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Don't give Turkey an F-16 consolation prize

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At the November G20 meeting, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. President Joe Biden met to discuss ongoing tensions and Turkey potentially purchasing the F-16. Washington should be skeptical. The Turkish government has repeatedly ignored alliance commitments and used U.S. weapons sales against both U.S. and NATO interests, such as its provocations in the Mediterranean and aggressions against the Kurds. Selling Turkey advanced fighter aircraft, which it will then use without constraint, defeats the purpose of the G20 meeting.

The G20 talks focused on Washington's partnership with Kurdish forces in Syria and Turkey's 2019 purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems. Turkey described the purchase as a "necessity" due to the "intensive attacks" from Kurdish forces on the border, as Erdoğan has long maintained that U.S. support for the Kurds is "unacceptable" and goes against its NATO obligations. Ankara's frustration in Syria gave Russia a leg up on its competition.

In response, the U.S. sanctioned and booted Turkey from the F-35 program, stating that the coexistence of the two programs meant Russian President Vladimir Putin's military could receive tactical information on U.S. weaponry and military operations. The S-400 can track the F-16 and perhaps provide tactical information to Russia, an action Turkey engaged in during 2020. Nevertheless, Erdoğan continues to prod the Biden administration for the recovery of the \$1.4 billion that Turkey spent on its F-35 system. Recently, Erdoğan suggested a U.S. sale of F-16s as a way to meet this debt and continue to provide Turkey with NATO weaponry.

This is not unusual. Much of Turkey's military capability comes from U.S. weapons and training. Turkey's entire stock of air combat fleets and the majority of its battle tanks are composed of U.S.-supplied weaponry. Between 2019 and 2020, the U.S. gave Turkey nearly \$5 million for international military education and training.

Washington justified this beneficence under the guise of the interoperability that Turkey's NATO membership demands. In October 2021, a State Department representative noted that "the United States and Turkey have long-standing and deep bilateral defense ties, and Turkey's continued NATO interoperability remains a priority." This theory is not without merit. In 2019, Turkish forces composed the second-largest army assisting in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo.

A continued partnership with Turkey does more harm than good. For starters, Turkey's anti-Kurdish efforts are undermining American interests in the fight against ISIS. Turkey is using U.S.-supplied weapons to fight U.S.-supported Kurdish troops in Syria rather than ISIS, prolonging U.S. involvement in Syria. It is in the United States' best interest to prevent a further Turkish incursion against the Kurds, encourage a cease-fire in northeastern Syria and withdraw troops. An easy way to do this is by limiting weapons sales to the combatants, including Turkey.

Further, Turkey consistently ranks as one of the largest human rights offenders that receive U.S. weapons. U.S. defense officials have also previously claimed they believe Turkey is using American weapons to commit war crimes. A U.N. report of Turkey-led human rights abuses against civilians in Syria confirms this reality.

While one may argue that if the U.S. does not sell Turkey arms, Russia will, that is less possible in the case of Turkey and the F-16. The Turkish Defence Ministry recently found the Russian warplanes were technically insufficient and extremely costly because Ankara would need to adapt to the Russian systems.

Even if the U.S. ceases arms sales to Ankara, Turkey is not going to commit to wholly siding with Russia and risk alienating its European partners or losing the benefits of NATO membership. Erdoğan still supports Turkey's possible ascension into the European Union, declaring in an address to EU ambassadors in January 2021 that he was "ready to put our relations back on track" and that negotiations in 2021 "will be the harbinger of a new era."

It is clear that Erdoğan recognizes the benefits of playing both NATO and Russia off of each other. Regardless of whether Erdoğan has any intention of entering the process of EU accession, Turkey will continue to maximize its gains from both partnerships and avoid an overcommitment to either side.

The costs of further exacerbating tensions with Turkey are minimal. The benefits, though, are worth paying to avoid the strategic folly and human rights abuses that come from these sales. Turkey made its bed, flirting with both Russia and the West. Instead of rewarding Ankara's estrangement from NATO, the United States should allow Erdoğan to lie in it and end arms sales to Turkey.

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