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Our Man in NATO: Why Putin Lucked Out With Recep Erdogan

Russia is on the verge of a resounding victory over NATO and the United States.

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Without firing a single shot, deploying a single tank or using a single internet troll, Moscow can soon destroy the unity of NATO by removing a key country from its military network.

What's more, Russia will receive $2.5 billion for its efforts and not a single new sanction.

This is a victory that was unimaginable only a few years ago.

I am talking, of course, about Turkish President Recep Erdogan's decision to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system.

The U.S. has tried to block the deal ever since Moscow and Ankara announced it in December 2017, initially claiming that the system was incompatible with NATO air defense systems. (It turns out, however, that NATO missiles can be fitted to the S-400.)

But Washington soon put forward its main argument — namely, that the S-400 is incompatible with the United States' newest fifth-generation F-35 fighter jet that should serve as the main aircraft of the NATO Air Force. That news triggered a "slow train wreck" in U.S.-Turkish relations.

Turkey and the U.S. are partners in an international consortium producing the aircraft, led by the F-35's developer, Lockheed Martin. The Turkish military-industrial complex manufactures components for the fighter — chassis parts, pilot cabin, airframe, and engine components.

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Turkey is meant to receive more than 100 F-35s by 2023 as replacements for its outdated F-16 aircraft. What's more, an F-35 engine maintenance center is being set up in Turkey to serve the European region.

Participation in the entire program with the U.S. would have brought the Turkish military-industrial complex $12 billion, more than offsetting the $9 billion - $10 billion price tag for Turkey's new batch of jets. The country has already invested $1.25 billion in the F-35 program.

For the U.S., Turkey's role in the production of the F-35 created a powerful ecosystem of influence on Ankara's policy and support for Washington's leadership in the Alliance. That honeymoon might soon be over.

The U.S. now is threatening to block Turkey's participation in the F-35 project and the delivery of its newest fighter jets (scheduled for late summer) if Ankara refuses to reverse its decision regarding the S-400. On April 1, Washington announced that it was suspending the shipment to Turkey of equipment necessary for operating the F-35 until Ankara confirmed that the S-400 deal was off.

United States Vice President Mike Pence sounded the final chord in the pressure campaign against Turkey.

"Turkey must choose," he said. "Does it want to remain a critical partner of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world? Or, does it want to risk the security of that partnership by making reckless decisions that undermine that alliance?"

U.S. senators have also threatened to impose sanctions against Turkey in accordance with the notorious CAATSA law, whose key provision requires the imposition of sanctions against countries that make substantial purchases of Russian weapons.

This would deliver a blow to Turkey's already unstable economy as it reels from Erdogan's policies.

The two countries are on a collision course, with both Washington and Erdogan determined to push ahead.

Related article: U.S. Halts F-35 Deal With Turkey, Protesting Its Plans to Buy From Russia

In a recent meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Turkish leader announced that delivery of the S-400 might be accelerated: his country has already made an advance payment and Russian technicians are already preparing sites for the weapon system in Turkey.

Why is Erdogan so bent on buying the S-400? Why does he continue challenging Washington by insisting that the purchase is a done deal — even threatening to purchase Russian Su-57 aircraft if the U.S. does not deliver the F-35s?

The reason is that Erdogan feels personally insulted by the U.S.

Washington neglected the security interests of its ally in Syria. First, it left Turkey to go it alone against Moscow, refusing to help when Russian forces defeated Turkish allies in Syria.

Next, the U.S. overruled Turkish objections and armed Syrian Kurds from the Syrian Democratic Forces, transferring to their control an important part of Syrian territory that borders Turkey.

Nor has it helped bilateral relations that the U.S. has refused to extradite the man Erdogen considers his main political opponent, Islamic scholar and preacher Fethullah Gulen, or that Turkey arrested U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson on espionage charges and held him in prison for two years before releasing him in October 2018.

Erdogan figured that if Washington were unwilling to take into account his interests as an ally, he would force them to do it by creating a real threat to the interests and security of the U.S.

On the one hand, the S-400 system was a "contribution" of sorts from Moscow to compensate for Turkey's defeat in Syria, and a "thank you" from Ankara for Russia's willingness to consider Turkish interests in its conflict with the Kurds.

On the other hand, it is a way to force Washington to accept Turkey's position on the Syrian conflict. Erdogan, however, miscalculated: the U.S. refused to hand Ankara a zone of control in Northern Syria and has linked delivery of the F-35s and possible sanctions to the S-400 deal — that had already progressed too far by then to cancel without losing face.

Moscow played its hand brilliantly, using Erdogan's distrust of Washington to "bait and hook him." Now Russia has only to reel him in.

Ankara's desire to buck NATO was a pleasant surprise for the Kremlin, and arguably a more significant foreign policy coup than saving the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"*Moscow played its hand brilliantly, using Erdogan's distrust of Washington to "bait and hook him."*"

What's more, Moscow did not have to do anything radical — simply toss a few coals into the smoldering fire of Erdogan's anger.

This, by the way, explains why Putin has been meeting so frequently with the Turkish leader. In its thinking and style, the Ankara regime is increasingly similar to the Kremlin, and ever more alienated from Washington.

If everything goes as planned, Turkey will de facto drop out of the military structures of NATO and will increasingly rely on military cooperation with Russia to ensure its security and interests in the region. However, Turkey will not completely leave NATO. Moreover, that is not what Moscow is angling for.

Moscow sees greater advantage in having Turkey play the "troublemaker" in NATO, serving as the one member willing to put in a good word for Russia and to ensure its security in the Black Sea.

Breaking up NATO from inside and walking away with $2.5 billion to boot — that's quite a priceless catch.

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