

US Senate Bans Sale of F-35s to Turkey: Dealing with an Unreliable Partner

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On June 19, the Senate passed a draft [defense bill for FY 2019](#) that would halt the transfer of F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) aircraft to Turkey, until the secretary of state certifies that Turkey will not accept deliveries of Russian S-400 Triumf air-defense systems. It paves the way for Ankara's expulsion from the program if it does not bow to this pressure. The support for the measure (85-10) is too strong to be overridden.

Turkey has been one of six [major partner nations](#) in the JSF project since 2002. It is responsible for the [production of certain components](#) and for providing [maintenance services](#) in Europe to other operators of the aircraft. About a dozen Turkish companies are involved in the manufacturing, in accordance with the deal that was reached 16 years ago (2002). Ankara has [placed an order](#) to buy more than 100 F-35A Lightning IIs. It has already paid \$800 million, so any restrictions that are imposed now will be an illegal breach of obligations by the US.

On June 21, the Senate Appropriations Committee added an amendment to the foreign-aid bill that would put a stop to future deliveries, if Ankara does not cancel the S-400 deal already [concluded](#) with Moscow. One of the arguments for blocking the F-35 transfer is the fear that Russia would get access to the JSF, enabling Moscow to detect and exploit its vulnerabilities. It would learn how the S-400 could take out an F-35.

Turkey and Russia signed the S-400 accord in December, finalizing a deal which deepened military ties between NATO member Turkey and the Kremlin.

The deal, reportedly worth some \$2.5 billion, has worried the West because the system cannot be integrated into NATO's military architecture.

“We brought forward the delivery date in the accord signed with Russia to provide the S-400 system and got a date of July 2019,” Turkish Undersecretary for Defence Industries Ismail Demir wrote on Twitter overnight.

His comment came after the two countries' presidents held talks on Tuesday and marked the official start of work to build Turkey's \$20 billion first nuclear power station at Akkuyu on its Mediterranean coast.

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The House version contains even more [limits](#) on arms transfers to Turkey. In May, the bill passed the House with a provision mandating a temporary hold on all major defense sales to Turkey, including F-35s, due in part to its impending purchase of the S-400. Almaz-Antey, the company that manufactures the Triumph, is on a State Department [list](#) of banned entities. Any deal with that firm could result in sanctions. **Rep. John Sarbanes** (D-Md.) has introduced [an amendment](#) to the FY 2019 Defense Appropriations bill ([H.R. 6157](#)) that would bar the planned transfer of the aircraft to Turkey. So, there may be some changes to the wording but that won't significantly alter the final result — the F-35 transfer will remain blocked after the reconciliation process.

The bill is expected to become law this summer. The administration will have no choice but to exclude Turkey from the F-35 program, to remove any parts of the plane produced in that country, and to ban the Turkish F-35s from leaving the territory of the United States.

Despite the proceedings on Capitol Hill, officials from the government and Lockheed Martin held a ceremony on June 21 in Fort Worth, Texas, to mark the “roll out” of the first F-35A Lightning II jet under its Turkish program. It was an imposing [ceremony](#), but it disguised some sleight of hand. The US government will retain custody of the aircraft while the Turkish pilots and service technicians are undergoing training at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona. This is a long process that will take several years, but the bill will become law soon. Turkey may be denied access to the cloud-based [Autonomic Logistics Information System](#) (ALIS) computer network, depriving it of [software updates](#) and [other data](#). The US could insert some malicious code to disable the aircraft even if they are transferred and based in Turkey in 2020 as planned.

US officials don't shy away from open [statements](#) about their intentions to exert pressure and prevent other countries from [buying Russian weapons](#).

“I would work with our allies to dissuade them, or encourage them, to avoid military purchases that would be potentially sanctionable,” said **David Schenker**, the nominee for assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, at his Senate confirmation hearing on June 14. “In other words, I would tell Saudi Arabia not to do it,” he explained.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are in talks with Moscow to buy the S-400.

[According to](#) UAWire, The US State Department’s Office of Cooperative Threat Reduction [has announced a tender](#) for the monitoring of open-source information about arms deals involving the Russian Federation and the CIS countries. That data will be collected in Russian, English, Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Urdu, and several other languages. The information will be used for decision-making and planning sanctions against foreign states.

So far, the [policy of twisting arms](#) has failed. Demand for Russian arms is booming in the [Middle East](#) and [Africa](#). Just a few days ago, one of Iraq’s armored brigades [swapped out](#) its American-made [M1 Abrams tanks](#) for new Russian T-90s. Last year, Russia and Iraq signed a [huge arms deal](#).

Unfazed by the US lawmakers’ stance, Ankara remains all set to go ahead with the purchase of the S-400 from Moscow. If the deal is blocked it will find an alternative, such as Russia’s [Su-57](#) jet, or Turkey could produce an aircraft of its own, as part of its indigenous [TFX stealth fighter program](#).

India has recently been [warned](#) against buying the Russian S-400. If it does, a [ban](#) will be put in place on sharing sensitive American military technology with Delhi, which is refusing to back down under pressure.

A deal is not always what one may think it is. A deal signed with the US is a special case because there are strings attached, which cannot be found in the text and are not mentioned during the negotiations. All of a sudden a partner finds out that there is a caveat that goes without saying. One may sign a deal and be naive enough to take it at face value, only to find out later that it will not be valid if certain unwritten conditions are not met. If you cooperate with another country without US approval, like Turkey does, you don’t get what you are entitled to under the terms of that agreement. Buy American, they say, but if you make a deal with Russia, like India wants to do, the access to the best technology the US has is going to be cut off.

Congress has offered a lesson to those who cooperate with America. They should remember that whatever they may sign with Washington cannot be taken for granted. US lawmakers can change everything to their heart’s content at any time they wish. There is nothing worse than an unreliable partner. And that’s what America is.

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