

A hollow Triumph

Turkey has been an active participant in the Joint Strike Fighter programme since 2002, but Ankara appears willing to risk its acquisition of new aircraft through a stubborn insistence on also buying Russian surface-to-air missiles

Never say never. Sound advice, but probably not words that will be well received by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. His refusal to cancel Ankara's order for Almaz-Antey S-400 Triumph surface-to-air missiles creates the real possibility that his country will lose something even more valuable: participation in the Joint Strike Fighter programme.

If Erdogan thought the USA was not serious in its threats to kick Turkey – and its aerospace industry – off the Lockheed Martin F-35 programme, he has now received a shot across his bows. On 1 April, it became public that the Pentagon had halted the delivery of F-35 parts and manuals to Turkey.

The USA and its allies are rightly concerned that the presence of the S-400 in Turkey could expose the F-35's vulnerabilities – weaknesses that could then be exploited by Russia and other customers of the anti-aircraft system, such as China.

It boggles the mind why Turkey would want to weaken the defences of an aircraft it plans to buy in such abundance, as well as risking the \$12 billion its aerospace industry stands to gain from Ankara's status as an original development partner in the JSF, yet here we are.

By acquiring the S-400, Erdogan could gain a number of advantages: a defensive hedge against meddling Western powers; a cosier relationship with Russia; votes from the anti-American bloc at the ballot box and additional industrial know-how.

But the S-400 is more pain than gain. In

addition to losing the stealth fighter and associated high-tech manufacturing work, Ankara risks sanctions from the USA, which would be particularly painful, given the state of the Turkish economy, which slid into recession in the fourth quarter of 2018.

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Turkey's trusted role within NATO could also be jeopardised, leaving it not only without the F-35 but deprived of other Western weapons, as well as military intelligence. The country could also lose the protection of America's nuclear umbrella – a possibility already on the table after 2016's failed coup attempt.

Ultimately, the S-400 gamble is not worth it, and Erdogan probably knows that. The problem is that Turkey's stubborn refusals have gone on too loudly, for too long.

Erdogan put it another way in a television interview with Kanal 24. "It's done. There can never be a turning back," he said. "This would not be ethical, it would be immoral. Nobody should ask us to lick up what we spat." ■

Air-defence threat could bring down Turkish Lightnings

Pressure mounts on Ankara over S-400 purchase as USA suspends parts shipments and seeks alternative suppliers

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The US Department of Defense (DoD) has stopped the delivery of Lockheed Martin F-35 parts and manuals to Turkey, amid Ankara's continuing refusal to cancel an order for Russian-built air-defence equipment, and could remove Turkish industry from the type's supply chain.

Washington is concerned that Turkey's acquisition of Almaz-Antey S-400 Triumph long-range surface-to-air missile systems could expose vulnerabilities of the stealth aircraft which could be exploited by Russia. Moscow's Rosobornexport arms export agency claims the S-400 system has an "anti-stealth range" of up to 81nm (150km).

"The United States has been clear that Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 is unacceptable. There-

fore, the DoD has initiated steps necessary to ensure prudent programme planning and resiliency of the F-35 supply chain," the Pentagon says. "Secondary sources of supply for Turkish-produced parts are now in development," it adds.

"Our important dialogue on this matter will continue. However, until they forgo delivery of the S-400, the United States has suspended deliveries and activities associated with the stand-up of Turkey's F-35 operational capability. Should Turkey procure the S-400, their continued participation in the F-35 programme is at risk," the DoD warns.

Lockheed officially presented the first F-35As for Ankara during a roll-out ceremony at its Fort Worth final assembly site in

Texas last June. However, Turkey is not expected to receive the Lightning II in its own airspace until 2020, with its pilots having started training on the type at Luke AFB, Arizona and aircraft maintainers receiving instruction at Eglin AFB, Florida.

In a bid to entice Turkey into abandoning its procurement of the S-400, the USA has instead offered the latest version of Raytheon's Patriot air-defence system, but Ankara has refused to accept the proposal.

Removing Turkey from the F-35 programme would cause supply chain disruption, the DoD has previously warned. In coordination with Northrop Grum-

man, the fighter's main fuselage supplier, Turkish Aerospace manufactures and assembles centre fuselages, produces composite skins and weapon bay doors, and fibre placement composite air inlet ducts. A total of 10 Turkish companies provide parts for every F-35 manufactured.

Turkey's purchase plans for the F-35 total up to 100 conventional take-off and landing examples, the first 30 of which have been scheduled for delivery before the end of 2022.

Cirium's Fleets Analyzer records Ankara as having received two aircraft so far, with these used to support its training activities in the USA. ■