

Turkish selection of Chinese missile system angers US

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A man walks past the logo of the China Precision Machinery Import Export Corp (CPMIEC) at its headquarters in Beijing on Sept. 27. Turkey has chosen the defense firm, sanctioned by Washington, to co-produce a \$4 billion long-range air and missile defense system. (Photo: Reuters)

NATO member Turkey's selection of a Chinese missile system for its long-term, long-range missile and aerial defense program, code-named T-Loramids, has highly irritated and frustrated the US, which has been advising Ankara not to opt for a non-NATO missile system that it said would cause interoperability problems, Western defense industry sources based in Ankara told Today's Zaman.

"The US is very, very unhappy about Turkey's selection of China [as their provider]. US President Barack Obama has twice taken up the missile issue with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during their face-to-face meetings and reminded the Turkish prime minister about the interoperability problems that ... a non-NATO system will create," said a defense industry source in Ankara, quoting the US sources.

The result of the multi-billion dollar tender may further anger the US because state-run defense firm China Precision Machinery Import and Export Corp. (CPMIEC), which made the winning bid, has been sanctioned by Washington.

In February, the United States announced sanctions on CPMIEC for violations of the Iran, North Korea and Syria Nonproliferation Act, Reuters reported on Sept. 26.

Turkey has decided to start contract negotiations with CPMIEC in its six-year project to acquire long-range missile and air defense systems.

"It has been decided to start contract talks with China's CPMIEC for the joint production of the missiles and their systems in Turkey," said a statement released after a four-hour meeting on Sept. 26 of the Executive Committee (EC) of the Turkish Undersecretariat for the Defense Industry (SSM). The EC, chaired by the prime minister, includes the defense minister and the chief of the general staff.

Officials made no announcement to the press after the meeting apart from releasing a statement about the EC's decisions. However, local industry sources told Today's Zaman that the Chinese offer to co-produce the missiles with Turkey involved high-technology transfer to the Turkish defense industry, which played a role in Turkey's choice.

The systems competing in the T-Loramids surface-to-air missile (SAM) acquisition project were the Chinese HQ-9, the US Patriot, Europe's Aster 30 SAMP/T and the Russian S-300.

The tender envisioned the acquisition of 12 missile firing units for a cost of around \$4 billion. But China priced their bid at about \$3 billion, the sources said.

The project is intended to bridge Turkey's gap in missile defense. Turkey opened a contract in March 2007 for the acquisition of long-range missiles, at the time citing, though implicitly, an effort to deter a possible threat from neighboring Iran.

Why China?

Local defense industry sources close to the industry told Today's Zaman that CPMIEC's bid included a huge investment to build a technology park next to Turkey's Sabiha Gökçen International Airport on the Anatolian side of İstanbul. This was one of the demands Turkey made to bidding companies -- and China met it, according to the sources.

Erdoğan is known for his policy of building everything in Turkey, including weapons, a defense industry source said.

“China reduced the price of its T-Loramids bid to about \$3 billion, while other three bidders were slightly over \$4 billion. Erdoğan must have calculated that he could pay Turkish engineers to do some of the work in developing the missiles with the extra \$1 billion that will be saved with the Chinese offer,” the sources said.

Analysts say Erdoğan was also making a political point to his European and NATO partners by choosing China for the long-range missile project -- that Turkey is dependent neither on Europe nor the US and can get what it needs in the East.

In fact, Turkey has a close defense relationship with South Korea. Seoul has been giving technical support to Ankara on its ambitious and controversial project of building its own fighter jet by 2023.

The US has good relations with South Korea, however.

Disappointing widespread expectations, Turkey did not finalize the six-year-old T-Loramids project tender at an EC meeting in January this year. Local and foreign defense industry sources told Today's Zaman at the time that at the meeting, Erdoğan used his influence to abandon the purchase of 12 SAM systems in favor of the development of an advanced SAM system between Turkey and one of the bidding companies.

US is upset at the moment

According to Western military officials in Ankara, Turkey choosing China has upset the US.

“But in the long term, it is not expected to affect overall relations between Turkey and the US, two close NATO allies, very badly. But there will be some concerns on the part of the US government as well as NATO regarding having the Chinese around the Turkish defense industry, which the US has been intensely involved in,” the sources said, citing Turkey's participation in the US' F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program.

In the long run, Turkey will pay the price in isolation, since NATO will not integrate Turkey's Chinese long-range missile systems with its own.

“This is the price Turkey will pay for choosing Chinese missile systems,” said a Western defense industry source in Ankara.

In the meantime, Turkey is seeking to keep NATO Patriot missiles deployed here to thwart ballistic missile threats from Syria for another year. The deployment ends in October. It remains to be seen how NATO -- and the US in particular -- will react to a Turkish request to keep the missiles on Turkish soil after the country chose China for its long-range missile defense project.

There have been speculations in Ankara that Erdoğan might have in mind enabling the transfer of NATO Patriots in the form of a grant to Turkey.

In the final analysis, Turkey's decision to co-develop high-tech missile systems with China to strengthen its relatively weak defense industry infrastructure will be more beneficial than buying these costly systems off the shelf from other bidders.