

The US and NATO are defending Turkey

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On 14 December US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta signed a decision about the deployment in Turkey of two batteries of the Patriot anti-ballistic missile system and 400 troops as personnel, auxiliary and intelligence services. Two American batteries and two batteries each from German and Dutch Patriot systems make up the elements of NATO's support coming in the light of potential threats facing Turkey due to the drawn out civil war in Syria. The Patriots are set to become fully operational at the beginning of January 2013.

Commentary

- Firm declarations of support for Turkey by NATO, the US and other allies and the deployment of Patriot batteries have come in response to several months of efforts by Ankara to obtain support in the situation of a protracted crisis in Syria. Turkey remains in hostile relations with the government in Damascus and in recent months there have been many armed incidents on the Turkish-Syrian border (the shooting down of a Turkish plane, artillery shootings). In recent weeks the Syrian government have been accused of using Scud missiles on the internal front and of making ready to use chemical weapons against militants. The Patriot Systems are intended to increase Turkey's security although this number of batteries does not shield the entire border and potential targets, despite appeals made by Turkey. The deployment of the Patriot batteries is a signal that an important divergence in the positions of Turkey, the US and NATO has been achieved following months of discussions regarding measurable co-operation.
- The deployment of the Patriot batteries and the reinforcement of the American troops stationed in Turkey are being treated in the region as a manifestation of larger and more long-term commitment from the US and NATO and also as an attempt at strategic consolidation in the Middle East. This has been roundly criticised by Russia and in particular by Iran. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and representatives of their army have accused Turkey and the US of preparing a military operation against Iran and are threatening Turkey with serious implications. It was also the reason for Iran to cancel President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Turkey in December this year and it suggests that the tension between Ankara and Tehran will escalate further (over the last year Turkey has accused Iran, inter alia, of backing the Kurd insurgency in eastern Turkey and an intensification of espionage).

- Increased activity and determination from NATO and certain allies also indicates that there is a growing feeling of frustration (particularly in Turkey) caused by the development of the situation in Syria and, in the broader perspective, across the Middle East (especially around Iran); the escalating and spreading of the conflict and the lack of belief in a swift and political resolution to it. In this context, neither a further escalation of the conflict, a direct threat to Turkey, nor the launch of armed operations by NATO countries in the region can be ruled out. For example, the use of chemical weapons by the regime in Syria is a declared basis for a possible American intervention there; the question of pre-emptive military action to prevent the development of the Iranian nuclear programme remains open. In the face of the scale of these challenges, Turkey finds itself obliged to seek support from its allies. Washington and Brussels on their part are compelled to focus on good co-operation with Turkey which is its ally and one of the main players in the region and the strongest point of support for NATO in the Middle East.