



BACKGROUND OF TURKEY'S DECISION TO PURCHASE S-400

The issue of Turkey's pending purchase of the Russian S-400 lunched an intensive debate in both Polish and foreign media concerning the divergence of interests between Turkey and its Western allies. Some commentators underlined that through this decision Turkey started to drift away from the geopolitical West and NATO and seeks to build a stronger partnership with Russia. Some other experts indicate that S-400 will help Turkey in its efforts to balance Greece which, despite being a member of NATO, uses Russian S-300 system. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that the issue of Turkey's domestic political situation as well as the question what exactly Russians offered Turkey is being marginalised in public debates. The aim of this WISI Opinion is to show how certain changes within the Turkish Armed Forces after 2016 attempted coup influenced Ankara's decision and what does Turkish decision makers expect from the S-400 Triumf system.

Consequences of purges in Turkish Air Forces

In order to understand Turkey's decision to purchase S-400 systems it is necessary to understand its potential role within the Turkish Armed Forces. It seems reasonable to assume that in Ankara's vision Russian S-400 Triumf will be used as a surface-to-air missile (SAM) asset, rather than performing ballistic missile defense (BMD) functions. In other words, its main aim is not to destroy incoming ballistic missiles, yet to destroy airborne targets.

This assumption is closely related to changes that had occurred within the Turkish Air Forces after unsuccessful coup d'état in 2016. Due to active participation of Turkish F-16 pilots in the attempted coup around 300 of them were purged which, in accordance to some sources, represented 50% of all trained Turkish F-16 fighter pilots. In result, cockpit to pilot ratio dropped from over 1.25:1 pilots per one aircraft to 0.8:1. Turkey asked its NATO allies for assistance (i.a. United States to send American instructors to Turkey), but the request was refused. Ankara also sought assistance from Pakistan which possesses the same Block F-16 as Turkey. However, what constrained this option were the US International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR). In accordance to ITAR pilot training would constitute a re-export of technical data which is restricted by U.S. law.

It is also worth mentioning that in July 2017 Turkey signed a cooperation agreement with French-Italian consortium EUROSAM concerning shared development and production of anti-aircraft system. Details of the cooperation are yet to be revealed. Nevertheless, some experts indicate that through this agreement Turkey will try to integrate its defence industry with the production process of Aster-30 Block-1 NT missiles, and thus to purchase SAMP/T system.

What about Turkish Patriots?

American Patriot systems were considered, despite certain differences, as an alternative to Russian S-400 Triumf. Moreover, as a result of NATO's decisions, Patriot systems were already deployed in Turkey (Patriots were sent from Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Italy and the United States) during Gulf War in 1991, War with Iraq in 2003 as well as in 2012 due to a ballistic missile threat from Syria. In January 2016 Germany pulled its Patriot missiles from Turkey. Decision was criticised by Ankara. Berlin announced that the risk of ballistic missile attack on Turkey has decreased significantly and there is no need to keep the Patriot installations in Turkey. However, unofficially the reasons for such decision are related to Turkey's military offensive against Kurds. Notwithstanding, Turkey rejected three American



offers for Patriot systems. In 2013 Ankara chose a Chinese state-owned company - the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation - as a potential contractor of 4 billion USD long-range air and missile defence system. After NATO's objection Turkey rejected the Chinese offer. NATO was concerned about the possibility that it would expose sensitive data to Beijing. However, in 2017 Ankara announced that it has chosen Russian S-400 Triumf systems. Americans made another offer in 2019 which was also rejected by Turks. According to the media U.S. proposed a quick delivery by the end of this year, yet did not include any loan agreement nor a technology sharing pact. The last point seems to be crucial for Turkey and Turkish officials as well as President Erdoğan underlined it on many occasions. Moscow's bid, despite lower price, included technology transfer and 50% joint production requirement.

Influence of domestic politics

As it was mentioned earlier, unsuccessful coup d'état in 2016 introduced many changes within the Turkish Armed Forces. Since the death of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk Turkish Army possessed a specific and autonomous position within the Turkish political system. After 2016 the ruling Justice and Development Party (Tur: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) introduced many legislative reforms which strengthened its position in relation to the army. As a result of purges around 30% of high-command representatives and around 40 thousand soldiers from the officer corps were forced to leave the army. This move strengthened civilian control of Erdoğan's party over the military and gave more power to the military staff loyal to AKP. Mateusz Chudziak from Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) noted that four different ideological groups can be distinguished within the Turkish Armed Forces: Conservatives, Nationalists, Eurasians and supporters of the Atlantic option. In terms of geopolitics, the battle between the last two fractions seems to be crucial. AKP supports the group closely associated with the Patriotic Party (Tur: Vatan Partisi) which supports the shift towards Moscow and Turkey's withdrawal from NATO and promotes the idea of Eurasianism. After purges this fraction gained more influence in the army and consequently pushes certain decisions concerning development of the Turkish Armed Forces.

Another factor is AKP's and Erdoğan's limited trust towards the army. There is a strong voice in Turkey that Russian S-400 system will not be used against external threats, but against the Turkish Armed Forces. Therefore, it can be assumed that the aim of S-400 Triumf system is to deter Turkish Armed Forces which played an important role in 2016 coup attempt (Turkish Air Force F-16 jets bombed the parliament building and attempted to intercept the presidential plane). Moreover, the fact that S-400 battery will be deployed near Ankara indicates that it could be used to gain air supremacy around Turkey's capital and defend airspace around governmental buildings. What is also important in this matter is the fact that NATO compatible systems cannot be used for such actions (e.g. a state that possesses the source codes is able to seriously limit its capabilities).

All of the issues mentioned above are often overlooked in debates concerning Turkey's decision to purchase S-400 Triumf. Purges after the 2016 coup attempt to a large extent affected operational capabilities of Turkish Air Forces and these losses can be compensated in a short period of time by the S-400. Russian offer also reaches Turkey's expectations in terms of technology transfer and joint production. Furthermore, Turkey's decision to buy Russian anti-aircraft weapon system is also related to Erdoğan's administration fear of losing power as a result of another coup d'état.



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