

GARRETT REIM LOS ANGELES

Opposition from the US Senate, House of Representatives and Department of State to the transfer of Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning IIs to Turkey is putting the latest delivery of the stealth fighter in jeopardy. That is despite the company having officially presented the fifth-generation aircraft to Turkish officials during a ceremony on 21 June in Fort Worth, Texas.

Should the US government actually block the F-35's transfer to Ankara, the process of untangling the NATO ally from the programme would be fraught and costly for the USA, Turkey and other customers, analysts say.

The number one objection from lawmakers and diplomats to Turkey receiving the F-35 is the nation's agreement with Russia to buy the Almaz-Antey S-400 Triumf system: one of the most advanced surface-to-air missile products on the export market, advertised by Rosoboronexport as having an "anti-stealth range" of up to 81nm (150km).

"We are sort of feeling our way along here. NATO has never had a government quite this bad in its midst," says Richard Aboulafia, vice-president of analysis with aerospace consultancy Teal Group. "This government is procuring Russian defence systems. At the same time it is procuring stealth fighters. Congress is right to raise concerns. This is a really bad mix of events."

Lawmakers and Department of State officials also complain about what they say is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decreasing respect for the rule of law, diminishment of individual freedoms, consolida-

# Lightning storm

Turkey's acquisition of a Russian anti-aircraft system has led US opponents to seek a block on F-35 sales to the country, bringing its participation in the programme into question

tion of power and strategic military decisions that are out of line with US interests.

Yet, despite this increasingly large gap between Turkey and the USA, a complete removal of Turkish companies from the F-35's supplier base would be costly and difficult. Ten different Turkish firms make parts for every F-35 manufactured. Turkey is also contracted, along with the Netherlands and Norway, to provide regional maintenance, repair, overhaul and upgrade capability for the F-35's Pratt & Whitney F135 engine in Europe.

## REPAYMENTS

The US government and Lockheed might also have to refund Turkey's contributions to the aircraft's development, as well as the down payments the country has made for its 14 ordered stealth fighters.

And then there are the optics of the situation. If the USA were to eject Turkey from the

F-35 programme, other nations may become reluctant to buy the aircraft should their politics fall out of favour with the administration in Washington DC.

"If another country's relations sour, then what?" says Dan Grazier, a military fellow with the Project on Government Oversight think tank. "All of them [partner nations] should look at this, because there is an issue of how dependent they are not just on the USA, but on Lockheed Martin."

Turkey became the seventh partner nation to join the Joint Strike Fighter programme in 2002, when it contributed \$175 million to the system development and demonstration (SDD) phase. The US fighter also secured commitments from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK.

As a partner in the programme, the Turkish air force gained insight into the aircraft's concepts and requirements definition, while

Ankara has committed to purchase 100 F-35As, with 30 due for delivery by 2022



US Air Force



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President Erdoğan's forging of closer ties with Russia stoked divisions with Washington DC

Turkish companies were brought in to the supply chain as subcontractors. For example, in co-ordination with Northrop Grumman, the centre fuselage manufacturer for the F-35, Turkish Aerospace Industries manufactures and assembles centre fuselages, produces composite skins and weapon bay doors, and fibre placement composite air inlet ducts.

Lockheed projects that the financial opportunities for Turkish companies to service and produce parts for the F-35 could reach \$12 billion over the lifetime of the programme.

Turkey has committed to buying 100 conventional take-off and landing F-35As. Its first batch of 14 are already purchased, and a total of 30 are scheduled for delivery by the end of 2022.

### LONGSTANDING RELATIONSHIP

In 2003, shortly after Turkey signed up to the F-35 programme, the country elected Erdoğan as its prime minister. His time at the top of Turkish politics was extended when he was elected president of Turkey in 2014 – a position renewed in June 2018.

While Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party has mild Islamist and authoritarian tendencies – out of line with the country's history of secularism and democracy – Turkey remained a reliable US ally throughout much of the F-35's SDD phase.

Divisions started to develop between Ankara and Washington DC in recent years, however. Erdoğan responded to a coup d'état attempt to overthrow his government in 2016 with mass arrests, firings of individuals perceived to be sympathetic to the coup plotters from government jobs, and restrictions on freedom of speech, among other alleged human rights abuses. He has also responded to the chaos in Iraq and Syria by forging closer ties with Russia.

Then, in December 2017, Turkey an-

nounced a deal – reportedly worth \$2.5 billion – to buy the S-400 air-defence system, which is designed to detect and shoot down stealth fighters such as the F-35. It also cannot communicate with NATO systems, potentially weakening the alliance's ability to share air-defence information.

"I think the nightmare scenario is a Russian defence system interacting with a stealth fighter," says Aboulafia, noting that the system could be used to find vulnerabilities in the F-35 – information which could be shared with Russia and its allies.

Erdoğan seemed to up the ante on 14 June, when he reportedly announced in an interview on Turkish 24 TV that he had reached out to Russian President Vladimir Putin with a proposal for Turkey and Russia to jointly produce the S-500 anti-aircraft missile system.

The antagonism caused a bipartisan group of US representatives to send a letter to US Secretary of Defense James Mattis the following day, asking him to block the F-35 deliveries. Three days later, the US Senate passed the 2019 National Defense Authorisation Act, with a clause that would confirm this step.

Department of State officials have also voiced their concerns.



Turkish Aerospace Industries

Turkish Aerospace Industries is a key partner

"We've been very clear that across the board, an acquisition of S-400 will inevitably affect the prospects for Turkish military-industrial co-operation with the USA, including F-35," Wess Mitchell, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said during a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee meeting on 26 June. "We work with them very closely in intelligence and in other areas, but this has the potential to spike the punch."

### TIGHT-LIPPED

For its part, the F-35's manufacturer has little to say about the dispute.

"As always, Lockheed Martin will comply with any official guidance from the United States government," the company says. "It would be inappropriate to comment on ongoing legislation, and premature to speculate on any impact to the programme."

The F-35 Joint Programme Office did not return a request for comment.

With Turkish-made parts in every F-35 manufactured, finding new suppliers could be costly and disruptive to the programme.

"It could take a year or longer to requalify alternative producers," Aboulafia says.

For that reason, even if there is any blockage of F-35 transfers to the Turkish air force, Ankara's defence industry might not be removed from the programme, he suggests. Aboulafia observes that Canada is a partner nation that has invested tens of millions of dollars into development of the stealth fighter and is now on the fence about buying the aircraft – but its companies have not been cut from the F-35's supplier base.

"The F-35 folks have always been pretty ambivalent about whether companies from non-customer countries can compete [for contracts]," Aboulafia says.

In fact, the US government may have time to work out a deal with Turkey, as the country is not expected to receive the new stealth fighter into its own airspace until 2020. Its first F-35A pilots began training on the jet at Luke AFB, Arizona at the end of June, while aircraft maintainers have already started their instruction at Eglin AFB, Florida.

The dispute between Turkey and the USA may rest in the hands of the US President Donald Trump – who, according to an unconfirmed claim by Turkey's foreign minister, has promised to ensure F-35 deliveries.

"If these are just voices in the wilderness in Congress and Trump is determined to stand by someone who is Islamist, but strangely to his liking, then yeah, you don't have to worry about this," says Aboulafia. "Congress isn't known for agility. Here you have the first plane about to be delivered. It's very difficult to stop. To use the overused F-35 metaphor: the train might be leaving the station." ■ ➤