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The European Land Force Commanders Organisation

FINABEL - THE EUROPEAN LAND FORCE COMMANDERS ORGANISATION

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WRITTEN BY
BERK BÜYÜKARSLAN

EDITED BY
CONLEY AUSTIN

SUPERVISED BY
BELÉN PADRÓN SALINAS

Introduction

Greece has been undergoing a significant progress of air force modernisation program since 2020, driven by both internal modernisation efforts and external geopolitical pressures (International Trade Administration, 2023). The country has heavily invested in new technologies and upgraded its military infrastructure. This includes the purchase of advanced weaponry, such as F-35 and Rafale fighter jets, reaching NATO's future standards. While Greece seeks a complete overhaul of the army as published in 'Agenda 2030' of the current Mitsotakis government, the acquisition of 4.5th and 5th generation fighter jets carry significant importance (eKathimerini, 2024; Ministry of National Defence, 2024).

One of the primary drivers of this transformation is Greece's ongoing air superiority dispute with Turkey in the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean (McBride, 2024). The two countries have a long history of conflict over airspace, territorial waters and most recently, resource exploration rights, leading to a contest of military deterrence (Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, 2022). As tensions rise over the militarisation of disputed islands and energy resources, Greece's actions appear to be geared towards bolstering its defence posture in the Aegean Sea, where these territorial issues intersect with broader national security concerns of disputed islands. For Greek officials, defence spending aims to not only offset Turkey's regional ambitions but also to secure Greece's borders and territorial sovereignty (Gingeras, 2022). The question then arises whether Greece's military buildup is solely for deterrence and defence, or if it reflects a more aggressive stance towards a potential conflict with Turkey over control of the Aegean Sea. These modernisation efforts might suggest a preparation for a future confrontation, or purely be a strategy for ensuring national security in an unpredictable regional landscape.

I. Aegean Sea: Exerting Land to the Sea

The Aegean Sea has long been a focal point for geopolitical tensions between Greece and Turkey. Rooted in territorial disputes, airspace violations and conflicts over maritime boundaries, these tensions stem from historical rivalries, competing sovereignty claims over islands and access to energy resources (CIA, 1984). In mid-2020, the discovery of gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean further heightened stakes in the region, bringing national security and economic interests to the forefront of Greece's foreign policy (Crisis Group, 2021).

From the Greek perspective, motives in the Aegean are driven by the protection of its territorial integrity, sea expansion and national security (Marghellis, 2021). Greece seeks to maintain control over key islands and ensure it can access valuable maritime resources,

which are critical for its economic growth, particularly in the context of energy relations with the EU (Saragerova, 2022). Moreover, Greece is concerned with Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy and military posturing in the region, which encapsulates the fear that unchecked Turkish influence could destabilise its security (RFI, 2024). Given the ongoing refugee crisis on Greek shores and Turkey's development in mass unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) production, Greek officials are seeking a strategy that would counterbalance Turkey with modernised air superiority (Michalski, 2023; Kokkinidis, 2024). Therefore, the attempts to gain air superiority are highly rooted in the context of territorial anxiety for Greece.

II. F-35 and Rafale - Defending the Land from the Skies?

Greece's most major step towards air superiority so far is its recent deal to procure 20 F-35A Joint Strike Fighters (Allison, 2024). This purchase is part of a broader strategy to strengthen its military capabilities amidst ongoing tensions with Turkey. The F-35 jets, expected to be delivered between 2028 and 2033, will provide Greece with advanced air power, replacing older aircraft such as the F-16 and Mirage 2000. The deal, valued at around $3.5 billion, could expand with an option for 20 additional jets, bringing the total value to $8.6 billion (Ioannidis, 2024). The acquisition is seen as a major boost to Greece's defence posture given the F-35's technical superiority over older generation Turkish F-16s (Iddon, 2023). Apart from deterrence, it also increases air interoperability in the region for Greece as a key NATO ally (Defence Security Cooperation Agency, 2024).

The F-35A Joint Strike Fighter is a 5th generation stealth aircraft known for its advanced sensor integration and radar-evading capabilities, making it a critical asset for Greece in potential first strike scenarios (U.S. Air Force, n.d.). The F-35 offers superior situational awareness through advanced sensors and electronic warfare systems, making it an indispensable part of Greece's defence strategy, particularly in the context of regional tensions with Turkey (Felstead, 2024). Its ability to conduct air-to-air, air-to-ground and reconnaissance missions with precision-guided munitions ensures it can dominate a wide variety of combat scenarios (Lake, 2024).

Additionally, Greece has strengthened its air force with the acquisition of 24 French Rafale jets. These multirole fighters excel in air superiority and precision ground strikes, equipped with long- range air-to-air missiles and advanced strike systems (Hellenic Air Force, n.d.; Ionnadis, 2024). This diverse air fleet enhances Greece's deterrence and defence, especially concerning its territorial claims in the Aegean Sea (Rojoef, 2024). As tensions over the Aegean islands and Eastern Mediterranean resources persist, these jets provide Greece not only with deterrent power but also the ability to defend its sovereignty in a complex geopolitical environment.

Therefore, Greece's investment in advanced fighter jets is not solely about achieving air superiority but also deeply connected to its efforts to safeguard its territorial integrity. The acquisition of these 5th generation fighter jets represents a strategic move to boost Greece's defence capabilities considering ongoing tensions with Turkey, natural gas drilling operations in Cyprus and deterring a possible move on the Aegean Islands (Balboa, 2024).

III. Aerial Dominance: A Question of Drones

To counterbalance Turkey's quantitative superiority in terms of jet fighters and UAVs, Greece has turned to a modernised defence strategy, emphasising drone technology (Kotzakioulafis, 2023). Drones offer a cost-effective alternative to the technological challenges associated with defending territory in the Aegean Sea, where conventional assets may struggle with the region's geography (Isleyen, 2021). UAV models such as SAFRAN and Patroller provide Greece with real-time monitoring of airspace and maritime activities, allowing rapid detection of potential threats from Turkish air and naval forces (Geopolitiki, 2023). Greece is also integrating anti-drone systems supplied by Israel into its overall military framework for electronic warfare, using them to disrupt enemy communications and jam radar systems (Kadam, 2022).

Greece's defence strategy in the Aegean Sea has evolved to focus on leveraging UAVs as a key component in maintaining territorial sovereignty and asserting dominance, especially in the face of Turkey's increasing military capabilities in UAV deployment (Gosselin-Malou, 2022). With the complex geography of the Aegean Sea, drones offer an efficient, cost-effective and strategic advantage to act rapidly (Kotzakioulafis, 2023). While the local enterprise Intracom Defence has already showcased their anti-tank munition system "Attalus" (Defence Industry Europe, 2023), the most recent plan to procure Switchblade drones from the U.S. indicates Greece's intent to adopt a rapid, offensive strategy and be able to compete with Turkey's UAVs (Reuters, 2024).

This drone strategy not only enhances Greece's capabilities in air but also provide a lethal strike option for land targets. Traditional air and naval forces are resource-heavy, and maintaining a continuous presence in a hot zone is challenging (Boyle, 2012). Drones, however, offer Greece the ability to cover large areas and monitor the region with real-time intelligence without the costs and risks associated with manned missions. This capability enables Greece to maintain a high level of situational awareness over its territorial waters and airspace. The current drone inventory of Greece focuses on surveillance and reconnaissance, with locally produced HAI E1-79 Pegasus (20 units) and leased IAI Herons from Israel (3 units) representing the primary Greek UAV assets (Eshel, 2020; Military Factory, 2022).

IV. Switchblades, Drone Capabilities and Jet Fighters

Greece's recent interest in the acquisition of Switchblade drones from the U.S. signals a shift towards adopting loitering munitions technology. The Switchblade 300 and 600 models are part of the new wave of tactical UAVs that act as both reconnaissance platforms and precision strike weapons systems. The Switchblade 300 is a lightweight drone designed for tactical strikes on soft targets. It has a range of 30 kilometres and a flight endurance of up to 20 minutes, making it ideal for quick strikes on fast-moving or lightly armoured targets (AeroVironment, n.d.). The Switchblade 600, a larger variant, offers enhanced capabilities, with a longer range (up to 40 kilometres) and the ability to strike heavily armoured targets like tanks. It has an endurance of 40 minutes and features an anti-armour warhead, making it suitable for taking out key military assets in a single strike (AeroVironment, n.d.). Both variants are equipped with real-time GPS and camera systems, allowing operators to adjust the drone's flight path mid-mission and even abort strikes if necessary. This flexibility is crucial in the dynamic environment of the Aegean Sea, where both Greek and Turkish forces often operate in proximity (Army Recognition, 2024).

Greece's current drone strategy consists of creating a drone fleet that incorporates medium-altitude, long-endurance (MALE) UAVs such as the Israeli-made Heron drones and French made Patroller UAVs for broader surveillance of the Aegean Sea (DEFEA, 2023). The Switchblade drones complement this by providing short-range, tactical strike capabilities which could fill a critical gap in the existing drone fleet. Loitering munitions can operate in tandem with surveillance drones, as they can fly longer distances unseen and execute a kamikaze attack (Collins, 2023). In the Greek scenario, Herons can identify and track hostile targets, after which Switchblade drones can be deployed for precision strikes. This multi-layered approach could allow Greece to maintain constant pressure on Turkish forces without the need for large-scale military deployments, as Turkey has been implementing successful aerial pressure through vast numbers of drones (Iddon, 2022).

Apart from drone capabilities, jet fighters still play a major role in securing aerial superiority. As mentioned above Greece's acquisition of F-35 and Rafale jets are a critical element of Greek air superiority, given their technological edge over Turkish F-16s (Newdick, 2024). In terms of interoperability, the Hellenic Armed Forces can integrate future F-35 jets with Switchblade drones, its existing UAVs and Spike missiles to create a highly coordinated, multi-layered defence network. Additionally, Spike NLOS missiles, known for their beyond-line-of-sight capabilities, can work in conjunction with Switchblade drones to extend Greece's tactical reach with their capacity to be used against both land and naval targets (Heiming, 2023). Greece's advancement in both air superiority and counter-drone defence therefore marks the core of Agenda 2030, and moreover, the need for upgrading Greece's

future military potential as announced by Defence Minister Dendias (eKathimerini, 2024).

Conclusion

Greece's strategic shift towards integrating an advanced fighter jet program with drone technology represents a new phase in its defence posture within the Aegean region. By combining different capabilities for deterrence, Greece is building a multi-faceted, highly adaptive defence network. This allows for real-time surveillance, precision strikes and extended reach across the Aegean's complex terrain, contributing to a cost-effective and technologically advanced strategy to deter potential Turkish military aggression in the Aegean Sea. This article delved into the motivations behind the modernisation of the Hellenic Air Force and possible scenarios of how Greece can effectively use this new technology. The integration of fighter jets and kamikaze drones ensures that Greece maintains a required level of competitiveness in protecting its territorial sovereignty and securing critical maritime zones without escalating tensions into full-scale conflict. Ultimately, Greece's drone strategy solidifies NATO’s operational capacity, naval protection and interoperability in the Eastern Mediterranean, ensuring both defence and dominance in the region.

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