATE 1-Sanctioned Turkish defence industry chief expects U.S. ties to survive, Reuters, 15 December 2020. www.reuters.com/article/usa-turkey-sanctions/update-1-sanctioned-turkish-defence-industry-chief-expects-u-s-ties-to-survive-idINL1N2IV17I

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