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## **Turkmenistan's growing militarization and the threat of a dangerous "Caspian arms race"**

Despite its long-term adhesion to a neutrality policy and to a military doctrine exclusively defensive, Turkmenistan has increased its military expenditures enhancing the capacity of the national navy and land forces, in order to preserve country's national interests and to deal with destabilizing threats.

As a matter of fact, according to the report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Turkmenistan ranked 40th in the world as arms importer over the period 2012-2016. Turkey (36 percent), China (27 percent) and Russia (20 percent) are the main Ashgabat's weapon suppliers, while Netherlands and France respectively provided radar technology and missiles.

It is intriguing to observe that Turkmenistan appears more worried to upgrade its national navy rather than to enhance the military capacity of its land forces engaged along the turbulent Afghan-Turkmen border, exposed to destabilizing armed incursions of Taliban. Turkmenistan bought ten patrol boats from Turkey and at least two of these have been equipped with anti-aircraft missiles produced by the MBDA European consortium.

Concerning the threats along the shared border with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan has bought air defense systems and armed drones from China to improve security and to prevent incursions, showing the growing relevance of the Sino-Turkmen strategic partnership also in the military sphere. It is evident the Beijing's attempt to ensure Turkmen stability is one of the foreign policy's main goal for the Chinese leadership.

The Ashgabat's strategic orientation to privilege the strengthening of military capacity to protect maritime borders could suggest that Turkmen president fears some threats potentially affecting Turkmen section of the Caspian Sea, damaging offshore oil and gas infrastructures as well as the proposed Western export energy route which will cross Caspian basin.

However, this Turkmen militarization could dangerously lead to a "Caspian arms race scenario" involving the three post soviet countries, considering that also Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have increased their military capacity. The unsolved dispute between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan over offshore energy fields, the undetermined legal status of the Caspian basin are factors which could fuel a regional tension spreading instability in a strategic area which would freeze all projects of energy cooperation.

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