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FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



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Issue 7

2023

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Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi delivers a campaign speech.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ebrahim_Raisi_delivers_speech_at_a_rally.jpg; Attribution: Wikimedia, CC-BY 4.0

Chinese Officials Justify Reaction to Western Presence in Taiwan Strait

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Taiwan is a “core interest”¹ of China’s. As such, recent military operations by the United States and other Western powers near Taiwan have elicited a strong Chinese response. On 26 May 2023, a Chinese J-16 fighter aircraft intercepted an RC-135 American reconnaissance aircraft in the skies above a Chinese naval exercise featuring the Chinese aircraft carrier *Shandong*. On 3 June, a Chinese naval ship intercepted and cut off the U.S. guided-missile destroyer *USS Chung-Hoon* while it transited the Taiwan Strait with the Canadian frigate *HMCS Montréal*.

According to the *Global Times*, a subsidiary of China’s flagship *People’s Daily*, a spokesperson at the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command stated that the PLA Navy “tracked and monitored them [*USS Chung-Hoon* and *HMCS Montréal*] through the whole course, and handled the situation in accordance with law and regulations.” This was almost identical to a statement by the PLA Southern Theater Command, which a week earlier claimed that aerial forces were organized to “track and monitor it [the RC-135] through its entire course, with maneuvers in a professional manner and in accordance with law and regulations.”²

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang pointed out that the Taiwan issue is the core of China’s core interests, the most important issue in Sino-US relations, and the most prominent risk.



Monument of Recognition of Taiwan on Hainan Island, (Tai Wan Dao – Taiwan Island).

Source: author's photo; Attribution: by author's permission

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang clarified China’s position on Taiwan to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken while the two met in Beijing two weeks later, according to a statement published on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Qin told Blinken that, “Taiwan is the core of China’s core interests” China’s recent military actions have been bolder towards both Taiwan and U.S. naval and aircraft operating in the region. Repeated aggressive responses to what China considers provocations, while not necessarily a trend, illustrate its willingness to engage in brinkmanship regarding Taiwan, perhaps to persuade Western powers to rethink military and political support for the island.³

Source: Liu Xuanzun, “PLA handles US, Canadian warships in provocative Taiwan Straits transit amid Shangri-La Dialogue, forcing US vessel to alter course,” *Global Times* (Chinese daily under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party’s flagship newspaper, the *People’s Daily*). 4 June 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1291897.shtml>

The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) handled a provocative transit in the Taiwan Straits made by US and Canadian warships on Saturday, with a Chinese destroyer reportedly forcing the US vessel to alter course by cutting in front of it, showing determination and capability in countering the provocation, experts said on Sunday.

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Coming against the background of the US failing to arrange a meeting between Chinese and US defense chiefs during the ongoing Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore amid rising tensions, the latest Taiwan Straits transit, led by the US, again showed the US' lack of sincerity, analysts said.

The US Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Chung-Hoon and the Canadian Navy Halifax-class frigate HMCS Montréal made a transit through the Taiwan Straits on Saturday, and the PLA Eastern Theater Command organized naval and aerial forces, tracked and monitored them through the whole course, and handled the situation in accordance with law and regulations, Senior Colonel Shi Yi, a spokesperson at the PLA Eastern Theater Command, said in a statement late on Saturday.

Shi's statement came after the US and Canada hyped their warships' transit through the Taiwan Straits, including Canadian news outlet Global News releasing a video on Saturday, which showed a PLA Navy Type 052D destroyer picking up speed and cutting in front of the bow of the USS Chung-Hoon from left to right, forcing the US warship to alter course and slow down to avoid a crash as the two vessels were reportedly within 150 yards (137 meters.)

The maneuvers in the Taiwan Straits share resemblances to another recent incident in which a PLA Air Force J-16 fighter jet intercepted a US RC-135 reconnaissance plane when the latter attempted to spy on the PLA Navy Shandong aircraft carrier group's routine training in the South China Sea on May 26, a Chinese military expert who requested anonymity told the Global Times on Sunday.

Both incidents were caused by US provocations in sensitive regions on China's doorsteps, followed by US failure to listen to Chinese radio warnings, led to professional PLA tactical maneuvers, which were then hyped by Western media attempting to shift blame to China, hype "China threat" and pressure China on the Shangri-La Dialogue, the expert said.

It showed that the US has no sincerity at all in communicating with the Chinese side, and if any accident happens, it would be the US who must shoulder the blame, the expert said.

Source: “秦刚同美国国务卿布林肯举行会谈 (Qin Gang Holds Talks with US Secretary of State Blinken),” Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 18 June 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202306/t20230619_11099462.shtml

Qin Gang said that at present, Sino-US relations are at the lowest point since the establishment of diplomatic relations. This does not conform to the fundamental interests of the two peoples, nor does it meet the common expectations of the international community. China's policy toward the United States has always maintained continuity and stability. It is fundamentally based on the principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation proposed by President Xi Jinping. China is committed to building a stable, predictable and constructive Sino-US relationship. It is hoped that the U.S. side will uphold an objective and rational understanding of China, meet China halfway, maintain the political foundation of Sino-U.S. relations, and handle unexpected incidents calmly, professionally and rationally. The two sides should fully implement the consensus reached by President Xi Jinping and President Biden at the Bali meeting, so as to promote the stabilization of Sino-US relations and get them back on track.

Qin Gang clarified his solemn position and made clear demands on China's core interests and major concerns including the Taiwan issue. Qin Gang pointed out that the Taiwan issue is the core of China's core interests, the most important issue in Sino-US relations, and the most prominent risk. Promises are truly delivered.

The two sides had a long period of candid, in-depth and constructive communication on the overall relationship between China and the United States and related important issues.

The two sides agreed to jointly implement the important consensus reached at the Bali meeting between the two heads of state, effectively manage and control differences, and promote dialogue, exchanges and cooperation.

Notes:

- [1] The Chinese wording on the statement regarding “core interest” from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs reads as follows: “台湾问题是中国核心利益中的核心.”
- [2] For pro-Chinese coverage of the RC-135 incident see: “US recon aircraft spies on Chinese aircraft carrier, professionally dealt with by PLA: PLA Southern Theater Command spokesperson,” *Global Times*, 3 June 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1291704.shtml?id=11>
- [3] For additional information regarding growing tensions regarding Taiwan, see: Dodge Billingsley, Taiwan Sees ‘Shift’ in China’s Grey Zone Warfare,” *OE Watch*, January 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/380556>

Honduran Presidential Visit Kicks Off New Relations With China

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Honduran President Xiomara Castro campaigned on a diplomatic switch from her country's recognition of Taiwan, recognized since 1949, to that of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Talk of abandoning Taiwan subsided after her election. However, she announced in March 2023 that the country would switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in an effort to gain financing for a hydroelectric dam project and to lower its external debt burden.¹ President Castro made a weeklong visit to mainland China to inaugurate these new relations, where Honduras opened its first embassy and officially acceded to the Belt and Road Initiative, according to *Prensa Latina*, a Cuban government outlet. Castro visited the New Development Bank—commonly known as the BRICS Bank—and requested membership for Honduras, according to *Prensa Latina*. Castro followed that visit with a stop at Huawei headquarters.

Castro opened the visit... in Shanghai; starting the agenda in that important metropolis illustrates the interest in strengthening commercial ties.

Castro also secured a bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping, according to *La Prensa*, a Honduran newspaper. He praised her courage, promised to negotiate a free trade agreement with Honduras, and agreed to promote the entrance of Honduran agricultural goods into the Chinese



President Xiomara Castro meets with a representative of Taiwan on her inauguration day in 2022.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:01_27_51845921976.jpg; Attribution: Wikimedia, CC-BY 2.0

market. The outlet reported that Honduras will present China with a list of infrastructure projects for financing, likely focusing on ports.

Honduras' diplomatic switch to the PRC leaves Taiwan with just 13 remaining countries who recognize its sovereignty, seven of which are in Latin America and the Caribbean.² The Western Hemisphere will remain the epicenter of the PRC's efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, with Central America and the Caribbean likely to be its principal focus.³

Source: "Honduras abre su embajada en China (Honduras opens its embassy in China)," *Prensa Latina* (Cuban government outlet that covers issues of importance to its allies), 11 June 2023. <https://www.prensa-latina.cu/2023/06/11/honduras-abre-su-embajada-en-china>

Honduras inaugurated its embassy, after China did so last week in its capital... Castro opened the visit... in Shanghai; and starting the agenda in that important metropolis illustrates the interest in strengthening commercial ties. In fact, she requested the country's accession to the New Development Bank, popularly called the BRICS Bank, during a meeting with the president of the entity, the Brazilian Dilma Rousseff, and later spoke with executives of the Huawei technology company.

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Source: “Gobierno de Honduras pedirá el apoyo a China para puertos (Government of Honduras Will Ask China for Support for Ports),” *La Prensa* (Honduran newspaper based in the business capital of San Pedro Sula), 15 June 2023. <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/politica-gobierno-honduras-pedira-apoyo-china-para-puertos-KI13931748>

Several projects have been discussed since it was necessary to pass this phase of the president’s visit to go into specific issues...Naturally, infrastructure issues are a priority...Honduras and China recently signed 22 documents in Beijing and next week it is expected that Honduran products such as coffee and bananas will begin to reach China.

Notes:

- [1] To read more about potential lessons for Taiwan and its presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, see: Ryan Berg and Leland Lazarus, “What Taiwan Can Learn from Honduras’s Switch to China,” *Foreign Policy*, 31 March 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/31/latin-america-taiwan-china-honduras-united-states-diplomacy-tsai/>
- [2] *OE Watch* has covered China’s expanding influence in Latin America, with a particular emphasis on Central America, where Taiwan is losing formal diplomatic allies. For example, see: Catalina Wedman, “China’s Growing Influence on the Latin American Economy,” *OE Watch*, October 2018, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/266517>
- [3] For more on Taiwan’s future in the Western Hemisphere and its difficulty maintaining allies, see: Ryan Berg and Wazim Mowla, “Taiwan’s Future in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *The Diplomat*, 1 September 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/taiwans-future-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

People's Liberation Army Transitioning From “Informationized” to Intelligent Warfare Concepts

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) considers an evolution from the current focus on “informationized” warfare concepts, such as the theory of system of systems operational capability, to intelligent warfare concepts, according to an article in the *PLA Daily*. PLA researchers have developed a system of systems operational capability theory that advocates an integrated C4ISR foundation for their move towards a joint operations capability.¹ The individual systems are basic warfighting functions—command, joint fires, logistics—integrated into a larger complex system. System of systems operations using advanced information technologies integrate weapons, equipment, and units to create a synergistic effect described by the PLA as $1 + 1 > 2$. This capability enables the creation of modular, recombinant task forces at the strategic, campaign or operational, and tactical levels which the PLA calls “operational system of systems.” This theoretical development has brought about the concept of warfare that the PLA describes as “system of systems confrontation,” where the main characteristic of warfare is the confrontation and destruction of competing operational systems of systems. The author also proposes the development of intelligent operational system of systems.

The evolution of the PLA's informationized warfare to concepts to one based on emerging intelligent technologies is described in the attached article in the *PLA Daily*. The author makes a transition to an intelligent operational system of systems to describe a task-organized force and warfare based on intelligent confrontation. This updates the current PLA view of system of systems confrontation based on information-based systems to a warfare system based on intelligent technologies. The author views the intelligent operational system of systems as a task force similar to the information-based operational system of systems composed of the required force modules—for example, command, maneuver, joint fires, and reconnaissance—but more resilient, autonomous, robust, and multidimensional.

However, the author highlights vulnerabilities that could be exploited. The intelligent operational system of systems will be heavily reliant on data to support an intelligent decision-making model. The author believes such a model has weak adaptability based on algorithm construction and parametric establishment. The intelligent decision-making model is only as good as its construction by humans, and unforeseen situations could cause errors leading to disaster on the battlefield. System security could also cause risks.

Intelligent Warfare: Human-Machine Interface.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Internet_of_Battlefield_Things.tif; Attribution: CCDC Army Research Laboratory (Public Domain)



Control of the intelligent operational system of systems will be difficult as its modular forces are dispersed across the physical domain, connected by the information domain, and compete in the cognitive domain. Data distortion and information damage can occur during combat as data, signals, commands, and information are transmitted across domains undergoing multiple interactions with humans and machines. Multiple and complex interactions in the command system across multiple domains can result in corruption of information.

The author notes that the intelligent operational system of systems will be more autonomous, but many critical actions will still require humans to be in the loop. The contention that, as important as technology is, humans are decisive for victory in wars is a common theme in PLA articles on artificial intelligence. This belief questions the degree of human control the PLA is willing to cede to autonomous systems.

Compared with traditional informationized operational system of systems, intelligent operational system of systems exhibit new characteristics such as autonomy, multi-dimensional, resilience, and other features to counter vulnerabilities greatly improving their robustness.

Source: “脆弱性：智能化作战体系“阿喀琉斯之踵” (Vulnerability: the “Achilles Heel” of the Intelligent Operational System of Systems),” *PLA Daily* (Official PRC Military Newspaper), 6 May 2023. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-16&paperNumber=07&articleid=905942

“The inexplicable nature of algorithms can lead to risks. As a special adversarial activity, the decision-making process of military intelligent systems should have “interpretability”, which means that people can understand the logical process and results of intelligent algorithm decision-making. However, the current artificial intelligence system algorithms exhibit a “black box” feature, making it difficult for humans to understand and master its decision-making process. Minor changes and adjustments to simple parameters such as initial conditions and weights may result in complex results. This means that intelligent systems have structural vulnerabilities, unpredictable decision-making risks, and are highly likely to produce erroneous or even dangerous decisions. At the same time, this also leads to hidden backdoors or vulnerabilities in the data, algorithms, models, etc. of military intelligence systems, making it impossible to predict system security risk.

It is difficult to completely trust the human-machine system. In the intelligent operational system of systems, command agencies at all levels collaborate with humans and machines, and the human brain and machine brain jointly constitute the command subject. During the combat process, in addition to human brain commands, all levels also need to implement the instructions issued by the computer brain. Due to the limitations of artificial intelligence “technology”, the “black box” decision-making process, and human subjective consciousness, it is difficult for humans to unconditionally trust and accept machine decision results. This sense of distrust can be reduced through long-term human-machine collaborative training, but it cannot be absolutely eliminated. At a critical moment in the development of the battlefield situation, if there is a disagreement between the decision-making results of humans and machines, it will inevitably affect the speed and quality of decision-making.”

Notes:

- [1] See Kevin McCauley, “PLA System of Systems Operations: Enabling Joint Operations,” *Jamestown Foundation*, 30 January 2017. <https://jamestown.org/product/pla-system-systems-operations-enabling-joint-operations-kevin-mccauley/>

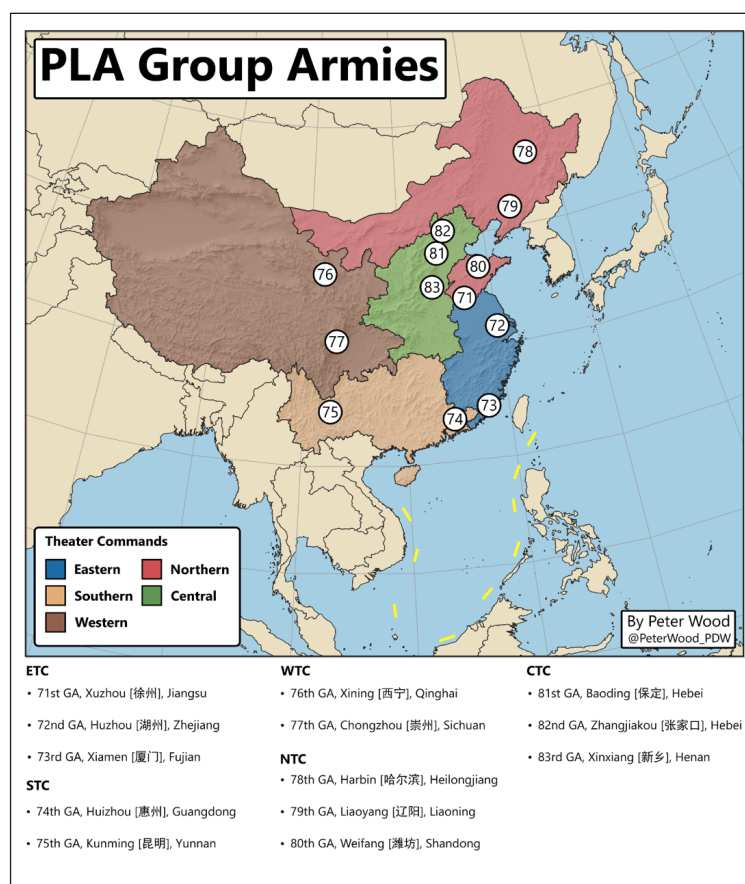
People's Liberation Army Continues To Integrate Intelligent Technology Into Training

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is trying to improve training to overcome a lack of combat experience by incorporating advanced technologies to enhance combat drills. The recent article from the *PLA Daily*, excerpted below, details the incorporation of intelligent technologies into simulated confrontation training as well as the use of equipment simulators by a brigade from the 80th Group Army, Northern Theater Command. The intelligent training and examination system quantifies and evaluates the quality of training by the unit and standardizes assessments for a uniform comparison of training between units. The system conducts monitoring throughout the exercise and provides automatic scoring and a video recording to reduce data errors typical of manual recording. It also generates a training trend chart to identify shortcomings and weaknesses.

The PLA is reforming training to provide realistic training and enhance combat capabilities within the force.¹ The incorporation of intelligent technologies to standardize assessments and provide accurate historical databases to compare training for comparison of unit training and to provide uniform training and assessments of unit capabilities. The employment of weapons and equipment simulators provides efficient and economical training for personnel.

The unit's man-portable surface-to-air missile simulation training room used a smart sensor helmet to track, lock, and strike to target. The "intelligent examiner" records the firing and updates the training database. The system provides an evaluation of the training.



PLA Group Armies.

Source: Peter Wood; Attribution: Peter Wood

This exercise applies the intelligent training and examination system throughout the entire process, which is a measure taken by the brigade to improve the quality and effectiveness of training and preparation by utilizing technological achievements.

Source: “第八十集团军某旅 - “智能考官”助力精准施训 (A Brigade in the 80th Group Army – The “Intelligent Examiner” Facilitates Precision Training),” *PLA Daily* (Official PRC Military Newspaper), 8 May 2023. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-08&paperNumber=01&articleid=905162

“The intelligent training and examination system is equivalent to an ‘intelligent examiner’, which can quantitatively evaluate the level of training. It is not only intelligent and efficient but also enhances the normalization and standardization of assessments. According to the commander of the brigade, this system can achieve full monitoring, automatic scoring, and video retention, reducing data errors caused by manual recording, and is conducive to improving the quality and efficiency of officers and soldiers’ training and examination.”

It is understood that at the beginning of this year, the brigade used an intelligent training and examination system to collect training data for officers and soldiers, and conducted a comprehensive analysis to establish training files for each officer and soldier. After each training session, the system can automatically generate training trend maps The commander can identify weaknesses and provide data support for precise training by analyzing targeting gaps, fluctuations, and other factors.

The reporter walked into the portable ground-to-air missile simulation training room and saw a soldier wearing an intelligent sensing helmet, carrying a missile simulation launcher on his shoulder, tracking, locking, and striking the target. The ‘intelligent examiner’ records the shooting process in real-time and updates the training database. The scoring team restores the on-site situation based on 3D imaging technology, and presents the shooter’s performance evaluation analysis in a three-dimensional manner.

It is understood that in the next step, they will further optimize the training and assessment plan, adjust the program parameters of the intelligent training and examination system, and accelerate the transformation of scientific and technological achievements.

Notes:

- [1] See Kevin McCauley “China’s PLA Explores ‘Battlefield Metaverse’ Training Base to Simulate Future Warfare,” *OE Watch*, 05-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/416134>

The Splitting of the Russian Western Military District

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

Russia announced plans for a large expansion of the Russian Armed Forces at an extended session of the collegium of the Russian Ministry of Defense held in December 2022.¹ Part of this plan involved the creation of two military districts and a new air and air defense army. The accompanying excerpted article from the pro-Kremlin daily newspaper *Izvestiya* discusses how Russian plans to create these two military districts and suggests how the new air and air defense army will be created. The Western Military District, which was created during the 'New Look' reforms, will be split into two new military districts that restore the previously abolished Moscow and Leningrad military districts. The 6th Air and Air Defense Army in St. Petersburg will likely remain at its present location, and the new air and air



Sukhoi Su-25 of the Russian Air Force landing at Vladivostok.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhoi_Su-25#/media/File:Sukhoi_Su-25_of_the_Russian_Air_Force_landing_at_Vladivostok_\(8683076150\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhoi_Su-25#/media/File:Sukhoi_Su-25_of_the_Russian_Air_Force_landing_at_Vladivostok_(8683076150).jpg); Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0

defense army will likely be assigned to the Moscow Military District. The preponderance of the new air and air defense army's combat power will be drawn from units currently in the 6th Air and Air Defense Army.

A new air and air defense army will be deployed against NATO...

Source: Roman Kretsul Alexey Ramm, "Полетный рубеж: новая армия ВВС и ПВО прикроет западные границы России Ее развернут в Московском или Ленинградском военном округе (Flight milestone: the new army of the Air Force and Air Defense will cover the western borders of Russia It will be deployed in the Moscow or Leningrad military district)," *Izvestiya* (Pro-Kremlin daily newspaper), 6 June 2023. <https://iz.ru/1523908/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/poletnyi-rubezh-novaia-armiia-vvs-i-pvo-prikroet-zapadnye-granitcy-rossii>

A new air and air defense army will be deployed against NATO, sources in the Russian Defense Ministry told Izvestia. It will be formed in the Western strategic direction as part of the Moscow or Leningrad military district. It will consist of several fighter regiments, a bomber regiment, an army aviation brigade, as well as air defense units and radiotechnical troops. According to experts, the strengthening of the western borders by the Aerospace Forces is especially important against the backdrop of the entry into NATO of Finland and, in the near future, Sweden...

In early June, the head of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate (GOMU) of the General Staff of the RF Armed Forces, Yevgeny Burdinsky, confirmed that two military districts would be created this year. He also announced plans to create two armies - combined arms and air and air defense. The direction where they will be formed, Burdinsky did not specify...

Currently, the Western Military District includes the 6th Air and Air Defense Army. It consists of one composite aviation division, several helicopter regiments, and an army aviation brigade. Also, this formation has two air defense divisions equipped with S-300 and S-400 anti-aircraft systems. The zone of responsibility of the 6th Army is one of the biggest. It covers the territory of Russia from Karelia to Voronezh...

This is not the first time in recent memory that the Ministry of Defense has strengthened the aviation component in the western strategic direction. As Izvestia earlier reported, this year ground attack aviation units, equipped

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with the famous 'Rooks', of the Su-25 attack family, should appear here. Until recently, there was not a single strike aviation regiment in the Western Military District. The task of the "Rooks" will be the direct support of the Ground Forces on the battlefield. The attack aircraft will also coordinate with army aviation helicopters...

Notes:

[1] The 'New Look' reforms were a series of major Russian military reforms that occurred from 2009-2012.

Russia Positions Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Belarus

By Ray Finch
OE Watch Commentary

The current Russian leadership appears to be taking concrete measures to reposition non-strategic nuclear weapons into Belarus to support its military operations in Ukraine, according to the pro-Kremlin site Century. A key element of the Kremlin's propaganda over the past decade has been its focus on its huge nuclear weapon arsenal, which it interprets to symbolize Russia's superpower status. Not surprisingly, the Kremlin's nuclear rhetoric escalated after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, senior Kremlin officials have repeatedly threatened to use these weapons to achieve their objectives in Ukraine.,

Belarus is now becoming Russia's "nuclear queen" on the borders with NATO and Ukraine.

The transfer of Russian nuclear weapons into Belarus was not altogether unexpected. President Lukashenko of Belarus has increasingly become dependent upon Kremlin support over the past several years.¹ Belarus's economic, defense, and foreign policies largely follow those of Russia.

Lukashenko has permitted the Russian military to use Belarus as a staging area while managing to prevent his soldiers from directly participating in the Ukrainian conflict. To maintain the fiction of Belarus' agency and independence, the article declares that "Lukashenko has long asked to place Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of his country."

While these nuclear weapons will remain under Russian control, President Putin addressed the training of Belarusian crews to deliver these bombs via Su-24 aircraft or the Iskander-M operational-tactical missile systems which belong to Belarus.² According to the article, Putin argues that Russia is merely answering the United States in a "mirror way," since "America stores 200 tactical nuclear weapons, mostly atomic bombs... in six European countries." The article concludes with a quotation from former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who claims that "the horsemen of the apocalypse are already on their way," and that if Ukraine tries to recapture Crimea, it "would be grounds for Russia to use any weapon."



President Putin and Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, Eurasian Economic Forum, 24 May 2023.

Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71198/photos/71199>; Attribution: CCA 4.0 Intl

Source: Alexander Pronin, “Ядерный ферзь России; Растущая милитаризация Европы и наш комплексный ответ (Nuclear Queen of Russia; The Growing Militarization of Europe and Our Comprehensive Response),” *Century* (pro-Kremlin site), 10 May 2023. https://www.stoletie.ru/rossiya_i_mir/jadernyj_ferz_rossii_537.htm

President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly raised the issue of deploying Russian tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in the republic with the Russian leadership. The last time - in March of this year. His request is finally granted....

According to Putin, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko has long asked to place Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of his country. He publicly announced this desire even before the start of Russia's special operation in Ukraine, in 2021...

...The next public discussion of the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus took place in June 2022 during the talks between Lukashenka and Putin.

The Russian leader noted that at that moment in six European countries - NATO members - the Americans stored 200 tactical nuclear weapons, mostly atomic bombs....

“On July 1, we are completing the construction of a special storage facility for tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus,” Vladimir Putin said in March 2023 in Pavel Zarubin's program.

...And he added that the training of Belarusian crews will begin on April 3. According to him, there are already carriers of (Russian) nuclear weapons in Belarus: these are the Su-24s, the Iskander-M operational-tactical missile systems, modified by agreement with Minsk, as well as our MiG-31s with Kinzhals, all this is covered modern air defense systems, including the transferred S-400 anti-aircraft missiles....

Thus, Belarus is now becoming Russia's “nuclear queen” on the borders with NATO and Ukraine....

By the way, special ammunition will be stored and controlled by the Russian army.... The President of Russia made it clear that the decision of Moscow and Minsk is a response to the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, organized by the West.

“Each day of deliveries of foreign weapons to Ukraine ultimately brings this same nuclear apocalypse closer. This does not mean that it will definitely take place. But the horsemen of the apocalypse are already on their way and continue their movement, you can rest assured,” Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Head of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, commented on the decisions taken by NATO.

In addition, Medvedev warned that Ukraine's attempt to retake Crimea would be grounds to use any weapon, including those provided for by the “fundamentals of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.” He believes that an attempt to “split off part of the state” is equal to “an encroachment on the existence of the state itself.”

Notes:

- [1] On paper, at least, Russia and Belarus have formed a “Union State.” The strength of this union improved after President Lukashenko appealed for Kremlin assistance in the summer of 2020. Lukashenko had falsified presidential election results, and when large protests broke out, Russia provided economic and security assistance to quell the demonstrations. Since then, Lukashenko's room to maneuver has been limited.
- [2] Russia has repeatedly promised to move an airbase into western Belarus for the past several years. There has been some speculation that Russia will use this base as the storage site for its non-strategic nuclear weapons. For background, see: Ray Finch, “Russia Deploying Anti-NATO Air Assets in Belarus Under Guise of Training,” *OE Watch*, July 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmsso/p/oe-watch-issues>

Russia and China Expanding Coast Guard Cooperation in Arctic

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

A new agreement with Russia's Coast Guard will give China greater access to the Arctic, according to the following excerpted article in Norway-based *The Barents Observer*. This is something China has sought as a "near Arctic" nation. China has long claimed a special status in Arctic relations since its proclamation that the "Arctic belongs to the world and China has the largest portion of the earth's population." Cooperation between the Russian and Chinese Coast Guards can be an important step in China's ability to gain more access to Arctic waters. The agreement on joint coastal operations could also give China a stronger voice in dictating Arctic policy. An analyst quoted in the article sees this as a significant policy shift for Russia, concluding that "Russia is generally skeptical about letting China get too close in the Arctic, but the Ukraine war might

have changed those calculations." The article suggests the presence of Chinese Coast Guard vessels patrolling Arctic waters, should it come to that, will make Norway's cooperation with Russia's Coast Guard even more difficult.

Cooperation on Coast Guard tasks is both a concrete action and often seen as more harmless than military cooperation. The Coast Guard's work is about protecting sovereign rights at sea, like fishing resources and access to oil and gas. Letting China in when it comes to fisheries inspections would be a big step in practical cooperation that has a security element to it.

Source: Thomas Nilsen, "Russia's Coast Guard cooperation with China is a big step, Arctic security expert says", *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 28 April 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/04/russias-arctic-coast-guard-cooperation-china-big-step-expert>

On 24 April, a groundbreaking memorandum on extensive cooperation in Arctic waters was signed with FSB Coast Guard. The Chinese Coast Guard was then invited to observe the long-planned "Arctic Patrol 2023" maritime security exercise. On 27 April, Governor Andrei Chibis met Chinese diplomats and discussed a roadmap for increased business, shipbuilding and Northern Sea Route developments. Amid the Ukraine war and halt in cooperation with the other seven Arctic nations, Russia turns east for new partners. Opening the door for China is a significant geopolitical change.

"Cooperation on Coast Guard tasks is both a concrete action and often seen as more harmless than military cooperation," explained Andreas Østhagen, an expert on Arctic security with the Fridtjof Nansen Institute. "The Coast Guard's work is about protecting sovereign rights at sea, like fishing resources and access to oil and gas. Letting China in when it comes to fisheries inspections would be a big step in practical cooperation that has a security element to it," Østhagen stated. Government officials in Beijing have for years said China is a "near-Arctic state," but so far, its presence up North has been limited to participating in conferences, annual research voyages, some few investments in Russia's natural resource developments, and a few Asia-Europe shipments along the Northern Sea Route.

"China's Polar Silk Road project seems to be more wait-and-see," write researchers Frédéric Lasserre and Hervé Baudu in a report published in April about the consequences of the war in Ukraine in the Arctic. The report, however, underlines that China is readily credited with great Arctic ambitions, but for now, mainly focused on securing hydrocarbon supplies from Siberia. China has its own projects under construction. Barges

for two additional floating nuclear power plants for the north coast of Siberia and a nuclear-powered icebreaker are currently under construction at a yard in China.

The Russia-China memorandum signed in Murmansk opens the opportunity for joint efforts to combat terrorism, illegal migration, fighting smuggling of drugs and weapons, as well as stopping illegal fishing. The deal was signed by top leaders with FSB Border Guards and the Chinese Coast Guard.

“This testifies that Russia actively wants to invite China into the kind of tasks we have thought Russia would safeguard,” Andreas Østhagen states, finding this a significant shift in policy. “We have thought that Russia is generally skeptical about letting China get too close in the Arctic, but the Ukraine war might have changed those calculations,” He notes that the future of China-Russian Arctic cooperation is difficult to predict, but he makes one comparison: “This reminds me a bit of when my mother-in-law wants to stay with us for a couple of weeks “until she finds something else.”

For Russia, the exercise showcasing FSB Border Guards’ maritime capabilities for the Chinese visitors wasn’t aimed at fishery inspections in the Barents Sea. This was hard-core security, as previously instilled by strongman Ramzan Kadyrov’s special Rosgvardia forces in the Arctic, including at the nuclear icebreaker base in Murmansk.

The exercise scenario was FSB fighting terrorists that had attacked Rosatomflot’s nuclear transport ship “Rosita” in Kola Bay. “All the inputs worked out during the practical maritime exercise confirmed the readiness of interdepartmental structures to solve problems in the waters of the Northern Sea Route,” said acting director of Atomflot Leonid Irlitsa.

Rosatomflot oversees Russia’s Northern Sea Route Directorate. The state-owned company is currently boosting the number of nuclear icebreakers and support infrastructure, key to President Putin’s great Arctic ambitions. For neighboring Norway, FSB Coast Guards’ new cooperation with China could pose a challenge.

“Although I think we are far away from seeing Chinese Coast Guard or naval vessels performing tasks in the Barents Sea, for Norway that would entail a new security challenge and make cooperation with the Russian Coast Guard (FSB) even more difficult,” says Andreas Østhagen. Norwegian-Russian Coast Guard cooperation in the Barents Sea is one of very few areas of contact that has not been officially called off by Oslo after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year.

Russia Possibly Courting Eritrea for Red Sea Naval Base

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 31 May, the Russian government-affiliated TASS news agency, published the excerpted article about Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki's visit to Moscow to meet with Russian President Putin. According to the article, the leaders discussed Russia's war in Ukraine and other issues, such as academic exchanges and trade. Russia is interested in Eritrea because of its location adjacent to the Red Sea and its demonstrations of loyalty to the Kremlin, according to a second article from the Ukrainian publication focus.ua. This article notes that Eritrea was the only African country to vote against a UN General Assembly decision for Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine in March 2022.¹ Russia had previously signed an agreement with Sudan to base four Russian ships and 300 soldiers in Port Sudan, seeking a foothold on the Red Sea, according to the focus.ua article. The article notes that Sudan has not ratified the agreement, and the country's ongoing conflict and Western pressure may cause the country's authorities to reverse the deal. Eritrea, which

borders Sudan, would provide Russia with an alternate base location near the Red Sea should the Sudan agreement not materialize.

The [Russian and Eritrean] leaders plan to discuss the prospects for the development of Russian-Eritrean relations in various fields, as well as topics of regional and international concern.

The Red Sea has strategic importance for Russia. Not only does 10 percent of global maritime traffic pass through it, but Russia's competitors and other major powers, such as the United States and China, have naval bases along the Red Sea in Djibouti, which borders Eritrea to the south.² However, Russia's naval presence near one of the world's major trade arteries represents expansionist intentions from the Ukrainian perspective represented in the article.



Massawa Harbour.

Source: Reinhard Dietrich, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Massawa_harbour.JPG; Attribution: CC x2.0

Source: “Путин начал переговоры с президентом Эритреи (Putin Begins Discussions with the President of Eritrea),” tass.ru (Russian government-affiliated publication), 31 May 2023. <https://tass.ru/politika/17892945>

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with the head of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, who is in Russia on an official visit. The leaders plan to discuss the prospects for the development of Russian-Eritrean relations in various fields, as well as topics of regional and international concern. The current talks were the first meeting between the leaders of the two countries.

According to data for 2022, the trade turnover between Russia and Eritrea amounted to \$13.5 million, while exports from Russia to Eritrea accounted for \$12.7 million. Since 2015, Eritreans have been provided with scholarships to study at Russian universities.

Source: “Завоевание Африки. Зачем Кремлю военная база в Красном море (Why a Russian Base on the Red Sea?),” focus.ua (Russian and Ukrainian language Ukrainian magazine focusing on global economics), 16 February 2023. <https://focus.ua/world/550262-zavoevanie-afriki-zachem-kremlyu-voennaya-baza-v-krasnom-more>

Russia does not abandon attempts to expand control over African states.

Wherever there are “Wagners”, companies associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin gain access to the natural resources of these countries and a certain political influence on them (usually they are authoritarian regimes). There is information about the presence of this group of mercenaries in Mali, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Madagascar, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and possibly Eritrea.

Most likely, the military authorities of Sudan intend to receive weapons from the Russian Federation for their army, and also consider Russia’s military presence as one of the factors guaranteeing the preservation of the political processes in the country after the presidential and parliamentary elections. For Russia, hosting a base carries a wide range of political benefits. First of all, it is a presence in a region that is strategically important for the entire planet. The Red Sea has played an important role in world trade since the beginning of navigation. Now 10% of all maritime trade passes through it.

We are mentioning that at a hypothetical military base (most likely it will be in Port Sudan) no more than four ships and 300 soldiers can be located at the same time. Time will tell how Sudan behaves in such circumstances. However, the growing influence of Russia in Africa, especially in the area of important trade routes, should be a wake-up call for the democratic part of the world.

Notes:

- [1] In March 2023, five countries, including Belarus, North Korea, Syria, Eritrea, and Russia itself, voted against the UN General Assembly resolution that “demand[ed] that Russia “immediately, completely, and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.” Sudan, in contrast, was one of 35 countries that abstained from the vote. See UNGA, “General Assembly resolution demands end to Russian offensive in Ukraine,” 2 March 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>
- [2] The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) opened a “logistical support facility” in Djibouti in 2017 with the potential to support China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and protect Chinese interests and nationals in Africa and the Middle East more broadly. Chinese ambitions in Djibouti were also reflected in China’s desire to compete with Russia, which itself had strengthened its base in Tartus, Syria during the Syrian civil war. Jean-Pierre Cabestan (2020), “China’s Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China’s Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29:125, 731-747.

Iran Claims New Flight Simulator Will Enhance National Power

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

The lifting of some international sanctions, the non-enforcement of others, and its blossoming relations with Russia have enabled Iran to upgrade its aging fleet¹ of fixed-wing combat aircraft.²

One aspect of Iran's effort to upgrade its air capabilities is in training. In the excerpted article from *Mashregh News*, an ostensibly private news agency close to Iran's security and intelligence apparatus, Air Force chief Hamid Vahidi argues that a new domestically produced flight simulator will have an outsized impact on Iran's capabilities and readiness, since earlier imported systems often did not always match Iran's fleet or conditions. Vahidi also indicates that Iran could be a hub for combat pilot training across West Asia. This is an exaggeration, as few regional states, with the exception of Syria, fly the same aircraft that the Iranian Air Force does, and there is no apparent desire by most West Asian countries to train in Iran when they have access to training facilities and simulators in the United States and Europe.

The introduction of the new system also demonstrates the interplay between Iranian universities and the military. In the West, most universities are clearly distinct from the military, except for service academies. In contrast, in Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps either runs entire universities or dominates certain academic departments whose research could enhance Iran's military capabilities.³ It is reasonable to expect growing Iranian Air Force activity both in the Persian Gulf and along Iran's eastern borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan as Iran augments its training and upgrades its fleet of aircraft.

f their personnel are trained on the flight simulator... Iran's national power will increase greatly.



Commander Mohammad Shirazi, chief of the military office for the leader of the Islamic Revolution, inspects the new flight monitoring simulator system, 13 June 2023.

Source: https://media.farsnews.ir/Uploaded/Files/Images/1402/03/23/14020323000580638222618232475677_14000_PhotoT.jpg; Attribution: Fars News Agency

Source: “Shabiyehsaz-e Moraghabat-e Pervaz Cheh Kar Baradi Darad? (What is the Purpose of the New Flight Simulator?),” *Mashregh News* (an ostensibly private news agency close to Iran’s security and intelligence apparatus), 13 June 2023. <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1498976>

...The flight control system made by the Army Air Force was unveiled this morning [13 June 2023] in the presence of General Mohammad Shirazi, chief of the military office for the Leader of the Islamic Revolution; Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi, chief of the Army’s Air Force; Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Marvinam, director of the Shahid Sattari University of Aeronautical Engineering, and a group of Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force specialists. This system replicated all the conditions of an air traffic control tower, such as weather, different times, and the real scenes of an airport. The Flight Simulator is used for training both undergraduate and graduate students as well as courses for flight attendant operations officers. The system is actually a set of five simulators that includes the flight control tower, airport approach radar and aircraft control radar.

Vahedi said, “This system was designed and built by our brave scientists and elite youth at Shahid Sattari Air University,” and added, “The indigenous flight simulator was built for the first time in the country, and we can use this system to train the students of the tower in all fields...

He continued, “The flight simulator is one of the systems we needed to train Air Force students, and was designed and built by using the experience of both the veterans and senior leaders of Shahid Sattari University....” Vahedi further stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the hub of flight simulators in the West Asia, and said the new simulators have upgrades those we already had to take into account the planes for which we did not have simulation....

[Marvinam] said that if their personnel are trained on the flight simulator and perform all the necessary exercises, not only Shahid Sattari students but also the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force will augment their abilities and, more broadly, Iran’s national power will increase greatly.

Notes:

- [1] For example, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran Wants Sukhoi-35 Fighters from Russia” *OE Watch*, October 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/427403/download>
- [2] With regard to developing Russo-Iranian ties, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran-Russia Relations” *OE Watch*, July 2016. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195435>
- [3] For example, see: Michael Rubin, “The University Jihad Stands Together with the Defense Jihad” *OE Watch*, November 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/356999/download>

Iran's Simorgh Transport Plane Makes Maiden Flight

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

The Iranian Aviation Industries Organization unveiled the prototype for its Simorgh transport plane in May 2022. The plane is named after the Simorgh, a mythical and benevolent bird mentioned frequently in Persian mythology and featured in the Shahnameh Book of Kings, Iran's national epic. It is a name that the Iranian military has applied previously to missiles or satellites.¹ The excerpted article from *Fars News Agency*, which is affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), suggests that the plane's development is advancing as the Simorgh undertook a 20-minute test flight reaching an altitude of 8,000 feet at Shahin Shahr, about 15 miles north of Isfahan.

The Simorgh demonstrates... the industrial maturity of the Ministry of Defense.

The Simorgh appears similar to the Ukrainian Antonov AN-140T, a decade-old platform designed to use rough or unprepared airstrips. The Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industries Corporation, based at Shahin Shahr, began importing Antonov AN-140 knock-down kits beginning 15 years ago,

aiming to assemble approximately a dozen per year. The current Simorgh makes minor adjustments to the body, tail, and wings of the AN-140T, includes a cargo ramp, and can reportedly carry 6 tons of cargo.

Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Mohammad Reza Ashtiani's claim that the Simorgh is indigenous is either an outright exaggeration or reflects successful reverse engineering and local production of AN-140 parts. A functioning local production line would enable Iran to sidestep problems with acquiring spare parts and could give Iran the opportunity to become a chief supplier of AN-140T parts to other customers of the Ukrainian Antonov plant in Kharkiv—another source of hard currency for Iran.

The production of the Simorgh transport plane may augment Iran's regional ambitions as its nearly 1,300-mile range will enable Iran to shuttle cargo and troops to regional allies Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The Simorgh's air ambulance capability also likely plugs a gap exposed by IRGC losses in the Syrian civil war.²



Iranian Defense Minister Mohammed Reza-Ashtiani meets with Abdul Karim Mahmoud Ibrahim, Chief of General Staff of the Syrian Army, 10 May 2023.

Source: https://media.farsnews.ir/Uploaded/Files/Images/1402/03/09/14020309001000_Test_PhotoN.jpg; Attribution: Fars News Agency

Source: “Havapeyma-ye Trabari Simorgh ba Mavafeqit Peruz Kard” (The Simorgh Transport Plane Flew Successfully),” *Fars News Agency* (news agency closely affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), 30 May 2023. <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14020309000919>

The Simorgh transport plane, made by experts from the Aviation Industries Organization of the Ministry of Defense, successfully passed its flight test. This aircraft is a new design and is the initial aircraft of its generation. It is fully suited to the needs of the national and military apparatus. It also takes into account the weather conditions of the country, international standards and regulations. It was designed, produced and built by the efforts of our young experts working for the [Iran Aviation Industries Organization, owned by the] Ministry of Defense and knowledge-based companies. It was first unveiled in May 2022 in the presence of the Minister of Defense and the Vice President for Science and Technology.

Among the features of the Simorgh transport aircraft are its light weight, cargo space, flight radius, sustainability to climatic conditions, the ability of land and take-off on short runways, agility and speed, allow it not only to be a transport craft but also an air ambulance.

The design and construction of this aircraft do several things. It saves significant foreign exchange [due to its local production], creates employment, demonstrates both the realization of the resistance economy and the technological and industrial maturity of the Ministry of Defense, and finally shows the integration of national capacities to produce a strategic and technological product. It accelerates the country’s air force and ushers the armed forces into the club of heavy and ultra-advanced aircraft manufacturers.

Notes:

- [1] For cursory discussion of the Simorgh rocket, see: Michael Rubin, “Zuljanah: Iran's New Solid-Fuel Rocket” *OE Watch*, March 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/368233/download>. For discussion of the Simorgh satellite, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Simorgh Satellite Ready for Launch,” *OE Watch*, August 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/241432/download>
- [2] For example, see: Michael Rubin, “IRGC Conducting Training by Fire in Syria” *OE Watch*, April 2017. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195917/download>

Iran Indicates Plans To Commercialize Nuclear Technology, Sell Heavy Water

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

In the accompanying excerpted speech from the official website (*Khamenei.ir*) of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei addresses Iran's nuclear program. Khamenei makes a public call to commercialize Iran's nuclear progress. Specifically, he suggests selling heavy water and nuclear isotopes. Heavy water is a type of water with specific atomic properties useful in the production of nuclear weapons and power. This follows a pattern in which Iran has sought to leverage its indigenous military industry to wean Iran off reliance on outside powers, turning it into a source of hard currency and influence.¹ While Western officials worry about Iran's military exports—for example, the sale of its drones to Russia and elsewhere—² the proliferation of nuclear goods would raise concern to a new level. Khamenei's suggestion that Iran make such sales to countries that are its allies would only enhance this concern. Many Iranian allies are either U.S.-designated state sponsors of terrorism, such as Syria, or revisionist states that reject the post-World War II liberal order, such as Cuba and Venezuela. Syria in 2007 sought to build a plutonium processing plant, allegedly with North Korean assistance. Iranian provision of nuclear goods would complicate operations should Syrian ambitions remain. Iranian export

If we wanted to build nuclear weapons, we would do it, and they know it.

of enriched uranium will increasingly raise the specter of adversarial state and nonstate forces using dirty bombs. Khamenei's speech also touches on past themes including linking Iran's prestige to its nuclear program and denying that Iran intends to build nuclear weapons, even though he also acknowledges that Iran could develop nuclear weapons should he make the decision to do so.



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei addresses nuclear scientists and engineers, 11 June 2023.

Source: [https://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=53104#i\[gallery\]/30/](https://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=53104#i[gallery]/30/); Attribution: Khamenei.ir

Source: “Biyarat dar Didar Daneshmandan, Motakhsasan, Karshenasan va Mosa’valan Sana’at Hasteha-ye Keshavar” (Statements in the meeting of scientists, specialists, experts and officials of the country’s nuclear industry),” *Khamenei.ir* (official website of the Iranian supreme leader), 11 June 2023. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=53111>

... I am truly grateful to the scientists, officials and activists of this industry who prepared this great meeting and this great exhibition for us today; it was a very good exhibition, it was pleasing, encouraging and redeeming. I have prepared a few remarks for you.... The first is about the importance of the nuclear industry. Of course, you know and you know the importance of this industry, but many people do not know the value of the nuclear industry, the various and extensive dimensions of this industry, and its impact on people’s lives and in the progress of the country.... This industry is important to the country’s progress and to the country’s capabilities in sectors such as technology, economy, and health. It brings honor to the country and makes life better for the

continue on 25

people, and brings great international prestige to the country. At the same time, the enemies are afraid that other nations might follow the path and the forward-looking mindset of the Iranian nation

In light of these aspects, everyone should acknowledge that the nuclear industry is one of the fundamental and important components of the country's credibility and the strength and power of the country.... This is also why the enemies are focused on nuclear energy; the reason that we have been challenged for 20 years... They know that we are not looking for nuclear weapons... We oppose mass murder. It is against Islam, whether it is atomic, chemical, or by other means. In the wars of the time of the Prophet, the commander of the faithful, and in early Islam, it was advised to make sure that the water was neither denied to the [enemy] people nor spoiled... [but] if we wanted to go nuclear, they would not be able to stop it, just as they have not been able to stop our nuclear advances so far. If we wanted to build nuclear weapons, we would do it, and they know it....

Today our nuclear facilities and progress are more than a hundred times more than 20 years ago.... Another recommendation is to commercialize nuclear products and services. These developments have good markets in the world and can really benefit the country's economy and income. Cooperation should be made with countries that do not have a conflict with us in this regard.

Source: "Cheshmandaz Sazman-e Enerzhi Atomi Tajari Kardan Sana'at Hasteha-ye Ast (The Vision of the Atomic Energy Organization [of Iran] is to Commercialize the Nuclear Industry)," *Holy Defense News Agency* (official news agency of Iran's Defense Ministry), 12 June 2023. <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/595935>

[Behrouz] Kamalvandi said, "Our vision is to have a strong organization that will take research to the industrial stage and then bring the industry to commerce. The cycle is to research and once research begins, it can't stop. Following research comes a semi-industrial pilot project, then an industrial project, and then a commercial industry. When we say commercial, this means delivery to the market, whether domestic or international. We now have a good market in "heavy water." Many companies from different countries want Iranian heavy water and its derivatives, and they are queuing to buy this product.

Notes:

- [1] For cursory discussion of the Simorgh rocket, see: Michael Rubin, "Zuljanah: Iran's New Solid-Fuel Rocket" *OE Watch*, March 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/368233/download>. For discussion of the Simorgh satellite, see: Michael Rubin, "Iran's Simorgh Satellite Ready for Launch," *OE Watch*, August 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/241432/download>
- [2] For example, see: Michael Rubin, "IRGC Conducting Training by Fire in Syria" *OE Watch*, April 2017. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195917/download>



Iran's Persistent and Growing Influence in Latin America

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Iran's influence in the Western Hemisphere is often underestimated. Recent events have underscored that Iran is trying to grow its regional influence through a patient campaign that seeks to expand relations in authoritarian states in Latin America: namely, in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Additionally, observers saw some unexpected activity when Iranian warships made a port call in Brazil in March 2023,¹ and Iran engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity to solidify its Western Hemisphere presence in June 2023. Iran first sent its Foreign Minister and now President, Ebrahim Raisi, whose entourage was comprised of a "large political, economic, and scientific delegation," aimed at signing strategic agreements with Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba according to *Infobae*, an Argentine outlet covering South America. Raisi spoke of a desire for a more multipolar world and denounced sanctions regimes at all three stops. Iran signed 19 strategic agreements to cooperate in various domains, most notably the oil industry during the trip to Venezuela reported in another article in *Infobae*. This cooperation is important because of how both countries use their cooperative agreements to flout international sanctions on their governments. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega supported the right of Iran to pursue more nuclear weapons, according to *Infobae*. Iran's engagement in the Western Hemisphere is often overshadowed by the efforts of China and Russia. However, Iran has close relationships with the region's three dictatorships and seeks to build beyond those relationships by diversifying its regional partners.² Authoritarian regimes under pressure from the international community continue to view Iran's friendship as a critical lifeline for survival.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi delivers a campaign speech.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ebrahim_Raisi_delivers_speech_at_a_rally.jpg; Attribution: Wikimedia, CC-BY 4.0

Our common position with these three countries is opposition to the hegemonic and unilateral system," Raisi said.

Source: “El presidente de Irán llegó a Venezuela, primera parada de su gira por Latinoamérica con visitas a regímenes aliados (The president of Iran arrived in Venezuela, the first stop on his tour of Latin America with visits to allied regimes),” *Infobae* (Argentine outlet with excellent regional coverage), 12 June 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2023/06/12/el-presidente-de-iran-partio-hacia-venezuela-primera-parada-de-su-gira-por-latinoamerica-con-visitas-a-regimenes-aliados/>

“Our common position with these three countries is opposition to the hegemonic and unilateral system,” Raisi said...The Iranian president defined relations with Caracas, Havana and Managua as ‘strategic’ and affirmed that this visit will mean ‘a turning point’ in the deepening of their ties...“We have important cooperation in the fields of defense, energy, oil, gas, refineries and the petrochemical sector,” Maduro said...On the trip to Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, the Nicaraguan president, defended Iran’s right to acquire nuclear weapons.

Source: “El régimen de Irán pretende consolidar su influencia en la región: su presidente visitará Venezuela, Nicaragua y Cuba (The Iranian regime intends to consolidate its influence in the region: its president will visit Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba),” *Infobae* (an Argentine outlet with excellent regional coverage), 7 June 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/06/07/el-regimen-de-iran-pretende-consolidar-su-influencia-en-la-region-su-presidente-visitara-venezuela-nicaragua-y-cuba/>

The trip will strengthen relations with the countries that Tehran considers ‘friends’ in economic, political and scientific matters...This is Raisi’s first trip to Latin America since he took office in August 2021...Last year Tehran and Havana agreed to strengthen their cooperation in technology and food security, during the visit to the Persian country of the Cuban deputy prime minister, Ricardo Cabrisas.

Notes:

- [1] For more information and context on this incident, please see: David Biller, “Iranian Warships in Rio de Janeiro Stirring Concern Abroad,” *Associated Press*, 2 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-ships-brazil-us-navy-rio-de-janeiro-2b6d98aca758c040e5e75293a05d9db9>.
- [2] Iran’s attempts to broaden its engagement in Latin America have not been uniformly successful. See, for instance, the debacle that ensued when a plane full of suspected IRGC members landed and was seized in Argentina. See: Ryan Berg, “Venezuela’s Mystery Plane Shows Iran’s Strategic Penetration of Latin America,” *OE Watch*, 07-2022, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/420434>.

Taliban Responds to UN Reports Claiming Taliban Rule Aids Terrorist Expansion

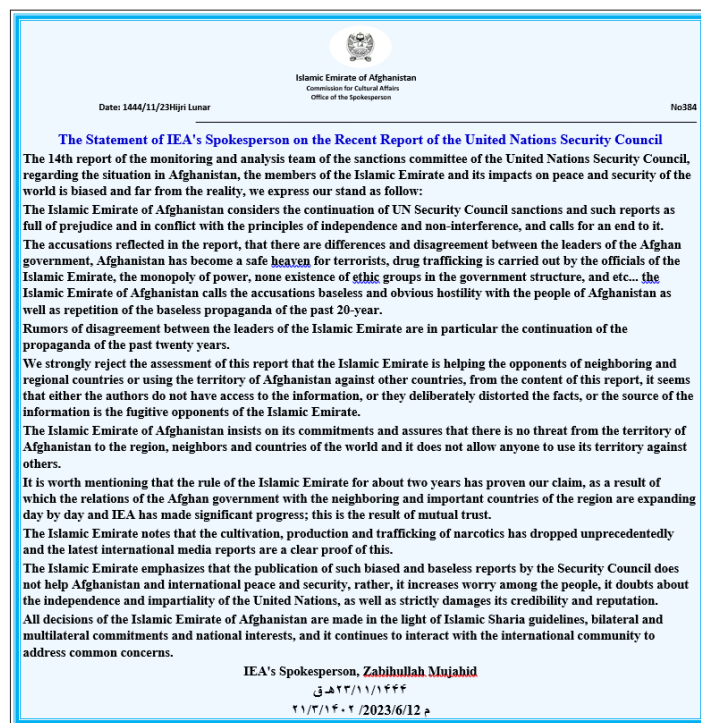
By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

The United Nations Sanctions Monitoring Team for the Taliban released a report in June 2023 critically assessing the status of the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan since the group took over the country in August 2021. For its part, the Taliban released an equally scathing rebuke of the UN's report. The Monitoring Team report, which draws from reporting by UN member states, underscores the link between the Taliban's rule and the greater latitude of movement that certain terror groups have in the region. Most notably, it articulates that "the link between the Taliban and both Al-Qaida and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remains strong and symbiotic," and that there "are indications that Al-Qaida is rebuilding operational capability [and] that the TTP is launching attacks into Pakistan with support from the Taliban." The report does note that not all terrorist groups enjoy equal latitude: the Taliban has attacked members of the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), though not to a degree that the operations of the latter have declined in a meaningful way. To the contrary, the report suggests that IS-K's numbers have grown substantially, now estimated to be between 4,000 and 6,000 fighters, a number that members of the U.S. intelligence community have claimed is significantly higher than their estimates.¹ IS-K has taken advantage of the lack of Taliban control to consolidate its power in more remote locations. As the UN report notes, "Attacks against high-profile Taliban figures raised [IS-K] morale, prevented defections, and boosted recruitment, including from within the Taliban's ranks."

A range of terrorist groups have greater freedom of manoeuvre under the Taliban de facto authorities. They are making good use of this, and the threat of terrorism is rising in both Afghanistan and the region.

Representatives of the Taliban government responded, calling the UN's report "biased and far from reality" and "full of prejudice." The Taliban press release notes that contrary to what the UN report claims, the Taliban government does not allow its territory to be used to threaten neigh-

boring countries, the region, or the world writ large. From the perspective of the Taliban, "the publication of such reports...does not help Afghanistan...rather, it increases worry among the people... [and casts] doubts on [sic] the impartiality and independence of the United Nations."



The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) decries a UN report "biased and far from reality."

Source: <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/the-statement-of-ieas-spokesperson-on-the-recent-report-of-the-united-nations-security-council/>

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has widened the window of growth for Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terrorist groups. The same threat actors that have consumed it for nearly two decades—the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State—still remain pernicious challenges even as the United States has shifted to focus most acutely on near-peer competition with China and Russia.²

Source: “Letter dated 23 May 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” 1 June 2023, United Nations Security Council Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1988/monitoring-team/reports>

The Taliban, in power as the de facto authorities in Afghanistan under Hibatullah Akhundzada, have reverted to the exclusionary, Pashtun-centred, autocratic policies of the Taliban administration of the late 1990s.

The link between the Taliban and both Al-Qaida and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) remains strong and symbiotic. A range of terrorist groups have greater freedom of manoeuvre under the Taliban de facto authorities. They are making good use of this, and the threat of terrorism is rising in both Afghanistan and the region. While they have sought to reduce the profile of these groups and have conducted operations against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-K), in general, the Taliban have not delivered on the counter-terrorism provisions under the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Taliban.

There are indications that Al-Qaida is rebuilding operational capability, that TTP is launching attacks into Pakistan with support from the Taliban, that groups of foreign terrorist fighters are projecting threat across Afghanistan’s borders and that the operations of ISIL-K are becoming more sophisticated and lethal (if not more numerous).

It is too early to judge the impact of the decree by the Taliban in April 2022 banning poppy cultivation. At this point, prices have increased, as has production of the more profitable methamphetamine. Key Taliban individuals remain closely involved in production and trafficking.

The Taliban de facto authorities have had some success in revenue generation and budgetary management, with the caveat that data on expenditures is scant and opaque. The effectiveness of the sanctions regime appears mixed. There is little evidence that it substantially impacts Hibatullah’s decision-making, but lifting sanctions measures is a constant demand by the Taliban engaging Member States. Widespread availability and proliferation of weapons and materiel already in Afghanistan undermines the arms embargo. A number of travel ban exemptions have been sought since the end of the group exemption for the Taliban in August 2022, but information regarding unauthorized travel and late requests is concerning.

Notes:

- [1] Jeff Seldin, “UN Report Warns Al-Qaida, Islamic State Growing in Afghanistan,” *Voice of America*, 15 June 2023. <https://www.voanews-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.voanews.com/amp/un-report-warns-al-qaida-islamic-state-growing-in-afghanistan/7138133.html>
- [2] For more on the state of the global terrorist landscape, see: Jason Warner, “Global Terrorism Declined Slightly in 2022, With the Sahel as the New Epicenter,” *OE Watch*, 5-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/global-terrorism-declined-slightly-in-2022-with-the-sahel-as-the-new-epicenter/>; Jason Warner, “African Leaders, UN See Terrorism in the Sahel as Dire,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/429303>; Jason Warner, “Global Reactions Vary After Death of Al-Qaeda Leader Al-Zawahiri,” *OE Watch*, 9-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/425695>

French Researchers Respond to Wave of Anti-French Sentiment in Africa

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

Unprecedented waves of anti-French sentiment have swept over many francophone African countries over the past four years. These manifest in large-scale civil society protests in Mali and Burkina Faso, the targeting of French counterterror convoys throughout the Sahel, and accusations from both Mali and the Central African Republic that France is actively funding terrorists.¹

The reasons why anti-French sentiment has become so pervasive are detailed in the accompanying article from the pan-African news aggregator *Africanews.com*. The article is based on the findings of an upcoming report from noted French think tank, the Institute for International Relations (IFRI). The report suggests there are three issues: African critiques of the French military and counterterrorism presence, a lack of development, and disdain over the CFA (Communauté financière d'Afrique) currency. The report also notes that France is consistently scapegoated by African political and military leaders for their own failures: "It is always an argument that comes to explain, and ultimately absolve, the responsibility of these elites."

African critics no longer even need to prove that France supports jihadism. [They] just say so."

The pervasiveness of simple untruths maligning French military and counterterror presence in the Sahel—what some researchers have called "Afrancaux News"²—is similarly driving the pervasiveness of the anti-French sentiment. The IFRI report notes that African critics "no longer even need to prove that France supports jihadism. [They] just say so." While Russian disinformation campaigns vilifying France and promoting Russia exacerbate the sentiment, the report's authors recognize that France itself does bear some responsibility for its declining reputation on the continent, with French leaders long believing that anti-French sentiment was merely tied to episodic crises and was not part of longstanding grievances tied to the colonial legacy of France in Africa. Understanding African public opinion remains imperative as many countries in



Anti-French sentiment has been spreading in francophone Africa.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_Flag_\(5089610330\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_Flag_(5089610330).jpg); Attribution: CC BY 2.0

francophone Africa—Mali, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic most prominently—move even further away from France and toward Russia.³

Source: "Pourquoi le sentiment anti-français imprègne l'Afrique francophone? (Why is anti-French sentiment so pervasive in Africa?) *Africanews.com* (pan-African news aggregator)," 15 June 2023. <https://fr.africanews.com/2023/06/14/pourquoi-le-sentiment-anti-francais-impregne-lafrique-francophone/>

Anti-French rhetoric in French-speaking Africa has spread beyond the educated urban elite, and the phenomenon could "take root for a long time," says Alain Antil, a researcher at the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), in an interview.

In recent years, criticism of France's policies has been accompanied by violent demonstrations against French companies such as Total and against diplomatic representations in Chad, Mali, and, more recently, Burkina Faso.

The depth of the phenomenon is "nothing like what we saw in previous decades," points out Antil, who heads Ifri's Sub-Saharan Africa Centre and who on Wednesday, with his colleague Thierry Vircoulon, is publishing a study devoted to "Themes, actors, and functions of anti-French discourse in French-speaking Africa".

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We are a long way from the days “when highly articulate criticism (...) was confined to leading circles of intellectuals and sometimes, during serious political crises, spilled out onto the streets,” he says.

It is striking to note that critics no longer even try to demonstrate untruths: “We no longer even need to prove that France supports jihadism. We just say so,” he observes.

For the researcher, the intensification of anti-French sentiment can be explained by “disappointing economic and political trajectories” in countries where the population had once pinned their hopes on economic progress and democracy.

Faced with the failure of their own policies, the leaders of these countries resort to “scapegoating techniques”: “France is ultimately responsible for the non-development of these countries and the corruption of their elites,” explains Antil. “It is always an argument that comes to explain, and ultimately absolve, the responsibility of these elites.”

At the same time, this anti-French rhetoric has been able to flourish because French leaders have been slow to react.

Until very recently, the French authorities “were in a kind of denial,” seeing it simply as a correlation with crises, “outbreaks of hives” or manipulation by the Russians, explains the researcher.

The study does show “a link between this Russian propaganda war and certain segments of African social networks.”

It is undeniable that social networks have massively circulated false information, such as videos or photos showing French soldiers “supposedly” stealing gold or “consorting with jihadists,” stresses Alain Antil.

But the expert warns against the temptation to explain everything in terms of Russian propaganda.

“Obviously, the Russians are playing their part, having an impact and funding anti-French campaigns,” he says.

However, he warns that it would be a mistake to think that “explaining to Africans that they are being manipulated by the Russians will put an end to it.”

Far from abating, this rhetoric will take root “for a long time in the politics and public opinion of these countries,” he adds, citing three factors fuelling anti-French sentiment: the military presence, the development aid policy, and the currency.

While the number of French troops has fallen drastically from 30,000 in the early 1960s to around 6,100 today, “interventionism has not diminished,” notes the researcher.

Notes:

- [1] For more information on claims that France is funding African terrorists, see: Jason Warner, “Mali Claims France Funded Terrorists; France Denies,” *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/428171>
- [2] For more information on the anti-French counterterror sentiment, see: Jason Warner, Lassane Ouedraogo, and Matthew Kirwin, “The Fake News Phenomenon in the Sahel: ‘Afrancaux News’ and the Postcolonial Logics of Polemical Information,” *African Studies Review*, 65 (4): December 2022, 911 - 938.
- [3] For more on African states’ growing alliances with Russia, see: Jason Warner, “Top Ugandan General Adds to List of Growing Pro-Russian African Military Personnel” *OE Watch*, 05-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/top-ugandan-general-adds-to-growing-list-of-pro-russian-african-military-personnel/>; Jason Warner, “Mali Defends Reliance on Russian Counterterrorism Assistance,” *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/437332>; Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso Fights Terrorism With Recruits and Russia,” *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/436264>; Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso: A Bellwether on Russian and French Presence,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/429302>

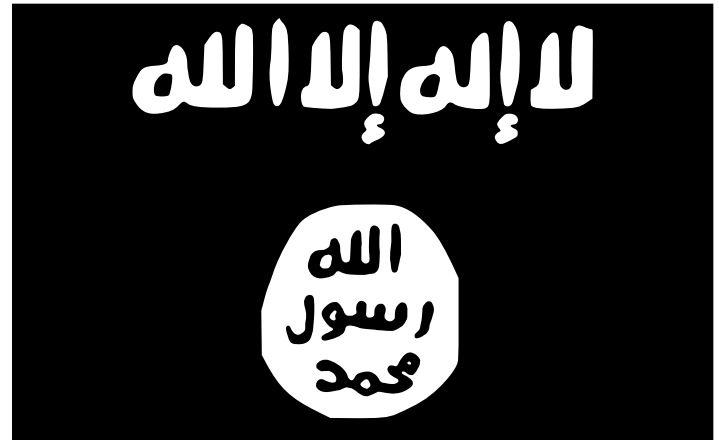
Sahelian Countries Divided on Negotiating With Al-Qaeda, Islamic State Militants

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

The countries of the Sahel are undertaking divergent paths when it comes to the question of negotiating with terror groups as the African region cements itself as the new epicenter of global jihadist terrorism.¹ Most countries in the Sahel, and wider West Africa, have shown a reluctance to negotiate with terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda (AQ)² or the Islamic State (IS),³ as well as with secular separatist insurgencies. Burkina Faso's prime minister, Apollinaire Kyelem de Tambela, was emphatic that his country, which has seen one of the most significant spikes of jihadist violence of any in the world, would "never negotiate" with the militants in his country, according to the pan-African news aggregator *allafrica.com*. He articulated, "The only negotiations that matter with these armed bandits are those taking place on the battlefield." Burkina Faso looks to rely heavily on its armed self-defense force, The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, or VDP (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie). The VDP is an auxiliary unit working alongside the armed forces of Burkina Faso, which has been criticized for providing civilians arms and authority for violence with as little as two weeks of training.⁴ Burkina Faso is also presumed to be receiving some assistance from the Wagner Group to facilitate this kinetic response, which it has officially denied.⁵

Niger's approach [to addressing jihadists threats]... starkly contrasts with the regional trend.

Niger has taken a different approach, combining negotiations with AQ and IS elements with kinetic counterterror efforts. Niger's counterterrorism strategy is seen as being



Niger and Burkina Faso, both afflicted with jihadist violence, demonstrate divergent views on negotiating with jihadists from the Islamic State (flag pictured above) and Al-Qaeda.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/121483302@N02/14690988398>; Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0.

much more effective than the zero-tolerance negotiation policy of other Sahelian states, according to a second article from the centrist pan-African think tank The Institute for Security Studies. Niger's approach is modeled after the successes of two other regional states, Algeria and Mauritania, to their own insurgencies, and it derived from its own successful history of addressing Tuareg rebellions that plagued the country for years. The military-first approach to counterterrorism in the Sahel has shown its limits over the past decade. The authors of the second article give advice: "Niger's neighbors in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea that are affected by violent extremism should take inspiration from the country's strategy as they tackle the insecurity afflicting their populations."

Source: “Burkina Faso: Prime Minister Rules Out Any Deal With Jihadists, Boosts Civil Militias,” *Allafrica.com* (pan-African news aggregator), 31 May 2023. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202305310419.html>

Burkina Faso’s prime minister on Tuesday ruled out any negotiations with jihadist insurgents that have taken control of swathes of the West African country since 2015.

“We will never negotiate, either over Burkina Faso’s territorial integrity or its sovereignty,” Apollinaire Kyelem de Tambela told parliament, adding that the government aimed to double the number of volunteers for the VDP civil defence militia to 100,000.

“The only negotiations that matter with these armed bandits are those taking place on the battlefield,” de Tambela told the Transitional Legislative Assembly.

Source: Hassane Koné and Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, “Is Niger’s counter-terrorism approach an exception in the Sahel?” Institute for Security Studies (centrist pan-African think tank), 5 April 2023. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-nigers-counter-terrorism-approach-an-exception-in-the-sahel>

In early 2022, Nigerien authorities recognised the need for dialogue with jihadist leaders in Tillabéri. This was inspired after several Nigeriens defected from their extremist groups, and violence in the Diffa region decreased after a disarmament and reintegration process launched in 2016....

The use of dialogue in Tillabéri shows strong political will on the part of the government, which is keen to disincentivise engagement with extremist groups, and stabilise the region. Niger’s approach, which combines dialogue and military action, starkly contrasts with the regional trend. Neighbouring countries have reinforced their military tactics through diversifying strategic alliance and employing armed civilians...

By including dialogue in its counter-terrorism efforts, Niger is experimenting with an approach similar to those in Algeria and Mauritania, underpin their decade-long protection against jihadist violence.

Niger’s neighbours in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea that are affected by violent extremism should take inspiration from the country’s strategy as they tackle the insecurity afflicting their populations. A coordinated regional approach would also exert pressure on terrorist groups and ultimately deprive them of human resources.

Notes:

- [1] For more on the Sahel’s role as the new center of global jihadism, see: Jason Warner, “Global Terrorism Declined Slightly in 2022, With the Sahel as the New Epicenter,” *OE Watch*, 05-2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/global-terrorism-declined-slightly-in-2022-with-the-sahel-as-the-new-epicenter/>; Jason Warner, “African Leaders, UN See Terrorism in the Sahel as Dire,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/429303>
- [2] For more on the status of Al-Qaeda in the Sahel and Sahara, see: Jason Warner, “Leader of Al-Qaeda’s Sahelian Branch Explains His Group’s Goals,” *OE Watch*, 05-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/leader-of-al-qaedas-sahelian-branch-explains-his-groups-goals/>; Jason Warner, “Al-Qaeda Leader in Maghreb Celebrates French Departure, Claims No Plans To Attack French Homeland,” *OE Watch*, 04-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/al-qaeda-leader-in-maghreb-celebrates-french-departure-claims-no-plans-to-attack-french-homeland/>
- [3] For more on the status of the Islamic State in Africa, see: Jason Warner, “UN Warns About Islamic State Surging in Africa and Afghanistan,” *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/un-warns-about-islamic-state-surging-in-africa-and-afghanistan/>
- [4] For more on the VDP and critiques of it, see: Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso Fights Terrorism With Recruits and Russia,” *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/436264>
- [5] For more on Burkina Faso’s relationship with Wagner and Russia, see: Jason Warner, “Russia-Supported Military Rulers in Mali, Burkina, and Guinea Continue To Deepen Ties,” *OE Watch*, 04-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-supported-military-rulers-in-mali-burkina-faso-and-guinea-continue-to-deepen-ties/>; Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso Fights Terrorism With Recruits and Russia,” *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/436264>

Scandal Threatens Stability of Colombia's First Leftist Government

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

A scandal has engulfed the administration of Colombian President Gustavo Petro, threatening his reform agenda.¹ Petro's campaign allegedly accepted illegal campaign contributions, including narcotics money from the Maduro regime in Venezuela. The scandal emerged when Colombia's leading weekly magazine, *Semana*, reported on an incident of cash being stolen from the home of Petro's chief of staff, Laura Sarabia. Sarabia suspected her nanny of the theft, subjecting her to a coerced polygraph test and illegally wiretapping her phone, according to the outlet. Simultaneously, *Semana* has a recording in which Armando Benedetti, former senator and, until recently, Colombia's Ambassador to Venezuela, discusses breaching campaign finance limits with Laura Sarabia and hints at dirty money in the Petro campaign. According to the article in the Argentine newspaper *Clarín*, a lieutenant colonel who was part of the illegal wiretapping and polygraph scheme to recover the stolen money was found dead, fueling speculations of potential foul play, although the death has been ruled a suicide.



Senator Armando Benedetti campaigns for Colombian President Gustavo Petro.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Senador_Benedetti.jpg; Attribution: CC-BY-SA 4.0

They took her [the nanny] to the Casa de Nariño, that is, to the Presidential Palace, for the polygraph part.

The allegations against Petro, exacerbated by the president's own obfuscation, are likely to pose the most serious challenge that Petro's government has faced. The inability to adequately counter these accusations will impact the government's stability

and could even lead to Petro's impeachment. As a result of these accusations, it is likely that Petro's planned reforms—such as his proposal for “total peace” with guerrilla groups and criminal organizations²—will stall in the country's congress.³

Source: “‘El presidente falta a la verdad:’ Fiscalía General: Duro choque con Petro por inspección judicial en caso de la exniñera de Laura Sarabia (‘The president is not telling the truth:’ Attorney General’s Office: Hard clash with Petro for judicial inspection in the case of Laura Sarabia’s ex-nanny),” *Semana* (Colombia’s leading weekly magazine), 30 May 2023. <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/el-presidente-falta-a-la-verdad-fiscal-general-duro-choque-con-petro-por-allanamiento-a-la-casa-de-narino-en-caso-de-la-exnina/202302/>

They took her [the nanny] to the Casa de Nariño, that is, to the Presidential Palace, for the polygraph part... During the time she was there, they never gave her access to a lawyer, despite the fact that they were accusing her of having committed a crime, and they also kept her incommunicado... When they did the polygraph, the Police told her that she was a thief and that she should return the money. The boss said that if she spent part of the money that nothing happened, and that she should return the rest.

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Source: “Crece el escándalo por una supuesta trama de corrupción en Colombia y Gustavo Petro sale a defenderse (The scandal grows over an alleged corruption plot in Colombia and Gustavo Petro comes out to defend himself),” *Clarín* (largest Argentine newspaper with excellent regional coverage), 15 June 2023. https://www.clarin.com/mundo/crece-escandalo-supuesta-trama-corrupcion-colombia-gustavo-petro-sale-defenderse_0_9qVh0AODUc.html

The money stolen from Sarabia’s house, which gave rise to a scandal in the government, was allegedly Petro’s, there were five suitcases and 3,000 million pesos (about \$718,000)...the scandal led to the resignation of Sarabia and the ambassador to Venezuela, Armando Benedetti, who was the one who allegedly leaked what happened to the press...In another twist to the crisis, police lieutenant colonel Óscar Dávila, assigned to presidential security and involved in the interrogation and illegal interceptions of Meza [the nanny], was found dead.

Notes:

- [1] For more information on the scandal itself from one of Colombia’s most respected political scientists, see: Sergio Guzmán, “Gustavo Petro’s Biggest Crisis Yet,” *Americas Quarterly*, 5 June 2023. <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/gustavo-petros-biggest-crisis-yet/>
- [2] OE Watch has covered Petro’s political and security reforms in several different articles. For example, see: Ryan Berg, “Colombia’s Gustavo Petro Promises New Approach to Security and Drugs,” *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/428038>
- [3] OE Watch has covered Petro’s plans for and the prospects of Total Peace extensively. For more information, see: Ryan Berg, “Colombia’s Congress Authorizes ‘Total Peace’ Negotiation With Guerrilla and Criminal Groups,” *OE Watch*, 1-2023, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/434199>

Pakistan's Defense Industry Publishes New Weapon Systems Roadmap

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Pakistan has cooperated with China on the development and production of several weapons systems for use in country's armed forces, including the Al-Khalid main battle tank and the JF-17 multirole fighter.¹ Technology transfers of smaller defense items have also provided a boost to Pakistan's defense industry. The accompanying excerpted article from Pakistan defense-focused *Quwa.org* reports on a recent announcement by Pakistan's government-owned Global Industrial & Defence Solutions (GIDS) on a roadmap to produce new products for the country's armed forces. While the roadmap did not include joint production of a new system with China, it still provides a look at production capabilities in Pakistan's defense industry, which has made sales to other governments in recent years.

The GIDS roadmap includes improved variants of existing systems as well as new systems. GIDS "does not develop or manufacture any of the systems it is promoting and selling," but rather it is the commercial component of other state-owned defense companies, according to the article. The roadmap includes two high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial systems currently in development, one of which can carry a payload of 450 kg, or roughly 1000 lbs. These systems could be used in a reconnaissance role for Pakistan and could fulfill several requirements for other buyers.

The roadmap also includes a new surface-to-air missile system and an upgraded variant of a multiple rocket-launch system that Pakistan currently uses. The roadmap is described as "relatively ambitious" and states that "it is unclear how far Pakistan has developed each of these systems." While Pakistan's defense industry has been technologically limited in certain capacities, the article acknowledges that the companies producing these systems are confident enough to reveal them to potential buyers in the roadmap.² It is unknown when all of the systems in the roadmap will be available for potential sales, but Pakistan's new systems could offer buyers cheap alternatives to systems already on the market. JF-17s have a lower cost than other multirole aircraft, for example.² Pakistan sold JF-17s to Nigeria in 2020, marking a boost for the country's defense industry.



Official logo of GIDS.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Official_logo_of_GIDS.png;
Attribution: Public domain

GIDS' future roadmap ranges from improved variants of existing, mainstay solutions – such as the Fatah-series of surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) and Burq-series air-to-ground missiles (AGM) – to newly revealed systems, like the "Group 5 UCAV" or "LOMADS" SAM system.

Source: "Pakistan's Defence Industry Lays Out Ambitious Future Roadmap," *Quwa.org* (news website focusing on defense issues in Pakistan), 22 May 2023. <https://quwa.org/2023/05/22/pakistans-defence-industry-lays-out-ambitious-future-roadmap-2/>

Global Industrial and Defence Solutions (GIDS), the commercial representative of multiple Pakistani state-owned defence suppliers, released its roadmap for future products...

GIDS' future roadmap ranges from improved variants of existing, mainstay solutions – such as the Fatah-series of surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) and Burq-series air-to-ground missiles (AGM) – to newly revealed systems, like the "Group 5 UCAV" or "LOMADS" SAM system.

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It should be noted that GIDS itself does not develop or manufacture any of the systems it is promoting and selling. Rather, GIDS serves as the commercial wing of a conglomerate of Pakistani state-owned enterprises that specialize in defence, such as NESCOM, for example. Basically, it is these state-owned enterprises that carry out the development and production work of GIDS' products...

According to GIDS, there are two HALE UCAVs are under development: the 3,000-kg "Group 5 UCAV" and the 1,650-kg Shahpar III (also designated as "Group 4").

The Group 5 UCAV seems to leverage twin turboprop or piston engines. The Group 5's designers (possibly, if not likely, NESCOM) is aiming to achieve an endurance of over 35 hours and external payload in excess of 450 kg. Though it is called a UCAV, it seems that NESCOM is optimizing the Group 5 for the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) role, especially imaging-related missions...

GIDS also revealed multiple potential systems that may speak to the future of Pakistan's ground-based air defence (GBAD) environment through new SAMs and radars.

First, there is a 'LOMADS' SAM with a range of up to 100 km and maximum engagement altitude of 20 km. According to GIDS, each of these LOMADS units would comprise of a multi-function radar and six multi-cell launchers carrying four missiles each. GIDS did not reveal the guidance and seeker details of the SAM, but it likely leverages active radar homing (ARH) like the majority of its current-day contemporaries.

GIDS also revealed an 'E-SHORADS' system, which it has also designated as the 'FAAZ-SL'. The FAAZ-SL will offer a maximum range of 20-25 km and a maximum engagement altitude of 6-8 km. GIDS stated that the SAM will be truck-mounted (seemingly similar in design to the NASAMS)...

Finally, GIDS has also shown that Pakistan is committed to continue developing upon the systems it already has, such as the Fatah, Azb, Burq, Zumr, and Ribat.

The Fatah-II is an evolved variant of the Fatah-I, an indigenously developed multiple launch rocket system (MLRS). Whereas the Fatah-I has a range of 140 km, the Fatah-II will improve upon it with a range of equal or more than 250 km, while also continuing to leverage the same GNSS-aided INS guidance suite...

Overall, GIDS has revealed a relatively ambitious product roadmap...It is unclear how far Pakistan has developed each of these systems. However, given that GIDS has revealed them to the public (and, potentially, to potential overseas buyers) could suggest that the institutes behind each of these are relatively confident about completing these projects...

Notes:

- [1] For more information on the China's efforts in the development of Pakistan's defense industry, see: Matthew Stein "China Involved in Developing Pakistan's Main Battle Tank," *OE Watch*, August 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>
- [2] For more on Pakistan's sale of the JF-17s, see: Matthew Stein "Pakistan Moving into Sales of JF-17 Fighters," *OE Watch*, May 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>

Armenia Questions Continuing Its Membership in Russia-Led Regional Security Body

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Armenia has long considered ending its membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) due to a perceived lack of support from the organization following numerous clashes with its neighbor Azerbaijan, which is not a CSTO member. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's statement on 22 May that Armenia is considering leaving the organization marked the latest in a series of disputes between Armenia and CSTO leadership that could be a turning point for its role in the organization. The accompanying excerpted article from the independent, Caucasus-focused website Kavkazskiy Uzel provides a look at the issues Armenia has with the CSTO. The article notes "the degree of Armenia's unfriendly rhetoric towards Russia has been rising" since the CSTO refused to intervene in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. In the fall of 2021, Pashinyan made a comment that "Armenia was not going to consider the possibility of leaving" the CSTO, but this position has changed since then. The article notes how the organization and Russia responded to recent incidents between Armenia and Azerbaijan. From Armenia's perspective, clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2022 should have triggered the CSTO's collective defense clause, but the organization declined to intervene. This damaged Armenia's already tenuous relations with the CSTO in addition to straining Armenian-Russian relations, as Armenian officials believed Russia has failed to pressure Azerbaijan to stop attacks against their country.¹ The article also notes that Pashinyan refused to sign a CSTO declaration in December 2022, declined to



Before the meeting of the leaders of the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. From left to right: CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas, Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, and President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CSTO_Summit_2022_01.jpg; Attribution: CCA 4.0

After Russia's refusal to intervene in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, Armenia's confidence in the benefits of participating in the Collective Security Treaty Organization has weakened to the point of threats to leave the CSTO.

host a previously planned CSTO joint military exercise in Armenia in 2023,² and refused to host CSTO observers. Armenia's relations with the CSTO have become bad enough that the CSTO Secretary General became concerned that Armenia will withdraw from the organization.

Source: "Главное о критике Арменией ОДКБ и Кремля (The crux of Armenia's criticism of the CSTO and the Kremlin)," *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (independent news website), 23 May 2023. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/386973/>

After Russia's refusal to intervene in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, Armenia's confidence in the benefits of participating in the Collective Security Treaty Organization has weakened to the point of threats to leave the CSTO. The "Caucasian Knot" has prepared a report on how the degree of Armenia's unfriendly rhetoric towards Russia has been rising...

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During the aggravation of the Karabakh conflict in 2020, Armenia turned to the CSTO for help. In response, Moscow stated that it could not help, since the borders of Armenia were not violated, the war took place on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. During the 2020 war, the Kremlin limited itself to political support for Yerevan, and then sent peacekeepers to the Karabakh conflict zone...In the fall of 2021, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, commenting on Armenia's criticism of the CSTO in connection with Russia's position on the conflict in Karabakh, stated that Armenia was not going to consider the possibility of leaving this organization. However, two years later, Armenia's rhetoric on this issue changed.

In the spring of 2022, Nikol Pashinyan accused the CSTO of not properly responding to the actions of the Azerbaijani military in the Sotk-Khoznavar sector. "The way the CSTO reacted to what happened was a failure for the organization itself. Contrary to existing procedures, the CSTO has not decided to conduct monitoring at the site at the moment, justifying the long-standing fears of the Armenian public that an organization important for the security of Armenia will not do anything at the right time," said the Armenian Prime Minister...

According to Pashinyan, during the discussion of security issues in the CSTO, he received clear assurances that the Armenian border was a "red line" for the organization, but "it turned out that red lines exist only in words." "This is important not only for Armenia, but also for the CSTO, because if you say that there is no border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, then there is no CSTO, because the CSTO has a zone of responsibility, which is defined by borders. If there is no border, then there is no area of responsibility; if there is no area of responsibility, then there is no organization," Pashinyan said.

On November 23, 2022, Nikol Pashinyan refused to sign the declaration of the Collective Security Council (CSC) of the CSTO and the draft decision on assistance to Yerevan. The reason was the lack of a clear political position of the organization on the issue of Azerbaijan's actions...

In January 2023, Nikol Pashinyan stated that Yerevan considers it inappropriate to hold CSTO exercises in Armenia. "The Armenian Defense Ministry has already informed the CSTO Joint Headquarters in writing that we consider it inappropriate to conduct exercises in Armenia in the current situation..." he said.

Commenting on the possibility of Armenia's withdrawal from the CSTO, Nikol Pashinyan replied that the Armenian side would be guided by the state interests in this decision..."When the CSTO Secretary General arrived in Armenia in 2022, he told me that the CSTO was concerned that Armenia would withdraw from the Organization. I said that this concern is out of place, but there is another concern that the CSTO may withdraw from Armenia. My assessment now is this: the CSTO, willingly or not, is leaving Armenia. And this worries us," Pashinyan repeated...

On May 22, 2022, Nikol Pashinyan confirmed at a press conference that the issue of Armenia's withdrawal from the bloc remains on the agenda...

He also explained why Armenia refused CSTO observers, being a member of this military bloc. "The CSTO mission does not operate on the territory of Armenia for the simple reason that, in fact, the organization does not indicate its vision of the territory and borders of Armenia. 90 percent of the problems stem from this," the prime minister said.

Notes:

- [1] For more background on the strained relations between Armenia and Russia, see: Matthew Stein "Armenia Acquires Indian Multiple Rocket Launcher System Amid Delays in Russian Deliveries," *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>
- [2] For more background on Armenia's refusal to sign the CSTO declaration, see: Matthew Stein "Armenia Takes Another Step Away From Russia," *OE Watch*, 2-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>

India's Security Engagement With Egypt and Saudi Arabia Evolving

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

India's military influence activities continue to increase in key Arab countries Egypt and Saudi Arabia.¹ In May 2023, the commanders of the Indian and Egyptian armies met in Cairo to discuss deepening bilateral military cooperation, as reported in the first accompanying excerpt, from the *Twitter* account of the Indian Embassy in Cairo. The meeting follows up on earlier high-level engagements discussing defense cooperation, most notably Egyptian President Sisi's January 2023 visit to India. Their armies conducted a bilateral exercise in Egypt in January, and earlier in May, the Indian and Egyptian air forces also conducted joint training, as mentioned in the second accompanying excerpt from the Egyptian defense ministry website. Egypt is seen as a possible gateway for Indian weapons sales to Africa with rumors of looming weapons sales and possible joint production agreements between the two countries.

The Indian military has also increasingly engaged with their Saudi counterparts. Indian and Saudi naval forces held a training exercise in the Persian Gulf in May, concurrent with a 3-week training program for around 50 Saudi naval personnel in India. India-Saudi military ties "are likely to develop further, with greater efforts toward interoperability and understanding each other's security concerns," according to an Indian defense expert cited in the excerpt from the Saudi English-language daily *Arab News*. The two countries' heads of state spoke in June on deepening relations in several areas, including defense.² Saudi Arabia remains among the top global arms importers and an attractive potential customer for the Indian weapons industry.

The military-to-military ties are likely to develop further, with greater efforts toward interoperability and understanding each other's security concerns...

Saudi media is enamored of the narrative of multipolarity but rarely considers India as part of the great power competition discussion. India's strategic importance is evaluated through the lens of its membership in non-Western multilateral organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Both Saudi Arabia and

Egypt recently became SCO dialogue partners and have moved toward greater involvement in BRICS institutions.³ India's growing security involvement in the Arab world bears watching even though it remains overshadowed by the specter of growing Russian and Chinese influence in the region.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting Mohammad bin Salman, Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia (2016).

Source: Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, via Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prime_Minister_Narendra_Modi_meeting_Mohammad_bin_Salman,_Deputy_Crown_Prince_of_Saudi_Arabia.jpg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>

Source: @indembcairo. *Twitter*, 15 May 2023. <https://twitter.com/indembcairo/status/1658039664345858049>

Indian Army Chief General Manoj Pande proceeded on a three-day visit to Egypt. The visit will provide an opportunity to enhance bilateral #DefenceCooperation and strengthen cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

Source: “The Egyptian And The Indian Air Forces Carry Out A Joint Air Training At An Egyptian Air Base,” *Egyptian Ministry of Defense Website*, 8 March 2023. <https://www.mod.gov.eg/ModWebSite/NewsDetails.aspx?id=42648>

Within the framework of supporting and strengthening military cooperation relations with friendly and brotherly countries, the Egyptian and Indian Air Forces carried out a joint air exercise at an Egyptian air base. The training included implementation of a number of joint drills, including training on aerial refueling, which contributes to the exchange of training experiences between the elements participating from both sides

Source: “Indian navy chief welcomes Saudi cadets during first joint training,” *Arab News* (English-language Saudi daily), 2 June 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2314776/saudi-arabia>

Muddassir Quamar, a Middle East expert and associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, said there have also been efforts to develop cooperation in nonconventional defense areas, as well as the defense industry. “The military-to-military ties are likely to develop further, with greater efforts toward interoperability and understanding each other’s security concerns,” he told Arab News.

Notes:

- [1] For background see: “India-Egypt Ties: Sharply Rising Graph of Engagement,” *Bharatshakti* (Indian defense publication), 12 December 2022. <https://bharatshakti.in/india-egypt-ties-sharply-rising-graph-of-engagement/> and “How India-Saudi Arabia Strategic Ties Are Deepening, And Will Help The Defence Industry,” *ABP News* (Indian news network), 28 May 2023. <https://news.abplive.com/india-at-2047/how-india-saudi-arabia-strategic-ties-are-deepening-and-will-help-the-defence-industry-1605245>
- [2] “PM Modi, Saudi Crown Prince review ties with focus on connectivity and defence,” *Hindustan Times* (Indian daily), 9 June 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-saudi-crown-prince-review-ties-with-focus-on-connectivity-and-defence-101686249683889.html>
- [3] Egypt recently became an official member of the New Development Bank, sometimes referred to as the “BRICS bank,” and Saudi Arabia is reportedly in talks to join. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have also both expressed interest in BRICS membership and are considered potential candidates were the group to expand.

Iran's Proposed Maritime Security Alliance Draws Mixed Reviews

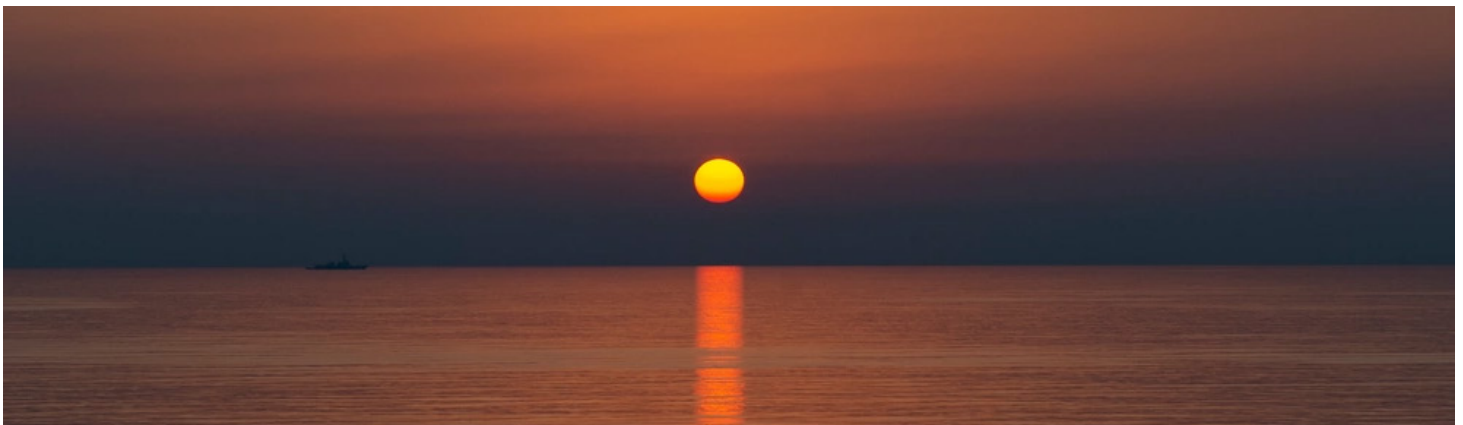
By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

In early June 2023, Iran's navy commander suggested that Tehran was on the verge of establishing a regional naval security alliance that would include India, Pakistan, and several Arab Gulf states, most notably Saudi Arabia.¹ Reactions in Arabic-language media were mixed. Outlets affiliated with or supportive of China, Iran, and Russia portrayed the announcement as a highly consequential move that would further erode, if not fully negate, U.S. regional influence. However, the announcement was essentially ignored by mainstream Arabic-language Gulf media outlets from the countries purported to form the alliance's backbone, most notably Saudi Arabia.

The first accompanying source, an excerpt from Russia's *Sputnik Arabic*, characterizes the proposed alliance as a one-time "fantasy" that has become an imminent reality made possible by the U.S. failure to provide regional maritime security. The second accompanying source, from a report in China's CGTN Arabic, argues that the China-brokered Saudi-Iran détente has created favorable conditions for regional security cooperation between Iran and the Arab Gulf states.² The third accompanying source, an opinion piece in the pro-Iranian Lebanese media outlet *al-Mayadeen*, describes how this new alliance constitutes Iran's "imposition of a new deterrence theory and a great challenge to the United States of America and its hegemony in the region," as well as "a practical reality, a fatal blow to the strategic interests of Israel."

Although not a tacit rejection of the idea, other Gulf media outlets have been less enthusiastic and officials from the Arab states involved have not commented. Prominent Saudi media outlets, such as *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *al-Riyadh*, have also kept quiet. By contrast, Saudi media outlets have vocally expressed new alignment with Iran on regional matters, most notably Syrian normalization since Saudi Arabia's May 2023 détente with Iran. Iran's inclusion in the Russo-Chinese "Maritime Security Belt" exercises in the Indian Ocean, most recently in March 2023, indicate the possibility of a Russo-Chinese role in encouraging a regional naval coalition that marginalizes the United States' role. Chinese interest in and encouragement of this Iranian-led security mechanism, if genuine, suggests that Saudi leadership might take the idea more seriously than the lack of media coverage would otherwise suggest.

Iran's actual and real success in forming [the new naval alliance] is an imposition of a new deterrence theory and a great challenge to the United States of America and its hegemony in the region, which it is slowly losing.



North Arabian Sea (January 2021).

Source: Photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Jose Madrigal, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6493578/nimitz-transits-arabian-sea>; Attribution: Public Domain

Source:

“نم حې صأ اذامل .. جېلخل او نارېا نېب ېرحب فللاحت
اهسفنن اهنما ىلع ةقطنملا لود ظفاحت نا ېرورضل

(Naval alliance between Iran and the Gulf... Why did it become necessary for regional countries to guarantee their own security?),” *Sputnik Arabic* (Russian Arabic-language media outlet), 5 June 2023. <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20230605/اهنما-ىلع-ةقطنملا-لود-ظفاحت-نا-ېرورضل-نم-حبصأ-اذامل-جېلخل-او-نارېا-نېب-ېرحب-فللاحت-اهسفنن-1077771292.html>

A few weeks ago, talk of an alliance including Iran and the Gulf countries together was a fantasy, but it has become a reality with the announcement of the imminent formation of a naval alliance that includes the countries of the region... Hassan Ibrahim Al-Nuaimi, an Emirati political analyst, considered that the countries of the region suffered from maritime threats, while foreign countries failed to secure the seas in the region. Thus, it became clear to the Arab Gulf states that these foreign countries only pursue their own agendas, and do not care about the interests of other countries.

Source:

“طسوالا قرشلا ېف تاقالعل نېسحت طسو ېرحب فللاحت لېكشتل ططخت نارېا”

(Iran plans naval alliance amidst improving relations in Middle East),” *CGTN Arabic* (Chinese Arabic-language media outlet), 6 June 2023. <https://arabic.cgtn.com/news/2023-06-06/1666049661388214273/index.html>

Iran’s proposal for a security alliance or coordination mechanism with Gulf countries is completely natural. Iran had the idea, and it is not a new one, but conditions were not adequate in the past...

Source:

“ةقطنملا ىلع الكريما ةنمي ههجاوم ېف نارېا .. ىلود فللاحت

(International alliance... Iran confronting American regional hegemony),” *al-Mayadeen* (pro-Iran Lebanese media outlet), 12 June 2023. <https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/ىلع-الكريما-ةنمي-ههجاوم-ېف-نارېا-ىلود-فللاحت-ةقطنملا>

Iran’s actual and real success in forming it is an imposition of a new deterrence theory and a great challenge to the United States of America and its hegemony in the region, which it is slowly losing... The international naval alliance is a joint security project for Iran and the Gulf states, the realization of which constitutes a practical reality, a fatal blow to the strategic interests of “Israel” in that region...

Notes:

[1] In addition to Pakistan and India, Iran’s proposed alliance is to include Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Iraq.

[2] The CGTN video report cites Dr. Niu Xinchun, the Director of Middle East Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/NEW/en-us/Institution.html?subtype=Middle%20East&&type=region>

Malian Special Forces Sustain Collaboration With Russia's Wagner Group

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 29 May, *Le Monde*, the French-language publication covering international affairs in France and Francophone countries, reported on the Malian Autonomous Special Forces Battalion (BAFS), which is the conduit for Russian Wagner mercenaries to support the Malian army. BAFS became widely known among Mali observers when one of its members, Colonel Assimi Goita, launched a coup in 2020 that brought himself into power. According to the article, BAFS' importance increased after it participated in the military coup in 2020 and then helped topple the transitional government in 2021.¹ After this second coup, relations with France and other Western countries soured and the new coup leaders welcomed Wagner Group to support BAFS.

The BAFS was the gateway for Wagner's mercenaries into the center of the country.

Wagner now has 1,600 troops in Mali and its current objective is ostensibly to fight alongside the BAFS in counter-terrorism operations in central Mali, according to the *Le*



Russian security forces in Bangui.

Source: Corbeau News Centrafrique, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_mercenaries_in_Koundili.jpg; Attribution: CC x 2.0

Monde article. However, the article claims summary executions have occurred when BAFS and Wagner Group operate together. Malian leaders claim “only terrorists” are killed in these operations and have vociferously rejected any criticisms of BAFS' cooperation with Wagner Group, indicating that Wagner will remain in Mali.²

Source: “Massacre de Moura au Mali: ce que l'on sait des deux militaires sanctionnés par les Etats-Unis (Massacre of Moura in Mali: what we know about the two soldiers sanctioned by the United States)” *lemonde.fr* (French daily with a focus on analysis and opinion and with socialist leanings), 29 May 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/29/massacre-de-moura-au-mali-ce-que-l-on-sait-des-deux-militaires-sanctionnes-par-les-etats-unis_6175335_3212.html

Mali remains plagued by both security and political instability: the military retook power from civilians after two coups in August 2020 and May 2021.

The BAFS was the gateway for Wagner's mercenaries into the center of the country. Deployed in Mali to help Bamako fight terrorism, the Russian private security group, which now has nearly 1,600 men on the ground, gained a foothold in the center of the country in early 2022.

It is from this locality that Wagner and the FAMA conduct a large part of their anti-terrorist operations in the center and during which several instances of abuses against civilians have been noted by humanitarian and human rights organizations.

The Malian government maintains that only “terrorist fighters” were killed by the army in Moura and it persists, moreover, in denying the presence of Wagner in the country, despite confirmations of the deployment of the group in Mali emanating from the Russian authorities.

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Notes:

- [1] Mali's first military coup occurred in 2020 when a group of soldiers from the Malian army mutinied and arrested President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita and forced him to resign and dissolve the government and National Assembly. Although the mutinying soldiers promised to hold elections and reinstate the constitutional system, no clear path for transition emerged. Subsequently, nine months later, in 2021, Mali's military arrested the interim civilian president and prime minister whose appointments the previous military coup leaders had overseen, but now the coup leaders claimed that the cabinet formed by the civilian leaders violated the terms of Mali's transition charter. Although that charter called for new democratic elections to be held in February 2022 to fully restore Mali to civilian rule, the coup leaders have not held those elections and remain in power. This has led to deteriorating relations with the West and has coincided with closer relations with Russia. See Ena Dion, "After Two Coups, Mali Needs Regional Support to Bolster Democracy," *United States Institute of Peace*, 9 December 2021. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/12/after-two-coups-mali-needs-regional-support-bolster-democracy>

- [2] The mutiny by Wagner Group CEO Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 seems to have little effect on Wagner's presence in Africa, including in Central African Republic (CAR), where its force is larger than in any other African country. The Russian Ambassador to CAR has claimed there are 1,890 "Russian instructors" in the country, who are reportedly "running" the country alongside the CAR government and have "displaced" the former colonial and post-colonial power, France. See Al-Jazeera, "Russian envoy says 1,890 Russian 'instructors' are in CAR," 3 February 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/3/russian-envoy-says-1890-russian-instructors-in-central-african-republic-ria>