The NATO Air Defense system deployment in Turkey — the last step before war with Syria?

Passions are still running high over the fighting in Syria, which has been going on without let-up for a year and a half. There are various scenarios for how the situation may play out, including the use of chemical weapons by the warring parties. It appears increasingly likely that NATO will get involved in Syria’s civil war. Turkey, which shares a border with Syria, is NATO’s front line in the Middle East. Its leaders have taken a number of steps that a country usually adopts in a period of threat, in other words when war is about to break out.

Recall that on October 4 Turkey’s parliament gave the government a one-year mandate for cross-border military operations into Syria. And Ankara is acting on that mandate. In addition to reinforcing its ground forces, Turkey has already managed to strengthen its air forces stationed near the border with Syria. Fifteen F-16 fighters had been moved from other parts of the country to the 2nd Tactical Air Force Command’s base in Diyarbakir. The total number of combat aircraft arrayed against Syria has increased to 55.

While stepping up its offensive capabilities, Turkey, which lacks its own missile defense system, requested that NATO deploy Patriot missile defense systems in the country. NATO has approved Ankara’s request: six antiaircraft batteries will be deployed on the Turkish-Syrian border — two each from the United States, Germany and the Netherlands.

Russia’s and Iran’s objections were no obstacle

Russia strongly opposed the deployment of Patriot missiles to Turkey. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that it “increases the risk of military conflict,” and evoked “Chekhov’s gun syndrome,” which says if a gun is shown on stage in the first act, it has to be fired in the third. NATO spurned Moscow’s objections. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called them “groundless,” and Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan said that his country’s plans to strengthen its security do not concern Russia. It is remarkable that Erdoğan made such a sharp remark just prior to President Vladimir Putin’s visit to Ankara.

Iranian political and military leaders objected strongly to NATO’s decision to deploy Patriot missiles in Turkey. Tehran expressed concern over the escalation of tensions in Syria, the worsening situation in the region and even preparations for a Third World War. But Ankara simply ignored them. The negative reaction by Iranian authorities came as no surprise to the Turkish government, which apparently is well aware that Iran will not risk losing Turkey as a trading partner. Given the international sanctions, its $15 million trade with Turkey is not on the table. Then too, Iran simply cannot ignore the fact that despite its affiliation to the Muslim world Turkey is a member of NATO. Ankara’s solid relationship with NATO has always been more important to it than good relations with Iran.

Two months from decision to deployment

All six batteries will become operational in late January 2013; of that there can be no doubt since implementation of the plan by NATO military leaders is on track. For example, 12 days after the NATO Council’s decision, i.e., on December 16, Germany’s parliament approved sending two of its Patriot batteries to Turkey, along with 400 personnel to service them. The mandate for the German mission is good until January 31, 2014. The air defense systems will be shipped from Germany by sea. The ships will be loaded and will depart between January 2 and 9, 2013. An advance party of German soldiers is already in Turkey to receive the systems. Colonel Marcus Ellermann,
who will command Germany’s component of NATO air defenses in Turkey, is convinced that his units will be combat ready by February 1.

The United States and the Netherlands also plan to have their batteries in the country by that time. The net result is that after making the decision on December 4, NATO will have the planned force of Patriot air defense missiles in Turkey by February 1, 2013.

**Who is the intended target?**

Let’s review some recent history. We know that Patriot missiles have been deployed in Turkey before — in 1991 and in 2003, during the first and second Iraqi wars. However, they were not used as intended. History is repeating itself: The deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey indicates that NATO military leaders have embraced large-scale military operations, in short, an actual major war, this time with Syria. In this scenario, Damascus could respond with air and missile strikes against targets in Turkey, which it is justified in seeing as one of the major players in NATO’s play to topple the Bashar Assad government.

Syria’s armed forces were built primarily to counter Israel, which has very effective air defenses, whereas Turkey, whose military has traditionally been oriented against the Soviet Union as part of NATO, has never had that kind of capability. It is no wonder that Turkey explains its request that NATO deploy Patriot missiles on its border with Syria as a need to defend against possible attacks by the Syrian military. The question is, why now? Damascus cannot believe there is a real likelihood of aggression by Damascus against Ankara. That leaves only one possibility — Syria will be forced to resort to attacks on Turkish territory in response to aggression against itself. I have to conclude that NATO has not ruled this scenario out and is urgently establishing an air defense capability that would allow it to “kill two birds with one stone.” The second bird would be Iran, which is also threatened by the Patriot deployment.

**Air defense missiles in Turkey signal preparations for aggression against Syria**

A new NATO Strategic Concept entitled “Active Engagement, Modern Defense” was approved at the Alliance’s summit in Lisbon (November 19-20, 2010) to replace the outdated 1999 concept. A special section of the Strategic Concept has the heading “Security through Crisis Management.” This section essentially justifies any intervention by NATO in crises and conflicts beyond NATO’s borders that “pose a direct threat to the security of Alliance territory and populations” — Turkey, in this instance.

It modestly calls the large-scale US and NATO military actions in Afghanistan and the Balkans “NATO operations,” and cites the lessons learned from them as evidence of effective crisis management, based on “a comprehensive political, civilian and military approach.” Given these “lessons learned,” the next stage in all probability will be to prepare NATO units to carry out special operations in Syria. The first reports concerning preparations by elite military units in France and the United States for a possible invasion of Syria have already appeared.

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