

# F-35 Crisis between the U.S. and Türkiye: Is This the End of American Nuclear Assurance for Türkiye?

ŞAFAK OĞUZ

Cappadocia University, Türkiye  
ORCID No: 0000-0001-6758-175X

**ABSTRACT** *This article analyzes the possible consequences of the F-35 fighter crisis between the U.S. and Türkiye, particularly in terms of its effect on the tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) now deployed in Türkiye as part of NATO's nuclear sharing program. It argues that the U.S. should respond to Ankara's demands by either allowing Türkiye to rejoin the F-35 fighter project or by selling new F-16 fighters and modernization kits to Türkiye that will permit its continued deployment of TNWs. This move would, in turn, prevent the 'brain death' of the alliance; otherwise, negative attitudes emanating from the U.S. may lead Türkiye to search for alternative suppliers, a move that could include buying fighter aircraft from Russia or China and might lead Türkiye to question its membership in NATO. Anything that causes Türkiye to do this is a problem in the current security environment since competition between NATO and Russia has reached dangerous levels with the Russian invasion of Ukraine under the shadow of the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.*

**Keywords:** F-35, Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Sharing, Dual Capability Aircraft (DCA), Nuclear Assurance

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## Introduction

**E**uropeans have often been suspicious of American intentions, but nuclear weapons have long been one of the most important tools, and perhaps the most important one, by which the U.S. prevented a possible Soviet conventional or nuclear attack in Europe during the Cold War. Europe's hesitations proved prescient when the U.S. urged its NATO allies to replace a 'massive retaliation' strategy with a 'flexible response' after Americans realized, with the launch of Sputnik in 1957, that the Soviet Union was able to strike U.S. territory.

The willingness of Americans to use strategic and tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet Union or Russian attack has been vague since NATO's earliest days and especially after the endorsement of a flexible response strategy. European allies, however, preferred to rely on the American nuclear umbrella within NATO to deter a possible Soviet threat because that has been the best, lowest cost, and most reliable security strategy. In addition to the strategic nuclear weapons (SNWs) located on American territory, the U.S. also deployed tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Europe, including in Türkiye, during the Cold War, although command and control of these weapons and the procedures under which they would be used remained vague.

The end of the Cold War opened a new era of cooperation between the

U.S. and Russia on non-proliferation, nuclear arms limitations, and nuclear arms reductions. Both sides agreed to reduce TNWs, which are not covered by any treaty, right after the end of the Cold War in the wake of discussions about the value and efficiency of these weapons in the new post-Cold War security environment.

Based on the paradigms of the new security environment, the U.S. has withdrawn most of its TNWs in Europe, except nuclear gravity bombs designed to be used by special fighters such as the F-4, F-100, F-104, or F-16 series, which are also known as dual capability aircraft (DCA). For now, the U.S. has gravity bombs in Europe deployed at military bases in Türkiye, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy. These host states use different versions of fighters as DCA, but they are also modernizing or procuring new fighters compatible with modernized B61 gravity bombs.

F-35 Lightning II, the fifth-generation fighter produced by the U.S.-led consortium that is funded by several NATO members, including Türkiye, is planned to be the default DCA for B61 gravity bombs in Europe. Allies that host U.S.' nuclear weapons have planned to procure F-35 fighters in different ways.

However, recent crises between Türkiye and the U.S. have changed these plans. The U.S. decided to remove Türkiye from the F-35 program and canceled delivery of the F-35 fighters

Türkiye had paid for because of Türkiye's S-400 procurement from Russia. Although this has not been part of any discussions in Türkiye or the international community, the F-35 crisis between the U.S. and Türkiye also has a nuclear dimension.

Türkiye recently asked the U.S. to either allow it to rejoin the F-35 program or to sell it new F-16 fighters and modernization kits that will allow it to restore the efficiency of its air force, which urgently and desperately needs new-generation fighters. The U.S. response might be a crucial factor for NATO-Türkiye relations as well as for the solidarity and cohesion of the alliance. A negative American response to Türkiye's request may force Türkiye to consider asking Russia or China for new-generation fighters – an act that might trigger another crisis in the alliance. Such a step might result in the withdrawal of the U.S.' tactical nuclear weapons, which would urge the alliance to reconsider its nuclear deterrence policies, including its nuclear posture amid the Russian-Ukrainian crisis.

### **U.S.' Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe and Recent Modernization Program**

There has not been any unique description of TNWs, which are also known as sub-strategic, non-strategic, or theater nuclear weapons. They are defined largely by exclusion and are set apart from SNWs, which include intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), sea-launched ballistic

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missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers.<sup>1</sup> They have not been part of any treaty or agreement in the Cold War or post-Cold War era and are commonly defined as 'not an SNW'. These weapons are mainly associated with lower yields and a shorter-range effect compared to the SNWs. However, it is worth noting, as highlighted by Sauer and Zwaan, that this definition might be misleading since most TNWs are more destructive than the Hiroshima bomb, which is why range-of-delivery vehicles for TNWs provide a better criterion.<sup>2</sup>

As with SNWs, the Cold War witnessed a massive TNWs arms race in which both the U.S. and the Soviet Union produced enormous nuclear forces. Nuclear weapons became the main game changer on the battlefield, and nuclear deterrence shaped international policy during the Cold War. As Burns and Siracusa pointed out, "If nuclear weapons changed the nature of modern war, their political ramifications were even greater."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to their strategic nuclear capabilities, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union deployed lower-yield

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and shorter-range TNWs to allied territories for use on the battlefield for limited or tactical objectives. The U.S. deployed TNWs in eight NATO countries between 1954 and 1963, a process that started with the arrival of the first TNWs in Britain in September 1954.<sup>4</sup> The number of TNWs deployed to Europe rose to almost 3,000 by 1960, doubled to 6,000 by 1965, and peaked in 1971 at approximately 7,300.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. and NATO doctrines on TNWs in Europe during the Cold War were, in part, based on the controversial notion that these weapons served as a rung on the escalation ladder – lending them, in effect, a deterrent role – and TNWs was a guarantee of the U.S. commitment to Europe.<sup>6</sup> They reduced the financial burden of stationing troops and expanded the U.S. ability to respond quickly to an enemy attack before ICBMs and nuclear-armed submarines became the backbone of the U.S. arsenal.<sup>7</sup>

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concluded crucial treaties regarding nuclear weapons and missile defense systems, but TNWs have never been part of any official discussion or treaty. Right after the Cold War, both sides, along with host states, started questioning the importance and value of TNWs deployed in Europe as well as other parts of the world, while the international community mainly focused on the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), especially those of the former Soviet Union. Rather than any treaty, the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiative (PNI) concluded when U.S. President George Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin established unilateral/reciprocal measures that allowed fast and drastic reductions without a formal arms control agreement and therefore without verification, and resulted in the removal of only half of the deployed TNWs.<sup>8</sup> However, as pointed out both in the U.S. Nuclear Review Strategy and NATO's 1991 Strategic Document, remaining TNWs deployed in Europe were regarded as the backbone of America's extended assurance to its European allies.

In the new security environment, the U.S. decided to reduce the number of deployed TNWs in Europe and keep only B61 gravity bombs for the use of DCA. Thus, starting in 1991, the U.S. reduced European-deployed TNWs from 1,500 to roughly 200 by 2007, including the removal of all TNWs from the UK and Greece. According to a fact sheet prepared by the U.S. government, the number of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons

has declined by more than 90 percent since September 30, 1991.<sup>9</sup>

The exact number of TNWs in Europe is still not clear, but most people believe that 150 nuclear weapons are deployed in six military bases in five countries: Türkiye, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. A copy of a draft report prepared by NATO called “A New Era for Nuclear Deterrence? Modernization, Arms Control, and Allied Nuclear Forces,” published by a Belgian newspaper that received a copy from a Belgian politician, verified that 150 weapons are located in these states. The report stated that 50 of these weapons are deployed at the İncirlik base in Türkiye.<sup>10</sup> The existence of 50 weapons in Türkiye was also tacitly acknowledged by President Donald Trump in 2019.<sup>11</sup>

NATO has been revising its nuclear posture in the post-Cold War era based on the changing security environment. Despite massive reductions in the numbers of TNWs and reduced reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO’s strategy, the alliance underlined that “as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance” and it will “ensure the broadest possible participation of allies in collective defense planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and command, control and consultation arrangements.”<sup>12</sup> Decreasing hostilities with Russia in the 2000s however increased public sentiment in Europe against U.S. nuclear weapons. The 2010 Strategic Concept was

endorsed after heated discussions in host states about the role and necessity of TNWs in Europe, especially in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Many politicians and scholars urged their governments to get rid of U.S. nuclear weapons in their countries, describing them as “relics of the Cold War.”<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that U.S.’ nuclear weapons in Türkiye have not been a hot topic during and after the Cold War in Türkiye. Despite calls by some scholars for the withdrawal of these weapons in the early 2000s, there has not been any official statement or comment about it because Turkish authorities usually tended to support keeping these weapons, especially for their political value.<sup>14</sup> A few scholars, such as Mustafa Kibaroğlu, advised Turkish politicians to reconsider the status of long-time hosting of these weapons underlining that a possible removal from other European states should be assessed especially in the context of “burden sharing” and “solidarity.”<sup>15</sup>

The B61 series weapons are tactical gravity nuclear weapons that can be used on DCA such as F-4, F-15, F-16, F-100, F-104, or Tornado fighters. The B61 bomb has the distinction of being the sole remaining U.S. nuclear weapon deployed outside U.S. borders (apart from missile warheads on patrolling nuclear submarines).<sup>16</sup> The U.S. announced a modernization program for gravity bombs deployed in Türkiye, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy as well as on the American mainland that started in



Türkiye, which was excluded from the F-35 program, decided to produce its own National Combat Aircraft (MMU), known as TF-X. TUSAŞ / AA

the 2012 fiscal year. The U.S. embarked on the B61-12 Life Extension Program (LEP) that will refurbish, reuse, or replace all of its nuclear and non-nuclear components to extend their service life by at least 20 years.<sup>17</sup> A modernization program that includes a better guidance system will improve the accuracy and targeting capability of these weapons. The U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) completed the B61-12 LEP First Production Unit (FPU) on November 23, 2021, and anticipates starting full-scale production in May 2022 and completing all needed products in the 2026 fiscal year.<sup>18</sup> There has not been concrete news regarding if the U.S. started full production in May, but there has been news in the media that the U.S. plans to accelerate the delivery of the upgraded nuclear bombs to Europe amid escalating

tensions with Russia. The report also alleged that the U.S. plans to deploy TNWs in the UK, which was a host nation until late 2000.<sup>19</sup>

The F-35 fighters that will replace existing dual-capable fighters for use of these new generation bombs have become the key component of the modernized TNWs for both the U.S. Air Force and NATO states that host TNWs. As indicated in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review of 2018, "The U.S. is incorporating nuclear capability onto the F-35, to be used by the U.S. and NATO allies, as a replacement for the current aging DCA. Improved DCA readiness and the arrival of the F-35, a "fifth generation aircraft," in conjunction with the ongoing B61-12 gravity bomb LEP, will preserve the DCA contribution to regional deterrence stability and assurance."<sup>20</sup>

Türkiye, the Netherlands, and Italy have emerged as the main partners of the U.S.-led F-35 effort with a massive procurement program, while Belgium is only a customer. Germany, at first, announced plans to buy Eurofighter Typhoon fighters to replace aging dual-capable Tornados. However, Germany decided to buy 35 F-35 fighters worth \$8.4 billion and the U.S. administration approved the sale.<sup>21</sup> Thus, based on the current situation, Türkiye will be the only host state in Europe that has not F-35 fighters.

Official documents and statements by U.S. officials indicate that F-35 fighters and modernized B61-12 gravity bombs will become the main components of U.S. TNWs deployed in Europe and the main U.S. nuclear assurance for European allies. When their increased accuracy and stand-off capability are mated with the stealthy F-35A fighter bomber, the B61-12 will represent a considerable enhancement of NATO's nuclear posture in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

Modernization of B61-12 gravity bombs and their incorporation into F-35 systems continues as planned. Two F-35A Lightning II aircraft released B61-12 Joint Test Assemblies, or JTAs, during the F-35A's first full weapons-system demonstration, completing the final flight test exercise of the nuclear design certification process in October 2021.<sup>23</sup> Nuclear design certification has been the first phase of the nuclear certification of F-35 fighters. Based on the analysis of test data and nuclear operational certification tests, the second phase

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of nuclear certification will be held in the coming years.

### **Türkiye's Fighter Program and TNWs**

Türkiye's nuclear weapons adventure started with the deployment of 15 Jupiter missiles at the Çiğli military base in İzmir in 1961. The U.S. withdrew these missiles as part of a secret deal with the Soviet Union during the Cuban crisis, and their failure to inform Turkish authorities of this act is regarded as one of the first major crises between Türkiye and the U.S., even though the Kennedy Administration replaced Jupiter missiles with B61 gravity bombs.<sup>24</sup> Thus, beginning in the early 1960s, nuclear weapons under U.S. Air Force custody that could be delivered by F-100, F-104, and F-4 aircraft were deployed in air bases in Eskişehir, Malatya (Erhac), Ankara (Murted), and Balıkesir.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. also deployed additional nuclear weapons in Türkiye, including nuclear artillery or rockets.

As was the case with most European states, the U.S. gradually withdrew its

## Türkiye's cooperation with Russia on several issues, and especially Türkiye's decision to procure S-400 air defense systems, however, has worsened relations between the U.S. and Türkiye as well as NATO and Türkiye

nuclear weapons from Türkiye starting toward the end of the Cold War. Based on the Presidential Nuclear Initiative of 1991-1992, the U.S. reduced most of the TNWs deployed in Türkiye in the post-Cold War era and left only B61 gravity bombs that would be delivered by U.S. and Turkish DCAs, namely F-4 and F-16 fighters.

There have been conflicting reports about Türkiye's current nuclear posture. Norris and Kristensen argue that there are 60-70 B61 gravity bombs in Türkiye at the İncirlik air base and most of these weapons (approximately 50) are for delivery by U.S. aircraft, although no fighter wing is based in Türkiye. The rest of these weapons are earmarked for delivery by Turkish F-16A/Bs.<sup>26</sup> Cohen alleges that the nuclear facility at İncirlik is more a storage site than a fighter-bomber base,<sup>27</sup> which is not the case for other European host states. This belief is also endorsed by some Turkish officials. As Kibaroğlu noted in his interview with Gen. Ergin Celasin (ret.), a former commander of the Turkish Air Force

(TUAF), the Turkish Armed Force's (TAF) role in NATO's nuclear contingency plans came to an end with the withdrawal of nuclear weapons in the 1990s from the Air Force units that were deployed in several air bases in Türkiye. This implies that during the Cold War, Türkiye had a nuclear mission under NATO with dual-key arrangements, but that mission has since ended.<sup>28</sup> However, there has not been any official report or statement by any high-ranking official verifying these allegations. Türkiye regularly attends NATO's Steadfast Noon exercise that ensures the alliance's nuclear deterrence. The participation of three Turkish F-16s in the 2022 exercises held in Belgium amid the Russian-Ukrainian crisis underlines Türkiye's role in the alliance's nuclear capabilities.

As noted by U.S. official documents, the modernization of B61 gravity bombs is directly linked to the F-35 fighter program. However, it does not require that B61 host nations be a part of the F-35 program. Only, three of the five host nations –Türkiye, Italy, and the Netherlands– have been part of the F-35 program since its beginning.

Türkiye was a Level III partner of the F-35 Lightning II program (which has four different levels), meaning it invested an initial \$125 million in it. This investment gives Türkiye a program office staff member in the F-35 office but also means that Türkiye has no direct vote on the F-35's basic engineering and mission requirements. Ankara has invested \$1.25 billion in

the program since 2002, and Türkiye manufactures several key components of the F-35.<sup>29</sup>

Türkiye has planned on procuring 100 F-35 by 2025 with an option to buy 16 extra fighters. Norris and Kristensen argue that, according to Pentagon sources, Türkiye currently uses its F-16s to execute its nuclear mission. Moreover, until Türkiye acquires a sufficient number of nuclear-capable JSFs, its F-16s are scheduled to receive a “stop-gap” upgrade to make them capable of carrying the new B61-12 bomb that will replace the B61-3/4.<sup>30</sup>

As of the beginning of 2023, the Turkish Air Force had 20 F-4 and 225 F-16 fighters in active use. After the procurement of F-35 fighters, F-4 fighters that entered service in the early 1970s were planned to be retired by 2020 because of a high number of accidents.<sup>31</sup> Thus, beginning in 2020, the Turkish Air Force planned to have a mix of F-35 and modernized F-16 fighters in service. The loss of most of the F-16 fighter pilots after the failed military coup in 2016, however, led Turkish authorities to postpone the removal plans of F-4 fighters from the service.

Türkiye, on the other hand, has several different versions (Block-30, Block-40, Block-50, and Block-50+) of F-16 fighters in active use by its air force. Türkiye has modernization capabilities for F-16 fighters, but most of its fighters will retire by 2030 even if modernization plans succeed.<sup>32</sup> Türkiye has been planning for a gradual retirement process for F-16 fighters

as it deployed F-35 fighters. However, relations between the U.S. and Türkiye have since sunk into a deep crisis, especially since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. Despite Türkiye’s strong objections, massive American support to PYD terror organizations, a Syrian affiliate of the PKK terror organization, under the name of the so-called fight against ISIS, has deepened the crisis between the two allies. Türkiye’s cooperation with Russia on several issues, and especially Türkiye’s decision to procure S-400 air defense systems, however, has worsened relations between the U.S. and Türkiye as well as NATO and Türkiye. The U.S. excluded Türkiye from its F-35 program, canceled the F-35 sale, and even refused to deliver the F-35 fighters Türkiye has already paid \$1.4 billion for. The U.S. initiated sanctions against Türkiye in December 2020 under the 2017 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which included a ban on all U.S. export licenses and authorizations to the Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB), an asset freeze, and visa restrictions on key officials, including the president.

Removal from the F-35 program led Türkiye to change its plans to modernize and replace its aging fighters. First, Türkiye intensified its efforts to produce the TF-X, a fifth-generation national combat aircraft, which is planned to be operational in 2029 and will replace its aging F-16s.<sup>33</sup> First flight test is scheduled in late 2023. With the realization of the TF-X project as planned, Türkiye would not need F-35 fighters from the U.S.

Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ), the prime contractor for the project, has already signed an agreement with UK BAE Systems to collaborate on the first development phase of the TF-X fighter. Russia has repeatedly offered cooperation and assistance in developing the TF-X fighter.<sup>34</sup> İsmail Demir, President of the SSB, also highlighted that Türkiye has consulted with Russia on several projects, including the TF-X.<sup>35</sup> Russia is also ready to hold negotiations with Türkiye on the possible delivery of Su-35 and Su-57 fighter aircraft if it receives a request to do so, as stated by Valeria Reshetnikova, spokesperson for Russia's Federal Service for Military and Technical Cooperation.<sup>36</sup> All of these developments reminded us of the conversation on Su-57 Fighters between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Vladimir Putin in Russia during the 2019 International Air Show.<sup>37</sup>

Türkiye, however, has emphasized its devotion to the principles of the alliance and asked the U.S. to either allow it to rejoin the F-35 program or sell 40 new F-16 fighters and 80 modernization kits to Ankara to sustain the efficiency of its air force. After the meeting between Erdoğan and President Joe Biden in Italy on October 31, 2021, on the margins of the G-20 summit, both sides agreed to form a joint mechanism to discuss this problem and consult on Türkiye's demand for 40 F-16 fighters and 80 modernization kits. Technical teams have met several times so far to discuss Türkiye's offer, but officials say there have not been any concrete de-

velopments. Officials, including President Erdoğan and Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, however, have repeatedly stated that there have been positive developments regarding F-16 sale negotiations.

### **F-35 Crisis and Possible Effects on TNWs in Türkiye**

Despite the diminishing role of nuclear weapons in international politics after the Cold War, there has been an increasing and dangerous arms race between major powers that includes nuclear weapons, delivery vehicles, and missile defense systems. This trend has been intensified by the tendency to scrap bilateral or international nuclear weapons treaties, such as the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty or the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The extension of New START, which remained the backbone of strategic nuclear weapons, has been signed as a last-minute deal that underlined the reluctance of these states to further cooperate. Positive developments such as a "vision of a world without nuclear weapons" declared by President Barack Obama in 2009 or the "Statement Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races" in 2022, provided hope for a better world –but contradicted real-life events happening on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

The U.S. has been pursuing ways to initiate negotiations with Russia, ei-

ther to link TNWs into a strategic arms control regime, such as New START, or formulate a new and wider nuclear weapons agreement that also includes TNWs. Anthony Blinken, U.S. Secretary of State, for example, stated, “the U.S. will use the time provided by a five-year extension of the New START Treaty to pursue with the Russian Federation ... arms control that addresses all of its nuclear weapons.”<sup>39</sup> However, increased tension between Russia and the U.S. prevented further cooperation. Finally, Russia suspended participation in the NEW START Treaty, the only remaining nuclear arms control treaty, in February 2023 and started a new era where both sides remained free to produce, possess and deploy nuclear weapons and its delivery vehicles.

The U.S. has also pursued a policy of nuclear arms control for TNWs that will include China. However, Russia insists that the negotiations might work only after the U.S. withdraws TNWs deployed in Europe,<sup>40</sup> including those in Türkiye. Thus, the fate of the TNWs located in Türkiye will shape these negotiations. In light of recent developments, such as Russia’s deployment of İskender missiles in its Kaliningrad region or the abolition of the INF Treaty, TNWs will play an important role in competition in the new security environment. Therefore, it is highly likely that the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which also included a nuclear threat, and suspension of the NEW START Treaty will prevent negotiations in the short term.

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On the other hand, the future of the weapons deployed in Türkiye will be defined by the fate of the relations between the U.S. and Türkiye, which are experiencing difficult times. The relationship will be shaped by the American response to Türkiye’s request for the sale of new F-16 fighters and modernization kits. New generation fighters will play a crucial role in the security of Türkiye, considering the crises now unfolding around it.

Competition between Türkiye and Greece, especially in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, has increased recently. Cooperation between Greece and France and the procurement of Rafale fighters have already increased Greece’s air force defense-and-attack capabilities. The U.S. established military bases in Greek islands and deployed U.S. troops and equipment, including attack helicopters, starting a new crisis with Türkiye. Therefore, a possible negative American response would

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force Türkiye to search for further options, such as the procurement of fighters from Russia, China, or South Korea.

Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated in an interview, “if the U.S. does not want to resolve the issue about F-35s, or if the U.S. Congress blocks it, Türkiye will consider other options, including purchasing (Russian-made) Su-35s or Su-57s.”<sup>41</sup> President Erdoğan also highlighted that Türkiye may look for alternatives if the U.S. insists on its stance in the F-35 crisis.<sup>42</sup> He recently stated that he hopes that Washington will not push Türkiye to different paths because the U.S. is not the only alternative,<sup>43</sup> implying that Türkiye might also negotiate with other states, including Russia or China.

Amid crises due to the procurement of S-400 air defense systems, Russian and Chinese fighters in NATO's second-most powerful armed forces would also mark a new phase in NATO's history. It is worth noting that four NATO members –Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Bulgaria– use Russian-made MIG series fighters,

while Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Bulgaria have Russian MI-24 attack helicopters.<sup>44</sup> However, Türkiye might be the only NATO member that will replace aging U.S. fighters with new-generation Russian or Chinese fighters. As Türkiye experienced during the procurement of air defense systems from China and Russia, some NATO members led by the U.S. would likely start a new crisis with Türkiye in such a scenario without considering the fact that other allies also have Russian fighters and helicopters. On the other hand, Türkiye's possible procurement of fighters from Russia or China might mark another turning point for the alliance considering the U.S.' TNWs deployed in Türkiye. That would mean that Turkish Air Force will not have any fighters able to use B61-12 modernized gravity TNWs. In such a scenario, Washington might decide to withdraw TNWs from Türkiye, probably to another European state.

Delaying the activation of S-400 batteries and offering new options to solve the crisis over the F-35s, Türkiye pursued a conciliatory policy to mitigate the problems rather than escalating the crises, which proves that Türkiye is still devoted to the principles of the alliance. It is now Washington's turn. The Biden Administration will now decide the future of U.S.-Türkiye as well as NATO-Türkiye relations, the fate of the TNWs deployed in Türkiye, and thus the destiny of the alliance. Biden government repeatedly underlined support for the sale of F-16 fighters, but there has been strong opposition in

the House of Representatives and the Senate against it.

## Conclusion

Türkiye has been regarded as one of the most devoted members of the alliance since its accession in 1952 despite NATO's reluctance to support Türkiye when needed –except for the deployment of Patriot systems during the Gulf War and the Syrian crisis in the framework of symbolic assurance measures. Until Türkiye's deal for the air defense systems with China and Russia, Türkiye's membership and contribution to the alliance has never been part of any discussions.

Türkiye has been hosting the U.S.' nuclear weapons, which have no more than a symbolic meaning according to many politicians, scholars, and military leaders, since the 1960s. Despite serious crises between Türkiye and the U.S. during and after the Cold War, such as the withdrawal of Jupiter missiles without informing Türkiye or the U.S. embargo after Türkiye's peace operations in Northern Cyprus to prevent a genocide by Greece and Greek Cypriots, the Turkish population did not discuss or question the existence of American nuclear weapons. This has not been part of any hot topic in Türkiye, although German, Belgian, and Dutch politicians urged the U.S. to withdraw these weapons, describing them as “relics of the Cold War.”

Relations between the U.S. and Türkiye are now at a crucial point. Washington's response to Türkiye's request

to rejoin the F-35 program or sell Ankara F-16 fighters and modernization kits will be one of the main factors that will drive the relations in the future. American rejection of any of these options would mean a possible deal with Russia or China to solve the urgent procurement needs of new-generation fighters until the TF-X is operational. That most probably would result in the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons, which have been one of the main tools of American assurance to its European allies with its symbolic value rather than military use, from Türkiye. This might also be a turning point in the history of NATO.

As it did for the procurement of air defense systems, Türkiye first asked its NATO allies for the procurement of these weapons before starting negotiations with Russia or China. Thus, neither NATO nor its members can blame Türkiye if it continues to pursue alternatives such as Russia or China to replace aging fighters, especially in the face of increasing cooperation between France and Greece to bolster the Greek air force. Thus, the U.S. would be in a position that triggers a serious crisis in the alliance by withdrawing nuclear weapons and urging Türkiye to buy fighters from other states such as China or Russia. Considering recent developments, it is highly likely, however, that the U.S. authorities will find a solution to solve the crisis with Türkiye because the possible results of the crisis extend far beyond the U.S. and Türkiye and might determine the fate of NATO-Türkiye relations amid the Russia-NATO crisis. ■

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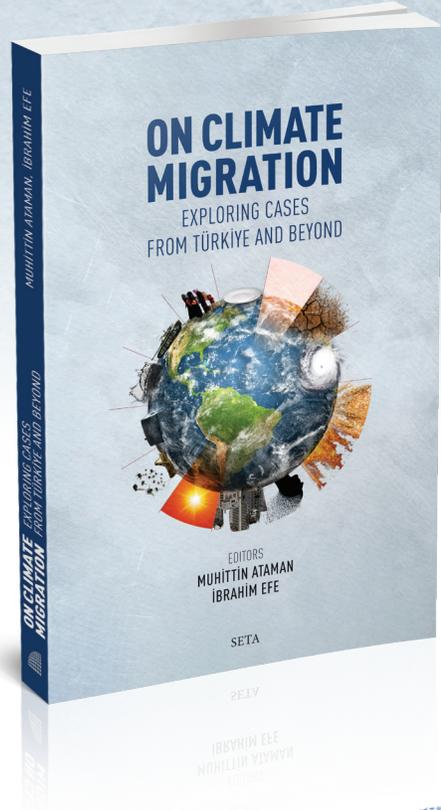
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