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Preserving air force balances in the Aegean: Greece and Turkey upgrade defense capabilities.

Greece and Turkey upgrade defense capabilities, with particular regard to the air force. This occurs in demanding times for the Eastern Mediterranean, crossed by shifting power balances and multidimensional threats.

Turkey signed a deal to purchase a Russian surface-to-air missile system, as announced by president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [Carlotta Galli-Andrew Higgins, “Turkey Signs Russian Missile Deal, Pivoting From NATO”, *The New York Times*, September 12, 2017]. Ankara has already transferred money to pay the first tranche of S-400 Triumf (NATO SA-21 Growler). On October 2017, also Saudi Arabia signed a preliminary agreement with Russia to buy this missile system.

Ankara will need Moscow’s assistance for specific training and the transfer of technical expertise in order to use and maintain S-400 Triumf.

In the meantime, the State Department of the United States approved a Foreign Military Sales to Greece: Athens requested the upgrade of its F-16 to the F-16 Block Viper variant [Nicholas Fiorenza, “Greece upgrades F-16s”, *Jane’s 360*, October 23, 2017]. The payment (\$ 2,4 billion) will be likely spread over multiple years to ease the Greek financial burden. The arms sale still needs the approval of the Congress of the United States.

On October 17, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras met with president Donald Trump at the White House, also discussing the upgrading of the Hellenic Air Force’s defense capabilities.

From a regional perspective, Russia has increased its geopolitical influence in the Eastern Mediterranean not only by soft power or direct military intervention (as in Syria) but also in terms of defense industry and military provision. Since 2015, Greece has been negotiating a maintenance deal for its 12 Russian-made S-300 PMU 2 Favorit surface-to-air missile system (SA-10 Grumble), and for the purchase of new missiles. The Greek S-300 were bought by Cyprus in 1997, transferred to Athens in 1999 and then definitely sold to Greece in 2007, after a Washington mediation to downplay tensions with Turkey on the Cyprus issue. Currently, the missile system is on the Crete island and was tested, for the first time, in 2013.

In the last decade, Turkey experienced a remarkable economic growth, which had an impact on Turkish regional policy ambitions. Military expenditures peaked in the late Nineties. But the point is that the failed coup (July 2016) was followed by a deep turn-over in the air force manpower, with the promotion of younger and less experienced pilots with respect to the previous ones.

On the contrary, Greece's economic and social crisis started in 2009, affected dramatically Greek military capabilities, as repeatedly denounced by the Hellenic Armed Forces. Notwithstanding the crisis, Athens remains the second main contributor to NATO, with 2,38% of the GDP in 2016.

A strategic military balance in the Aegean is fundamental for Mediterranean security. In 2014, Turkey ordered the first lot of 10 F-35, with deliveries set for 2019. If Athens will not be able to upgrade its equipment, Greece will suffer a tangible shift in the airpower domain, in times of rising tensions between neighbours.

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