

Turkey's ICBM: Ambition for Autonomy

By
Curtis McGiffin

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At the recent SAHA Expo 2026, Turkey [unveiled](#) a mock-up of the Yildirimhan (Thunderbolt) and [released](#) details about the long-range, four-engined, liquid-fueled ballistic missile. The designation “Yildirimhan” refers to Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I, known as “the Thunderbolt,” circa 1400 AD. He was [known for](#) acting faster than his enemies, striking before alliances formed, and crushing resistance with swift effectiveness. The naming approach sends a geopolitical message as loud as the missile itself.

Turkey's pursuit of an advanced long-range missile capability reflects a broader shift in its strategic ambitions, regional influence, and state security priorities. Once seen as sufficient to defend NATO's southeastern flank but not fit for EU membership, Turkey has increasingly sought to redefine itself as an independent geopolitical power. No longer willing to be merely a buffer state for Western interests, Ankara is actively transforming into an independent, assertive geopolitical power capable of shaping the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and even Europe itself.

A key part of this transformation has been Turkey's increasing focus on defense self-sufficiency, domestic military technology, and [strategic autonomy](#). Within this context, Turkey's declared [goal to develop long-range ballistic](#) capabilities, including at Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) levels, demands America's full attention.

We may be witnessing the ultimate manifestation of a state seeking to decouple its sovereign interests in security and power projection from historical external arms dependence and traditional “alliance reliance” Western security guarantees.

Turkey's missile ambitions are likely part of a broader effort to reduce its dependence on foreign defense suppliers that either [restrict access to advanced weapons](#) capabilities or sell suboptimal weapons systems that are difficult to integrate, costly to maintain, or are just ineffective. Turkish leaders have frequently expressed frustration with [arms embargoes, sanctions, and restrictions](#) imposed by allies during political disputes. These tensions have accelerated Turkey's investment in domestic aerospace, drone, missile, and satellite-launch industries, framing these programs as symbols of national sovereignty, technological progress, and strategic independence.

Concurrently, Turkey's increasingly unstable security situation has incentivized its need for long-range deterrent capabilities. Ankara is not only positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, but it is also close to several regional flashpoints involving Ukraine, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and ongoing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey desires increased geopolitical influence and greater operational freedom. Developing long-range missile systems, therefore, has both military and political importance, boosting deterrence and signaling Turkey's rise as a regional power capable of independent strategic action. In short, Turkey intends to shape these challenges moving forward, and more autonomy is the price of leadership.

Turkey's long-range missile development, fueled by its [National Technology Initiative](#), is part of a larger investment in [civilian space and satellite launch](#) initiatives, which were officially presented as peaceful technological advancements designed to strengthen communications, scientific research, and national prestige. Turkey's commitment to this effort is now on display in [Somalia](#), of all places, where it is constructing a spaceport to support future launch operations. The technologies required for satellite launch vehicles closely overlap with those needed for ballistic missile systems, including multi-stage rocket propulsion, precision guidance, and reentry vehicle engineering. As a result, advances in Turkey's space program will expedite its long-range ballistic missile development.

Although Turkey does not possess nuclear weapons and is a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, occasional statements by [Turkish officials criticizing](#) the global nuclear order have fueled international speculation that Turkey might seek its own nuclear arsenal in the future. Any ICBM [capable of carrying](#) a 6,000-pound weapons payload over approximately 6,000 kilometers would have limited strategic value as a conventional weapon, but with a nuclear warhead, it would dramatically alter the strategic calculations across the region and beyond.

The possibility of a reduced American nuclear commitment to NATO Europe could increase Turkey's importance in the same way. If European governments keep pushing Washington out of NATO, the result will be that Europe must pay for and [develop its own nuclear capabilities](#)—another form of deterrence. France has introduced its [new doctrine of “forward deterrence,”](#) which [advocates](#) for an expanded nuclear arsenal and a broader nuclear deterrence umbrella over all of Europe, but only under French operational control. Both [Poland and Germany](#) have conveyed interest in alternative nuclear arsenals to bolster European deterrence. In this context, Turkey could see its long-range missile capabilities as an opportunity to fill the deterrence gap identified by other NATO leaders and as a pathway toward future nuclear delivery capability if political circumstances change.

At the same time, Turkey's pursuit of advanced missile systems could generate tensions within NATO if those capabilities are not carefully integrated into the alliance's broader strategic framework. Some European allies may view Turkish missile development—and any potential future nuclear ambitions—as destabilizing, given Ankara's sometimes contentious relationships with other NATO members. Such developments would inevitably raise questions regarding missile security, command-and-control arrangements, escalation risks, and about whether Turkey's long-term strategic objectives remain fully aligned with broader alliance priorities.

Whether Turkey ultimately seeks to develop an arsenal of nuclear-armed ICBMs remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that Turkey's long-range missile ambitions are real and appear to support both a broader long-term strategy of autonomous power projection and a more immediate effort to expand capabilities that could contribute to NATO's evolving long-range strike and nuclear deterrence requirements.

Turkey's growing missile capabilities reflect a clear strategic goal: to make itself an independent, technologically advanced, and influential military power in an increasingly unstable region; thereby, demonstrating that Turkey is not only a force to be reckoned with but also a partner to

be allied with. Its growing missile ambitions reflect a strategic objective of establishing Turkey as an independent, technologically advanced, and regionally influential military power capable of operating with greater strategic autonomy in an increasingly unstable security environment. Turkey should not be viewed merely as a state to be reckoned with, but as an indispensable ally and arms supplier.

Colonel Curtis McGiffin (U.S. Air Force, Ret.) is Vice President for Education at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies, President of *MCG Horizons LLC*, and a visiting professor at Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies. He has three decades of experience in uniform and DoD civil service and is the co-host of the weekly *The NIDS View* podcast. The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and *MCG Horizons LLC*, and do not necessarily reflect the views of any other affiliated organization.