

AN ALLY, A PARTNER AND AMERICAN UNILATERALISM: ON THE U.S. RESPONSE TO TURKEY'S S-400 DEAL WITH RUSSIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The decision by the United States to [terminate Turkey's participation in the F-35 joint strike fighter project](#) and its threat to impose economic sanctions on Ankara under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in response to the Turkish decision to buy Russian S-400 air defence systems has close parallels to the predicament facing India on the same issue. There are major differences in the two cases, but there are also remarkable similarities.

Turkey has been a long-standing member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and an integral part of the American-led alliance whose principal goal was and continues to be to prevent the expansion of Russian influence and power. It was also seen as the principal gateway for the projection of American power in West Asia, especially in Syria and Iraq, through the Incirlik airbase. The U.S. and other members of NATO are worried that a Russian military relationship with Turkey could provide Moscow access to the technological secrets underpinning NATO's most sophisticated weapon systems. In a statement, the White House said, "The F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform that will be used to learn about its advanced capabilities." Ankara has remained defiant and the first deliveries of components of the [S-400 systems arrived in Turkey earlier this month](#).

Turkey's decision to acquire the Russian systems emanated in part from the American refusal under the Barack Obama administration to sell it the Patriot anti-missile system that Ankara considered essential for its air defence in the context of the Syrian civil war. Turkey's forced ejection from the F-35 project now could also turn out to be counterproductive. Reports suggest that Turkey is planning to buy advanced Sukhoi fighter jets (the Su-35 and/or the Su-57) from Russia to compensate for the loss of the F-35 planes, thus further complicating the issue of NATO interoperability.

Although tensions in the relations between the U.S. and Turkey had become increasingly evident in the past couple of years, especially over the American support to the Syrian Kurdish force fighting the Islamic State, the YPG, which Turkey considers an extension of the secessionist PKK, Ankara and Washington are formal allies as members of NATO.

The Indian case is very different. While it is true that the U.S. now considers India a "strategic partner", principally because it views New Delhi as a counterweight to expanding Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region, India has never been a formal ally of Washington. From Jawaharlal Nehru's time New Delhi has attempted to maintain its strategic autonomy and indeed has had a close defence relationship with Russia, which continues to be India's largest arms supplier. Therefore, there is far less reason for the U.S. to take umbrage at India's decision to buy the S-400 air defence system.

However, the current American administration seems incapable of understanding these glaring differences between the two cases. In part this is the result of the fact that in 2017, the U.S. Congress passed CAATSA that makes it mandatory that the U.S. impose economic sanctions on countries engaging in significant business transactions with the Russian defence sector. [India's purchase of the S-400 falls squarely within this definition](#).

The threat of CAATSA sanctions comes at a very inopportune time for India as it has been considering major multi-billion dollar arms acquisition deals with the U.S. The U.S. is also India's largest trading partner and is intimately engaged in India's civil nuclear programme. While there is a provision for waivers in the CAATSA legislation, these are not automatic and are tied principally to Russian behaviour and therefore almost impossible to implement.

[The whole affair leaves India in a catch-22 situation](#). It cannot renege on the S-400 deal, which was signed on October 5, 2018, for deliveries to be made by April 2023, without alienating its largest and most reliable defence supplier. On the other hand, going ahead with the deal is likely to invite American economic sanctions and throw a wrench into India's developing strategic relationship with the U.S. On its part, the U.S. is caught in a bind because it cannot give a waiver to India while sanctioning its NATO ally Turkey for the same "crime".

The root of the problem lies in America's twin proclivities of acting unilaterally without regard to the interests of its international interlocutors and of enforcing provisions of pieces of its domestic legislation on foreign countries that have no say in the drafting of these laws and little recourse to appeals against them. It has done so in the case of sanctioning countries, including India and Turkey, importing Iranian oil regardless of their dependence on this source of supply or their traditional relations with Iran. Such unilateralism seems to have become an integral part of the current American administration's DNA.

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