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Putin Balances Turkish Fighter Jet Interest with Syria's Fight Against Terrorism

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On Tuesday, the biennial MAKS-2019 International Aviation and Space Show kicked off in Russia's Zhukovsky International Airport. This important event has drawn spectators, journalists, and photographers from around the world every odd year since 1992. What began as an entertaining event has now become a marketplace for Russian aerospace companies to negotiate export contracts and for Russian air carriers to make foreign contacts.

This year by special invitation Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan was given a personal tour by President Putin and other officials, to gain insight into Russia's latest aviation developments. Turkey was recently ejected from the multinational, US-led F-35 industrial program after defiantly purchasing and receiving the first shipment of S-400 missile systems from Russia, earlier this summer. Erdogan has said that by April of next year the S-400 will be operational much to the dismay of the Washington.

On July 17th White House spokesperson Stephanie Grisham made an announcement stating,

> "Unfortunately, Turkey's decision to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems renders its continued involvement with the F-35 impossible. Turkey has been a longstanding and trusted partner and NATO ally for over 65 years but accepting the S-400 undermines the commitments all NATO allies made to each other to move away from Russian systems."

During the aviation show Erdogan said,

> "We came here for more than just a sightseeing tour. We will make steps after learning about the final decision [from Washington on the F-35]. The market where Turkey can acquire everything it needs is large enough." He also stated, "We want to proceed with the solidarity [with Russia] in many areas of the defense industry. This can be on passenger or fighter aircraft. We will continue with the spirit of solidarity."

The head of Russia's Federal Service for military-technical cooperation Dmitry Shugayev confirmed on Wednesday that Turkey was interested in procuring "either the Su-35 or Su-57." Turkey's Foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu clarified that Turkey would prefer to search for alternatives to the F-35 but would look for a new source to procure combat jets if the U.S. follows through with canceling their F-35 shipments of which Turkey is not just a

customer but a manufacturer as well.

On the way back to Turkey Erdogan was asked if Turkey was interested in Russian planes and he responded, “Why not? We didn’t come here for nothing.” Russia’s fifth-generation jet might but the answer to Erdogan’s F-35 problem. Erdogan asked Putin if the plane was airworthy and for sale to which Putin responded, yes you can buy it. This was the first time the export variant of the Su-57 was presented to the public and Erdogan was the first foreign world leader to see them up close and person. Earlier this year the Russian military started receiving its first serial-product models.

The United states has insisted that the F-35 is not compatible with the S-400 and that the two systems operating together might reveal intelligence which Russia can then use.

In addition to discussing fighter jets and being treated to ice cream, Erdogan and Putin also discussed Syria. Ankara has long supported the terrorist factions fighting against the Syrian army and has tried to protect them on multiple occasions. Both leaders have expressed interest in working together to ease tensions in Idlib province, however their views on how to solve those grievances are different. Russia supports Syria’s fight against terrorism and has taken an active role both politically and militarily to back the Syrian government alongside Iran, Hezbollah, and other forces of the Axis of Resistance.

Syrian forces are taking steps to liberate Idlib the last terrorist stronghold.

> “The situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone is of serious concern to us and our Turkish partners,” Putin said at a press conference with Erdogan on Russian state television. Putin also said Turkey had “legitimate interests” to protect on its southern borders and supported the creation of a security zone in the area.

The Syrian government has warned that Turkey is trying to change the demographics of areas by driving out diverse populations and replacing them with Syrian refugees that had fled to Turkey and are sympathetic to the Free Syrian Army and Al Qaeda.

Last year a de-escalation buffer zone around Idlib was negotiated between Putin and Erdogan to avert confrontation between the Syrian army and terrorist factions, but the ceasefire was not respected by the terrorist facts and the Syrian army continued with their military operations to liberate terrorist infested areas.

Erdogan has complained that his troops are in harm’s way, the simplest way to resolve this would be to stop supporting terrorist factions, pull out all Turkish forces on Syrian land, and close down all twelve observation posts.

On September 16th Turkey, Russia, and Iran’s presidents will be meeting at a summit to discuss Syria. Erdogan said the September meeting “should contribute to peace in the region”.

Although both Russia and Turkey’s leaders have stated that they support Syria’s territorial integrity Turkey has shown that behind their humanitarian façade is a plan to illegally expand their territory. Putin along with the Syrian government has emphasized the need to keep fighting terrorist factions in Idlib. “Terrorists continue shelling the positions of Syrian government forces, trying to attack Russian military installations,” Putin said. He also

stated, “The de-escalation zone must not serve as a refuge for militants, let alone a bridgehead for new attacks.”

Putin’s role as political mediator between Syria and Turkey has become more complex due to Turkey’s interest in purchasing Russian jets.

> “We have many opportunities, we demonstrated new weapons systems and new electronic warfare systems,” Putin said. “In my opinion there was a lot of interest from our Turkish partners.” It will be interesting to see if Syria’s sovereignty will become a bargaining chip in these war games.

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