

The history of the S-400 anti-aircraft weapon system

- ▶ Late 1980s – Start of development of the S-400 system
- ▶ January 1993 – Announcement of the system by the Russian Air Force
- ▶ February 12, 1999 – First reportedly successful tests
- ▶ April 2004 – Successful interception of a ballistic missile
- ▶ 2007 – Approval of the system for service
- ▶ February 8, 2008 – Announcement of the replacement of the S-300 system with the more technologically advanced S-400
- ▶ 2009 – Turkish interest in buying the system was expressed at the International Defence Industry Fair in Istanbul
- ▶ March 2014 – Authorisation to sell the S-400 system to China
- ▶ November 2015 – Reported deployment of the S-400 system in Syria
- ▶ October 15, 2016 – Signing of an agreement with India for the supply of five S-400 systems
- ▶ February 2017 – Reported interest of Egypt in the S-400 system
- ▶ July 2017 – Signing of a deal by Turkey to co-produce the S-400 system with Russia

(The Arab Weekly)

Making sense of Turkey selecting Russia's S-400 air-defence system

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As friction between Turkey and its ostensible allies in the West grows, numerous reports cite Turkish and Russian officials suggesting that Ankara is close to finalising a nearly \$2.5 billion deal to acquire Russia's S-400 air- and missile-defence system. This would mark a sharp pivot from Turkey's traditional axis and the clearest indicator yet of Ankara's thinking.

In 2015, it looked as if Turkey had selected the Chinese-manufactured FD-2000 system. However, after what was thought to be significant pressure from the United States, Ankara was persuaded to restart the process. The possibility of more competitive proposals from Turkey's US and European suppliers likely sweetened that particular pill.

Simultaneous to this process has been growing rift between Europe and Russia. In the last few years, NATO has been establishing a ballistic missile shield using US and European systems to counter the growing threat of missile proliferation from countries such as Iran and North Korea.

Such moves have been greeted with suspicion in Moscow. For the Kremlin, NATO's plans appear to be focused primarily on Russia and, as such, pose a threat to the established balance of power. Russia is working on developing weapons it claims will effectively negate NATO's missile defence plans in Europe.

At a time of such mistrust between NATO and Moscow, which may have contributed to Russian military intervention in Ukraine and Syria, Ankara's growing alignment with Moscow takes on new and significant implications.

For the United States, Turkey's selection of the Chinese FD-2000 was bad enough. However, Turkey's shift to Russia as its technology partner in air- and missile-defence is far more worrying.

The S-400 will have no interoperability with US and European systems used by NATO. Key alliance members would hardly tolerate a Russian system being integrated into their network, even if it was technically possible. Russia has deployed the S-400 in Syria and sold a less-advanced variant to Iran following the lifting of international sanctions against it regarding the nuclear deal.

Turkey's longer-term commitment to NATO is another important issue. There is a growing perception that Turkey's trust in NATO has been hit hard. Some Turks say NATO's support was below expectations as its southern borders were affected by the Syrian civil war. Western voices were similarly muted during the related stand-off between Turkey and Russia afterward, though that has since been resolved.

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Separately, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling party lashed out at what they saw as slow and weak condemnation by NATO allies of an attempted military coup last year. Greece and Germany have been accused of granting asylum to Turkish military personnel wanted by Ankara for involvement in the coup plot, fueling suspicions of Western backing or support to topple the Turkish government. Possibly as a result, Ankara has downsized its representation at NATO headquarters.



Long-standing prowess. Russian S-400 Triumph medium-range and long-range surface-to-air missile systems ride through Red Square, last May. (AFP)

tation at NATO headquarters.

European goodwill towards Ankara has similarly cooled following what many see as an excessive crackdown on political opposition within Turkey. The barring of entry by Germany and Netherlands to Turkish politicians seeking to participate in public rallies for expatriate Turks created a sour atmosphere and illustrated a growing mutual dislike.

Ultimately, not only have Turkish aspirations of EU membership been called into question, many wonder whether Turkey will preserve its longer-term alliance with the West through its membership of NATO. In the middle is the United States, which has struggled to mediate between the two increasingly belligerent sides.

Still, nothing is definite yet. Procuring the S-400 system will, Ankara claimed, provide it with the kind of technology transfer that US

and European allies have proven unwilling to trust Ankara with.

In theory, the door remains open for Turkey to procure US or European systems, to be operated separately. Alternatively, Turkey could choose to play a prominent role in the NATO missile-defence programme in exchange for the alliance funding a deployment of systems in Turkey.

Ankara may genuinely not want to abandon its traditional strategic alliance with the West but its growing tendency to venture out further is likely indicative of its longer-term ambitions and outlook. Either way, the acquisition of the S-400 adds to the increasingly strategic dimensions of a renewing Turkish-Russian partnership.

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Russian military leases in Syria potential regional game changer

Viewpoint



John C.K. Daly

Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed a law establishing two Russian military bases in Syria possibly until 2066.

The agreement between Moscow and Damascus provides for a Russian airbase in Hmeimim in Latakia province as well as formalises the Russian Navy's use of Syria's Tartus Mediterranean port for 49 years.

Hmeimim has been the key military element in Russia's Syrian operation since Moscow intervened in the conflict in September 2015, the result of which has been helping turn the tide in favour of embattled Syrian President Bashar Assad, one of Russia's closest Middle East allies.

Russia and Syria signed the original agreement in Damascus on January 18. The protocol said the agreement will be in force for 49 years and "automatically" be renewed for 25-year periods thereafter. Under its generous terms, the agreement grants Russia free use of the airfield and port.

The agreement formalises Russia's return as a diplomatic and military power in the Middle East, which many Arab governments

see as injecting an element of stability even as European Mediterranean countries and NATO, along with the United States, perceive it as a provocative foreign element adding uncertainty to an extremely volatile situation.

Beyond Syria, other Middle Eastern countries heartened by the development include Egypt and Iran, though for different reasons. Before a terrorist attack in 2015 in the Sinai Peninsula that brought down a Russian passenger jet, Egypt had been a leading vacation destination for Russian tourists. Egypt is a major export market for Russian wheat and armaments.

Russia and Iran also have significant relations; some of these, such as Russia's construction of Iran's sole operating nuclear power plant at Bushehr, have unsettled the international community. Both countries have sought to increase bilateral trade, especially considering that both are subjected to international sanctions.

As neighbours across the Caspian, Russia and Iran have had joint maritime exercises; the most recent ended July 15. In that drill, a detachment from Russia's Caspian Flotilla visited the Iranian port of Anzali, the fifth such visit in the past decade. For Iran, Russian diplomatic, economic and military cooperation presents a significant upgrade of its strength and an added asset in its existential struggle with Saudi Arabia across the Persian Gulf.

Russia's improvement in its regional relations extends to NATO's

easternmost member, Turkey. Despite various Western sanctions, Russia and Turkey are going ahead with Moscow building a natural gas pipeline under the Black Sea to help alleviate Ankara's chronic energy shortages.

Of greater interest to NATO is that Turkey and Russia are apparently concluding a contract for Ankara to purchase an S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, a development with the potential to unsettle the alliance, as all NATO military equipment must be interoperable between the various members.

Energy forms the basis for Russian relations with regional hydrocarbon superpower Saudi Arabia. To shore up sagging global oil prices, the world's top two oil exporters – Russia and Saudi Arabia – recently agreed to modest production cuts, Russia not being a member of OPEC and a direct Saudi rival in the global oil market.

Putin, interested in political stability, is less a fan of democracy than upholding Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes and protecting them from colour revolutions underwritten by Washington and Europe. Putin has viewed the seemingly endless political chaos and violence roiling the Middle East and concluded that strong-arm regimes there are preferable to the removal of central governments, as their downfall, as evidenced by Iraq and Libya, results in a political environment in which extremism and terrorism flourish, the latter an increasingly

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international threat.

For Putin, Syria has proven the crucible in which all these tendencies have emerged. This is the rationale behind Putin's military assistance to Assad. In Syria and neighbouring Iraq, a lawless battlefield has emerged where jihadists from around the world can acquire combat skills that they could utilise upon their return to their home countries, resulting in rising terrorist attacks as evidenced by incidents in Europe.

The Russian government has estimated that more than 5,000 Russian citizens are fighting in Syria and Iraq, mostly for the Islamic State (ISIS), and Putin has drawn the conclusion that it is better to battle them there than to wait for them to return home and produce carnage.

Above and beyond rising Western political concern about Russia deepening its footprint in the Middle East, interest in combating terrorism remains a common thread uniting the Middle East, Russia, Europe and the United States. The only question is whether Europe and the United States can overlook their political differences with Moscow to accomplish this common goal.

As Russian military forces will seemingly be stationed in the Middle East for the next 50 years, this is a question that Europe and the United States should consider sooner rather than later.

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