



The intersection of arms deals and migration in German-Turkish relations

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS *

This past weekend, the political magazine Der Spiegel, known (and dreaded by some) for its exclusive insights, reported that the German government has approved large-scale arms deals with Turkey for the first time in years. These deals include the delivery of 100 guided missiles for ship air defense, 28 SeaHake torpedoes, and packages for the modernization of German-made Turkish submarines. According to the magazine, the total value of the deal is 336 million euros. Der Spiegel describes this as a “remarkable shift” in Germany’s policy towards Turkey.

The publication of this sensitive information comes at a particularly active time in German-Turkish relations. Next weekend, Chancellor Olaf Scholz will travel to Istanbul for political talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The two leaders recently met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, where Erdogan ambiguously stated, “Turkey is prepared to take steps that will benefit both sides.” This phrasing suggests the possibility of a political trade-off. Such negotiations are a hallmark of Turkish foreign policy – a tactic President Erdogan often relishes employing.

In Germany, few issues dominate politics as much as migration. The political consensus is that Turkey is a crucial – if not the most important – strategic partner in controlling illegal migration. This was already true a decade ago when the EU’s agreement with Turkey helped stem the mass influx of Syrian refugees into Europe. In light of the new conflict in the Middle East, the situation remains unchanged. Hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals are now looking toward Europe for safety.

Berlin is eager to renew the agreement with Ankara, with the strategic aim of ensuring Turkey keeps any new refugee flows from reaching Europe. In exchange, Turkey seeks assistance in modernizing its outdated air force, a task for which it relies on support from Western nations.

Ankara has long expressed interest in acquiring the European Eurofighter jet, an ultra-modern aircraft manufactured by a consortium of companies from England, Spain, Italy and Germany. While all other



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (right) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attend a press conference at the Chancellery in Berlin, November last year. Next weekend, Scholz will travel to Istanbul for political talks with Erdogan.

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nations in the consortium have approved the sale, Germany has hesitated. However, Turkish sources now report that Berlin has given the green light for the Eurofighter’s delivery to Turkey, and technical negotiations have reportedly begun.

These developments regarding the Eurofighter come as speculation mounts about Turkey’s possible return to the US F-35 program. The fifth-generation aircraft should have been operational in Turkey years ago, but the project came to an abrupt halt in 2019 when Erdogan, without consulting the Americans, ordered the Russian S-400 defense system from Moscow, raising concerns in Washington about potential espionage risks to the advanced jets.

Moscow has since delivered the S-400 system to Ankara, but Erdogan has not yet activated it, fearing further US sanctions. The Russian S-400 system remains a major point of contention in US-Turkish relations. For Vladimir Putin, the system serves as a wedge within NATO, while for Erdogan, the billion-euro investment has so far been a military deadweight.

With the US elections just weeks away, the S-400 issue – and the potential resumption of F-35 deliveries to Turkey – has come under the spotlight. Reports suggest Washington has proposed storing the Russian missiles at Incirlik Air Base, in a section controlled by the Americans. In return, Turkey could immediately rejoin the F-35 program.

No official Turkish response has been reported yet. Erdogan’s acceptance of this offer would severely strain Ankara’s relations with Moscow, marking a setback for his multidimensional foreign policy, which seeks to maintain balanced ties with both Washington and Moscow.

Erdogan, however, is not one to be without alternatives. The Eurofighter is an excellent substitute for the politically costly F-35. It is likely Erdogan will apply pressure on Scholz to fully abandon any remaining opposition to the aircraft’s delivery – if he hasn’t already.

Before his meeting with Erdogan in Istanbul, Chancellor Scholz will meet Greek Prime Minister Kyrriakos Mitsotakis in Brussels this week. It would be unsurprising if Mitsotakis reiterates Greece’s long-standing concerns over German arms sales to Turkey, while warning of potential damage to German-Greek relations.

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