

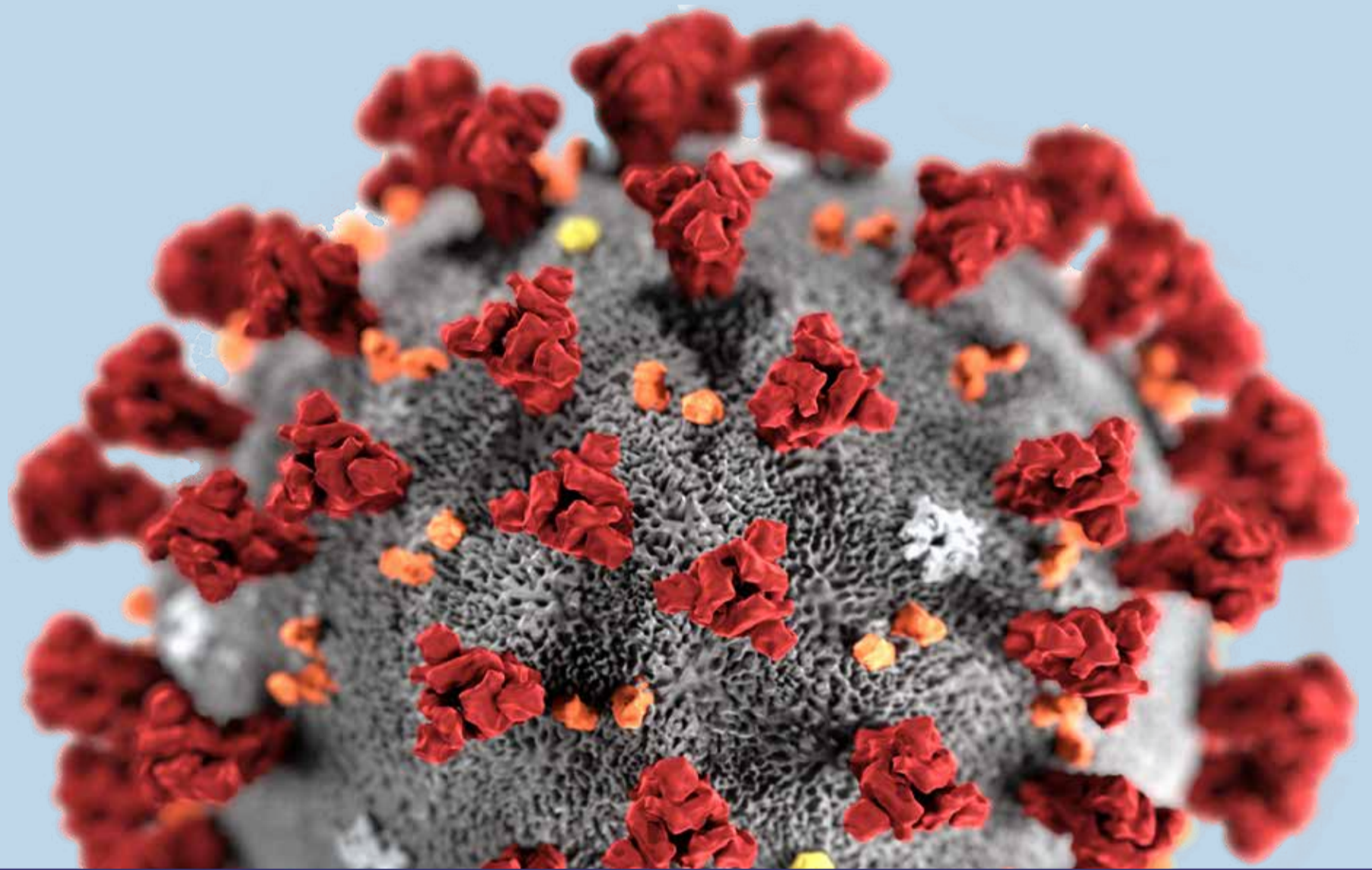
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FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



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ON THE COVER:

Computer render of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

Source: CDC/ Alissa Eckert, MS; Dan Higgins, MAM via Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2019-nCoV-CDC-23312.png>, Public Domain

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Russia: Tanks A Lot

OE Watch Commentary: Five years ago, the Russian military displayed its new, 4th generation T-14 Armata tank during the annual Victory Day Parade. At the time, both domestic and foreign military observers suggested that this fundamentally new tank, of which 2,000 were planned to be built, could change the armored correlation of forces in Russia's favor. Production delays and design problems, however, have reduced the production target to a modest 130 tanks, resulting in a more modest reassessment of Russia's armored forces. Still, as the brief excerpt from *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye* argues, "the tank was and remains the embodiment of the military power of Russia."

The author begins his tank analysis by claiming that the chief concern of the West during the Cold War was "the avalanche of Soviet tanks rushing to the English Channel," where the USSR had as many tanks "as NATO and China combined." He then goes on to describe how post-Soviet Russia employed tanks in the various conflicts over the past 25 years (e.g. Chechnya, Georgia) and where the tank has played a major role in other regional (e.g. Iraq, Libya, Donbass, Yemen and Syria) wars.

The article describes the current disposition of Russian tank forces (unit, location, model of tank), claiming that the Russian armed forces have approximately 2000 tanks in combat units and at least as many in storage. The author points out that even though the "tank is constantly buried," it always comes back because "there is nothing comparable to the tank, in terms of combining firepower, mobility and security, and never will be." In addition, he claims that since "man lives on earth, not in the air or in the water... the land war will ultimately always be the main one."

The author concludes by pointing out that the "one significant drawback - the price" was the primary reason behind the decision to reduce the planned production of the Armata from 2,000 to 130. He goes on to explain that "the current number of [all models of] tanks in combat units of the Russian military cannot be considered acceptable, given the size of the country, the length and geographical vulnerability of its borders." He asserts that "Russia needs to have at least 5 thousand tanks in service and as many in storage." He suggests that these tanks should not be deployed against NATO (since "NATO troops are not ready for such battles"), but rather in the Central and Eastern Military Districts to defend against "PLA tankers." (Also see: "Sinking the Armata?" *OE Watch*, October 2019) **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

"...The tank was and remains the embodiment of the military power of Russia..."



T-14 Armata Tank at the 2015 Victory Day Parade, Moscow.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin via VitalyKuzmin.net, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/9th-May-military-vehicles/i-R62n9MV/A>, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Continued: Russia: Tanks A Lot

Source: AAlexander Khranchikhin, “Преждевременный отказ от брони (Premature Cancellation of Armor),” *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, 20 February 2020. http://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2020-02-20/1_1082_tanks.html

The tank was and remains the embodiment of the military power of Russia.... In the West during the years of the Cold War they were not afraid of anything like the avalanche of Soviet tanks rushing to the English Channel. In the USSR there really were a lot of tanks. About the same as NATO and China combined....

During the first Chechen war, the Russian Armed Forces lost more than 300 T-62, T-72 and T-80 tanks, but perhaps this number includes not only irretrievable losses, but also tanks to be recovered.... During the second Chechen war, all tanks were equipped with dynamic protection and were used under the guise of infantry units, so the losses decreased by an order of magnitude....

...In service with the 4th TD (Kantemirovskaya) as part of the ZVO (the location is Naro-Fominsk, Moscow Region), there are 188 T-80U and 41 T-72B3. There are no more T-80U tanks in combat units. On the basis of the 7th TBR TsVO (Chebarkul, Chelyabinsk region), the 90th TD was formed. It consists of at least 120 T-72B, which are supposed to be replaced by T-90. There are also two tank brigades: the 5th in the Eastern Military District (Ulan-Ude) and the 6th in the Western Military District (Dzerzhinsk, Nizhny Novgorod Region), 94 T-72B / B3 each.

...Paradoxically, it is the tank that is constantly buried, which does not happen to any other class of equipment. It is doubly paradoxical that they bury him because of allegedly too much vulnerability on the battlefield, no other charges are brought against the tank... If the tank is outdated due to vulnerability, then a land war can no longer be fought at all, which can hardly be discussed seriously. Still, man lives on earth, not in the air or in the water. Therefore, the land war will ultimately always be the main one... And there is nothing comparable to the tank, in terms of combining firepower, mobility and security, and never will be.

In all recent wars, losses in tanks turn out to be very large, an extremely striking example of this is the war in Libya (total losses of the parties - more than 200 tanks), Donbass (at least 250 tanks were destroyed in total), Yemen (about the same) and Syria (total loss of sides - at least 750 tanks). ...Therefore, tanks are not going anywhere, at least in the foreseeable future....

The Russian Armata is a major breakthrough in the development of armored vehicles in the entire post-war history.... True, it seems that the “Armata” has one significant drawback - the price. And that is why the tank is moving so slowly towards adoption.

...Moreover, the current number of tanks in combat units (approximately 2 thousand) cannot be considered acceptable, given the size of the country, the length and geographical vulnerability of its borders. Russia needs to have at least 5 thousand tanks in service and as many in storage....

Another circumstance is the endless funeral of the tank described above, exacerbated by another myth: large-scale tank battles will never happen again. Yes, indeed, they will never be between Russia and NATO. For the sole reason, NATO troops are not ready for such battles due to psychological reasons. But such battles with the Ukrainian army are already quite possible (they even already had a place). And - most importantly - they are quite possible with the PLA tankers....

Fangs of the Lone Wolf

Chechen Tactics in the Russian-Chechen Wars 1994-2009

Dodge Billingsley
with Lester Grau

Fangs of the Lone Wolf is about combat experience in urban, mountain and fairly open terrain. It is not a comprehensive history of conflict. This book is a series of snapshots — of vignettes — describing the difficulty, the hardship, the victories and the defeats of the participants. It is an examination of the raw data of combat in a foreign land, and is aimed to advance the professional military study of conflict.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/195587/download>



Great Patriotic Victory: Developing Military Patriotism in Russian Society and Military

OE Watch Commentary: Provided the country can contain the coronavirus, Russian defense officials are gearing up to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War (WW II) in May. Besides the massive parade planned for Red Square on May 9th, Russians will commemorate the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in hundreds of venues throughout the country. In the brief excerpt from the military weekly, *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* (Military-Industrial Courier), General Andrei Kartapolov, Deputy Minister of Defense and Head of the Main Military-Political Directorate of the RF Armed Forces, discusses some of the preparations for this anniversary. He also notes the current situation in the Russian military and provides a brief assessment on the recently instituted military-political bodies.

General Kartapolov begins by asserting that he is “deeply convinced that today the Russian media convey to society the whole truth about the army and navy.” Given the quasi-Kremlin control over the country’s major media, negative military reporting has become scarce. Kartapolov goes on to claim that the Russian military today is “modern, well-equipped, technologically advanced,” and that to ensure that “no one... has the desire to attack... we must be the strongest.” Indeed, Kartapolov asserts that Russia is now leading “in the development and creation of modern arms and military equipment,” and that therefore, other countries must “catch up with us.”

The bulk of the article describes how the Ministry of Defense (MoD), which will play the “main role,” is “actively preparing for the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory.” After insisting that “the ideology of the state can and should be patriotism,” Kartapolov reminds readers that “on the eve of May 6–7, we plan to hold a ceremony for the consecration of the main temple of the Armed Forces.” Adjacent to the temple, the MoD “will open the multimedia complex ‘Memory Road,’” which will display “microphotographs” and “information on 33 million [Soviet] people” who fought in the war. Kartapolov states that “almost everyone has relatives who took part in the Great Patriotic War,” and that in “this complex of folk memory... each and every one will be listed. Everyone will be able to come and see their ancestors.”

Toward the end of the article, Kartapolov briefly touches upon “the current state and work of the recently created military-political bodies,” positing that “it’s too early to give them an assessment.” He points out that over the past 30 years, with the advent of new technologies, “the structure of consciousness has changed dramatically.” As opposed to the “Soviet people who were brought up in a team and clearly understood what it was, now... in the behavior of people, individualism is more manifested, each more often thinks of himself.”

He suggests that “the task of educational bodies and other structures in the army and navy is to make our servicemen think more about their homeland.” This appears to be part of a greater effort to develop contemporary military patriotism in Russian society and military. (Also see: “Letters to Great-Grandfathers at the Front: Developing Military Patriotism in Russian Society,” *OE Watch*, March 2020.) **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**



Colonel-General Andrei Kartapolov.

Source: mil.ru via wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrey_Kartapolov,_2018.jpg, CCA-4.0 Intl

“...the ideology of the state can and should be patriotism...”



Continued: Great Patriotic Victory: Developing Military Patriotism in Russian Society and Military

Source: Andrei Kartapolov, Oleg Falichev, “У русского офицера один путь – славный,” (The Russian officer has one way - the glorious),” *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer*, 10 March 2020. <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/55754>

Colonel-General Andrei Kartapolov, Deputy Minister of Defense, Head of the Main Military-Political Directorate of the RF Armed Forces, spoke about the tasks and problems of educational work in the army and navy, about plans for preparing for the 75th anniversary of the Victory for the “Military-Industrial Courier.”

...I am deeply convinced that today the media conveys to society the whole truth about the army and navy as it is. And it is that our Armed Forces are modern, well-equipped, technologically advanced. They serve people devoted to the Fatherland.

...Our task is not just to defend the country, but to ensure that no one, as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Putin said, has the desire to attack. Therefore, we must be the strongest, although our defense budget is only the seventh in the world after the USA, China, India, Great Britain, Saudi Arabia and France ...

...But we, as they say, are strong enough. Moreover, for the first time in a long time, we are not catching up with other countries in the development and creation of modern arms and military equipment. They must catch up with us.

...The ideology of the state can and should be patriotism. There is no other and, probably, there is no need to invent anything. It is necessary to explain this simple idea to fellow citizens, to convey it to the personnel and to follow it.

...Now we are actively preparing for the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory. I believe that it is the events that the Ministry of Defense will carry out that will play the main role. And not only the Victory Parade. On the eve of May 6–7, we plan to hold a ceremony for the consecration of the main temple of the Armed Forces. This is a great event. At the same time, we will open the multimedia complex “Memory Road,” which will be located on the territory of the temple... The panel of microphotographs will contain information on 33 million people. Today we have collected 29 million exhibits. We have over six million photos - verified and processed. And we continue this work throughout the country.

... Almost everyone has relatives who took part in the Great Patriotic War.... And in order not to forget anyone, this complex of folk memory is being created, where each and every one will be listed. Everyone will be able to come and see their ancestors.

...As for the current state and work of the created military-political bodies, I think it's too early to give them an assessment. We see perfectly what and how to do it, but the problem is that over the past years the structure of consciousness has changed dramatically - every soldier, sergeant and officer. If earlier it was Soviet people who were brought up in a team and clearly understood what it was, now human consciousness has become somewhat different. In the behavior of people, individualism is more manifested, each more often thinks of himself. Everyone uses gadgets, freely receiving alternative information. The task of educational bodies and other structures in the army and navy is to make our servicemen think more about their homeland....

Compendium of Central Asian Military and Security Activity

By Matthew Stein

Since Central Asian states gained independence in 1991, new regional military and security alliances have been created (some of which are Russian-led), new military partnerships with non-NATO countries have been established, a number of joint military exercises have been conducted, over a dozen high-profile incidents of violence and civil unrest have taken place, and military installations have been used by foreign militaries. While this activity gained attention, it has not been collectively compiled. A compilation of this activity can serve as a guide for current and future military and security involvement in Central Asia.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/194880>





New Rocket-Assisted Projectile Will Extend Russian Artillery Range

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpted article from *Izvestia* discusses Russian plans to employ “super-long-range projectiles” for the new 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV and the Msta family of howitzers, that can deliver precision strikes to a range of over 100km. The current Russian precision guided artillery projectile, the Krasnopol, only has a maximum range of 20km. These “super-long-range projectiles” will give Russian maneuver brigades and divisions an organic long-reach capability that previously could only be found at the Combined Arms Army/Tank Army/Army Corps-level with operational-tactical missile systems such as the Iskander (SS-26 STONE/SSC-7) and the recently retired Tochka (SS-21 Scarab). Interestingly, *Izvestia* mentions that there are several such systems in development. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**



Self-propelled gun 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/April-22nd-rehearsal-Alabino/i-LB8hW4M>, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



50P6E TEL for S-350 Vityaz system.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/ARMY-2019-Demonstration-part-2/i-PPmBJXJ>, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

“The unique munitions will permit Koalitsiya-SV to deliver precision strikes to a range of over 100 kilometers. The innovations also will augment the unit of fire of the Msta family of howitzers.”

Source: Anton Lavrov and Roman Kretsul, “Долгорукая пушка: дальность стрельбы артиллерии РФ вырастет в пять раз (A Long-Reach Gun: Russian Federation Artillery Range of Fire Will Increase Fivefold),” *Izvestia Online*, 5 March 2020. <https://iz.ru/974543/anton-lavrov-roman-kretcul/dolgorukaia-pushka-dalnost-strelby-artillerii-rf-vyrastet-v-piat-raz>

A Long-Reach Gun: Russian Federation Artillery Range of Fire Will Increase Fivefold

Izvestia was informed by sources in the defense-industrial complex that work now is underway on several versions at once of super-long-range projectiles for the new 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV howitzer. The publication’s sources refused to give precise dates for its completion, but they explained that the developments will be transferred to testing in the near future. The unique munitions will permit Koalitsiya-SV to deliver precision strikes to a range of over 100 kilometers. The innovations also will augment the unit of fire of the Msta family of howitzers.

One of the super-long-range munition projects is a telescoping guided projectile with rocket ramjet engine. Scientific research already is being conducted at the present time to create an exotic munition expanding in flight like a telescope. Such a transformation permits improving characteristics of the built-in engine and radically increasing range compared with the traditional construction.

“The target can be illuminated from an unmanned aerial vehicle,” military expert Viktor Murakhovskiy told *Izvestiya*. “But there also are other engineering solutions that permit high accuracy. In this area we will be at the same level as the most advanced developments of Western countries. “The principal purpose of these smart munitions is to engage especially important targets in the tactical depth: command posts, communications centers, missile launch positions, airfields, and helicopter pop-up sites,” the expert added.

In contrast to ballistic missiles, the artillery projectile is impossible to intercept by PVO [air defense] assets. Its flight time is less. The munition arrives entirely by surprise without giving the enemy time to take cover or displace.

...According to developers’ information, new models of heavy and medium Russian UAVs can be equipped with powerful laser rangefinder-target designators. This will enable using them in the role of gun layers for existing and new long-range guided projectiles even at maximum ranges of howitzer fire.



GIS Technology Seen As Key Enabler for Russian Armed Forces

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpted interview of Major General Alexander Nikolayevich Zaliznyuk, the Chief of the Russian Federation Armed Forces General Staff Military Topographic Directorate, by *Krasnaya Zvezda*, explains the Russian view of the importance of geospatial information systems (GIS) in the support of the Russian Armed Forces.

According to the interview, the Armed Forces Topographic Service's primary missions are: (1) The accomplishment of measures for the topogeodetic and navigational support of the Armed Forces and other troops, military formations, and agencies; (2) The accomplishment of geodesic, topographic, and cartographic work; (3) Topogeodetic and navigational support in furtherance of the combat and mobilization readiness of troops and forces; (4) The creation of products and the provision of support to troops and forces with topogeodetic information systems in digital and analog forms, initial astrogeodetic and gravimetric data, and the accounting and monitoring of use of these products and services.

The accompanying excerpted article from the Russian Ministry of Defense explains how geospatial data is disseminated to the Russian Armed Forces through military district-level "Geospatial Information and Navigation Centers" [центра геопространственной информации и навигации] that provide geospatial products (to include 3D products) and support to commanders of all levels. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**

“Today the Armed Forces must obtain cartographic information, the timeliness of which is numbered not in years but in days and even in hours.”
-Major General Alexander Nikolayevich Zaliznyuk, Chief of the Russian Federation Armed Forces General Staff Military Topographic Directorate



PNGK-1 navigation and geodesic vehicle.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/ARMY-2017-Static-p3/i-wCSPwd2>, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Continued: GIS Technology Seen As Key Enabler for Russian Armed Forces

Source: Viktor Khudoleyev, “Курсом к единому геоинформационному пространству (With a Course Toward the Single Geoinformation Space),” *Krasnaya Zvezda Online*, 7 February 2020, <http://redstar.ru/kursom-k-edinomu-geoinformatsionnomu-prostranstvu/>

With a Course Toward the Single Geoinformation Space

Alexander Nikolayevich, what is the RF Armed Forces Topographic Service's primary designation?

The RF Armed Forces Topographic Service is responsible for the most important type of operational and combat support of contemporary military operations – topogeodetic and navigational. It consists of the timely preparation of the territory of the continental areas in a topogeodetic and navigational regard in support of the Russian Federation's defense and security.

The Topographic Service's military units and subunits created more than 8,500 stock lists of topographic maps and over 1,000 published ink manuscripts and published more than 200 stock lists of analog topographic maps for the topogeodetic and navigational support of the RF Armed Forces in 2019. And over 30 airfields and aviation ranges were also prepared in a geodesic regard and 668 points of the state geodesic network were restored and 85 were established, and 37 terrain mockups were manufactured.

How do you assess the Topographic Service's current level of equipment?

Today the Armed Forces must obtain cartographic information, the timeliness of which is numbered not in years but in days and even in hours. In the future, the need has been specified to receive cartographic information on any of the planet's territories in real time with the high reliability of the display of the cartographic information. This objective need of the troops and headquarters assumes the continuous development of the topogeodetic and geoinformation support systems. To do this, electronic cartography centers are being created by equipping topogeodetic military units with advanced hardware and software complexes based upon the RF Defense Minister's decision.

These measures were mainly completed by 1 January 2020, and the topogeodetic military units have been equipped with state-of-the-art complexes. The RF Armed Forces Integrated Automated Geospatial Information System (YeASO GPI) [Единая автоматизированная система обеспечения Вооружённых Сил РФ геопространственной информацией (ЕАСО ГПИ)] and the Hardware and Software Complex for the Creation and Renewal of Digital Information on the Terrain (PAKSOTsIM) [Программно-аппаратный комплекс создания и обновления цифровой информации о местности (ПАКСОЦИМ)], which permits us to emerge at a qualitatively new level in the sphere of the development and dissemination of geospatial information in digital form to the troops and forces, constitute their foundation...

Source: “Войска ЗВО полностью переведены на электронную картографию (Western Military District Troops Transitioned to Digital Cartography),” *Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation*, 8 February 2020. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12274842@egNews

Western Military District Troops Transitioned to Digital Cartography

Western Military District (WMD) formations and military units have completely transitioned to digital cartography... "The Western Military District Geospatial Information and Navigation Center provides commanders of all levels with the necessary maps in digital form," Lieutenant Colonel Aleksey Krasnov, the chief of the WMD staff topographic service, reported.

Geodetic crews on terrain are working using the latest PNGK-IM mobile navigation and geodetic systems [подвижный навигационно-геодезический комплекс ПНГК-И], the capabilities of which allow the servicemen to exchange array of data with military command and control entities from any location...

With the employment of the Electronic Automated System Support for Geospatial Information (EASO GPI) software and hardware system, created exclusively based on the Russian GIS technologies, the loading of the terrain updated digital information is being performed using high-speed data transmission channels, directly into the central mapping database. The servicemen are composing digital maps of terrain utilizing the PAK SO TsIM software and hardware system for terrain digital data rapid generation and update... To manufacture relief maps and large topographic models, the military topographers employ 3D printers -- the GEO 3D PAK SN systems, which allow to visualize large amount of geographic data in real time mode.

The ZVO Geospatial Information and Navigation Center servicemen provide geospatial information to automated command and control systems for troops (ASUV) [автоматизированная система управления войсками (АСУВ)] and precision-guided weapons systems, create terrain photographic documents and special digital maps on the basis of Earth's remote sensing, maintain a database, and monitor the GLONASS satellite navigation systems' radio navigation field status...



Russia Brings Back “Medical-Spetsnaz”

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpted article from *Izvestia* discusses Russian plans to reintroduce the special-purpose medical detachments (SPMD) [медицинский отряд специального назначения (МОЧ)], or “medical-spetsnaz” back into the Russian Armed Forces. SPMD units were first formed in the late 1980s/early 1990s to provide additional medical services when needed. Five SPMDs reportedly provided support for units in the First Chechen War. SPMDs are designed to provide first aid, temporary hospitalization, and patient stabilization until the patient can be transported to another medical institution. They are equipped with field kitchens, baths, tents, and mobile trauma bays. In the event of epidemiological emergencies (such as COVID-19), SPMDs can test patients, detect infectious disease carriers, and take necessary steps to prevent the spread of pathogens. The SPMDs were disbanded during the ‘New Look’ reforms, but current plans for SPMDs envision them as a military district-level asset, with approximately 200 personnel. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**



Medical Training.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/Commonwealth-Warrior-2011/i-PpNSb4D>, CC BY-ND-NC 4.0



AS4350 medical vehicle.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/Static-displays-Park-Patriot/i-LBH8CrN>, CC BY-ND-NC 4.0



UAZ-SSA-1845 medical vehicle.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/Static-displays-Park-Patriot/i-24zTTJL>, CC BY-ND-NC 4.0

“As of this year, special-purpose medical detachments (SPMD) [медицинские отряды специального назначения (МОЧ)] will be deployed in every military district.”

Source: Alexey Ramm and Roman Kretsul, “Тяжело в лечении: военные округа укрепят «врачами-спецназовцами» (Difficult to Treat: The Military Districts Will Be Strengthened By ‘Spetsnaz-Doctors’),” *Izvestia Online*, 10 March 2020. <https://iz.ru/983801/aleksei-ramm-roman-kretcul/tiazhelo-v-lechenii-voennye-okruga-ukrepiat-vrachami-spetsnazovtcami>

Difficult to Treat: The Military Districts Will Be Strengthened By “Spetsnaz-Doctors

The Defense Ministry is restoring the battlefield medicine system...The “medical spetsnaz” which was made redundant during the course of the military reform is being brought back into the ranks. The Defense Ministry has started anew to form special-purpose medical detachments. These mobile units can be redeployed to any region of the planet to set up a proper hospital there. The best military medics capable of working in hostility zones, as well as in emergency situation and mass epidemics areas, will serve in these units...

*As of this year, special-purpose medical detachments (SPMD) [медицинские отряды специального назначения (МОЧ)] will be deployed in every military district. Next summer, they will take part in a large-scale exercise where they will practice their actions in emergency situations and epidemics, *Izvestiya’s* sources in the military department stated. They are independent administrative units that have in their inventory everything they need for autonomous operation: Field kitchens, baths, living tents, mobile trauma bays, and so on. The numerical strength of each SPMD will be around 200 personnel. As Colonel Sergey Shutov, chief of the Western Military District Medical Service, stated earlier, that a SPMD will be deployed in Leningrad Oblast by the end of this year.*

Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu brought into the military department the experience he gained when he was in charge of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, Colonel Aleksandr Perendzhiyev, professor at the Plekhanov Russian Economic University, pointed out.

*“The Armed Forces currently tackle not only issues of the country’s defense, but, as we saw last summer when the military were engaged in the cleanup operation after floods in the eastern regions of the country, also take part in rescue operations,” the expert told *Izvestiya*. “The Defense Ministry leadership proceeds from the assumption that situations in which the military’s help will be required may crop up in the territory of any military district. The medical Spetsnaz can also be used abroad. Our troops in other countries can fulfill various missions, not only of combat character, but also peacemaking and humanitarian ones. They cannot do without medical support there. In essence, at issue is the restoration of battlefield medicine which was greatly reduced during the course of reforms...”*

The best personnel are selected in hospitals and medical battalions for service in the medical Spetsnaz. Military doctors often have to provide medical assistance close to the front line, virtually under fire. This requires great composure and top-notch professional skills...



Russian Army to Receive New Tentage: From the Arctic to the Desert

OE Watch Commentary: Nights out in the snow will not be so bad for the Russian soldier anymore. According to *Izvestia*, the armed forces will be receiving state-of-the-art tentage that will allow a good night's sleep without freezing temperatures or hordes of ravenous mosquitoes. Further, the requirement to always have a soldier awake to feed the stove and prevent a tent fire is over with the new climate-control system. As the article writes, "troops will be supplied with comfortable tents with climate control. They will replace tarpaulin shelters with engine-driven gasoline generators and potbellied stoves, fueled with charcoal or firewood. The new heating system operates on natural gas or a special liquid fuel. It will provide a comfortable rest for servicemen, when the temperature outside is from +50° to -50° degrees Celsius [122° to -58° Fahrenheit]. The tents are equipped with hygiene units with washbasins and a water supply." As the article notes, in extreme climate conditions, it is important to provide soldiers and officers with a comfortable environment, as "this will increase the combat readiness of the units."

According to *Izvestia*, the first samples of the tents are being tried "in the subunits of the Arctic 80th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, stationed in the Alakurtti settlement in Murmanskaya Oblast. In the future, they will be supplied to units stationed in Siberia according to the Defense Ministry." **End OE Watch Commentary (Grau)**

"Troops will be supplied with comfortable tents with climate control."

Source: Aleksei Ramm and Bogdan Stepovoi "Troops receive climate-controlled tents," *Izvestia*, 26 February 2020. <https://iz.ru/978829/aleksei-ramm-bogdan-stepovoi/vyshe-gradus-voiska-poluchat-palatki-s-klimat-kontrolem>

Troops receive climate-controlled tents

Troops will be supplied with comfortable tents with climate control. They will replace tarpaulin shelters with engine-driven gasoline generators and potbellied stoves, fueled with charcoal or firewood. The new heating system operates on natural gas or a special liquid fuel. It will provide a comfortable rest for servicemen, when the temperature outside is from +50° to -50° degrees Celsius [122° to -58° Fahrenheit]. The tents are equipped with hygiene units with washbasins and a water supply....This kind of temporary housing will be used not only under combat conditions, but also in peacetime, while dealing with emergency situations.

Habitability conditions

New climate-controlled tents are currently undergoing tests in the force. The first samples are already being tried in the subunits of the Arctic 80th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, stationed in the Alakurtti settlement in Murmanskaya Oblast. In the future, they will be supplied to units stationed in Siberia according to the Defense Ministry...

Military expert Oleg Zheltonozhko noted "In extreme climatic conditions, it is important to provide soldiers and officers with a comfortable environment. In severe frost or heat, peoples' focus is rapidly lost, awareness dulls, and endurance is reduced. This negatively affects the ability of soldiers and officers to competently assess their situation and to accurately perform their duties. As a result, mistakes can occur in decision-making or while operating military equipment. The sum of such "miscalculations" can undermine the accomplishment of a combat mission. Having living quarters where it is possible to relax in comfort while waiting out a blizzard will help reduce unnecessary stress on the body. In the end, this will increase the combat readiness of the units....

The tents are made of waterproof breathable fabric, equipped with mosquito nets, special plastic windows, and wind-protective blinds. Their space inside is divided into several zones. At the entrance, there is an alcove, which is especially useful during the cold season, in order to keep the warmth in the inner premises. The residential compartment has room for army cots. A specially-equipped hygiene compartment permits washing up. There is a water reservoir. The new tents can be manufactured in camouflage, army green, white, or other colors.

The climate-control system helps to maintain the necessary temperature -- around +20° Celsius [68° Fahrenheit], as well as a comfortable level of air humidity. This single-unit system includes a natural gas or liquid-fuel power station, as well as a heating convector and an air conditioning device. In addition, the system is a generator for electrical appliances and lighting. The power plant has minimal exhaust. There will be no smoke columns over the tent camp to reveal the units' location.

Currently, the temperature in tents is managed using portable stoves -- made of cast iron or heat-resistant steel. They were developed back in the 1950s. Firewood is the most common fuel for these stoves. Fuel usage is one of their drawbacks. Also, they are fire hazards and require constant monitoring, as not only the main body of the stove gets overheated, but also the exhaust pipes. These stoves do not hold heat for long and cool off immediately if not stoked....

The Defense Ministry recently purchased field fuel depots (PSG-600) to provide equipment with fuel under combat conditions. They consist of 12 polyurethane "sacks," each of which can pump up to 50 cubic meters of liquid. The field refueling station has a single automated command and control center, the computer of which monitors all the information regarding the fuel consumption. These can be deployed covertly in the frontline zone.



Shredding the Sakhalin Shores: Recon Snowmobiles Debut in Far East Islands

OE Watch Commentary: Russia continues to upgrade its military equipment in the Far East and Sakhalin Island is getting its share, having recently been assigned the T-80BVM tank (see: “Upgraded Fire Power On the Pacific,” *OE Watch*, January 2020). As the accompanying excerpt from the *Russian Ministry of Defense* discusses, now they have assigned snowmobiles for the reconnaissance forces of Sakhalin Island.

The article discusses a special tactical exercise, with a reconnaissance subunit from the motorized rifle formation of the Eastern Military District army corps, which ended at the Pushistyy airfield on the island of Sakhalin. During the exercise, “scouts test-drove modern snowmobiles, on which they practiced tactical combat in deep snow. In all, more than 50 personnel took part and eight snowmobiles were used.” The passage also notes “some of the troops were towed on skis by rope behind the snowmobiles and fired at targets while on the move. A second group laid an ambush, while a third seized a guarded facility.”

Towing troops and firing from the move sounds like a kick. The Ministry of Defense report does not mention how many scouts ended up in a “ditch pickle.” It gets cold and humid on Sakhalin thanks to the surrounding Sea of Okhotsk. The average winter temperature ranges between -6° Celsius [-21° Fahrenheit] the South to -24° Celsius [-11° Fahrenheit] in the North. The exercise was in the south. Japan lost ownership of the southern half of the island as well as the southern Kurile Islands to the Soviet Union at the end of World War II.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Grau)**

“A special tactical exercise, with a reconnaissance subunit from the motorized rifle formation of the Eastern Military District army corps, ended at the Pushistyy airfield on the island of Sakhalin.”

Source: “Eastern Military District Sakhalin Island reconnaissance scouts test modern snowmobiles in a mock battle,” *Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation*, 3 March 2020. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12280346@egNews

Eastern Military District Sakhalin Island reconnaissance scouts test modern snowmobiles in a mock battle

A special tactical exercise, with a reconnaissance subunit from the motorized rifle formation of the Eastern Military District army corps, ended at the Pushistyy airfield on the island of Sakhalin.

During this unique event, the scouts test-drove modern snowmobiles, on which they practiced tactical combat in deep snow. In all, more than 50 personnel took part and eight snowmobiles were used.

Some of the troops were towed on skis by rope behind the snowmobiles and fired at targets while on the move. A second group laid an ambush, while a third seized a guarded facility.

The troops on the snowmobiles had to reach the facility and dismount, with one of their number remaining with the vehicles and firing at the enemy to cover his comrades, as they for their part eliminated sentries and captured the building.

The exercise was inspected by the commanding officer of the Eastern Military District army corps, Lieutenant General Dmitriy Glushchenkov.

The force-on-force battle showed the troops the potential impact of enemy fire as they advanced towards a building to be seized, were ambushed, or engaged in firefights. In addition, they tried out tactics and ways of using the snowmobiles in the deep snowdrifts that are typical of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands.



Strengthening Russia's Pacific Coastal Defenses

OE Watch Commentary: Russia has the world's longest borders and seacoast. It has always had to deal with a northern, eastern, southern and western threat. Often, the southern and western threats received the most attention and new equipment. According to *Izvestia*, Russia is now upgrading its small missile ships, which are part of the Pacific Fleet's 114th Harbor Defense Brigade, with a potent package of electronics, modern missiles, cannon artillery and integrated reconnaissance data systems. As the passage notes, in addition to new missiles, these ships will receive modern radar and telecommunications, and more efficient and powerful diesel engines. The ships are based out of Petropavlosk-Kamchatskiy port on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

This area is becoming increasingly important due to the new liquid natural gas (LNG) trans-shipping terminal located there as the destination for Russian ice class LNG tankers moving energy from the Arctic gas fields to eastern customers. The passage notes that Kamchatka has been receiving special attention lately. Some of the systems deployed there include the Murmansk-BN electronic warfare system and BTR-82A armored personnel carriers. In addition, "the new diesel submarine Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy and two of the latest project Alexandrit minesweepers will arrive in Kamchatka in 2020. There are also plans to deploy a new regiment of MiG-31 aircraft-interceptors here."

Small missile ships are harder to find and engage, but not the ideal vessels for rough seas. Small ships do not have to remain in the open seas, but can function effectively in inlets, on rivers and in harbors. **End OE Watch Commentary (Grau)**

“Kamchatka has been receiving special attention lately. The Murmansk-BN electronic warfare system, capable of disrupting communications of ships, aircraft, and headquarters at a distance of up to 8,000 kilometers, has deployed here.”

Source: Aleksei Ramm and Bogdan Stepovoi, "Upgraded Project 'Ovod' Missile Ships will protect Kamchatka," *Izvestia*, 12 February 2020. <https://iz.ru/968145/aleksei-ramm-bogdan-stepovoi/sereznyi-ovod-modernizirovannye-raketnye-korabli-usiliat-kamchatku>

Upgraded Project 'Ovod' Missile Ships will protect Kamchatka

Kamchatka is turning into a true Pacific bastion. All of the project 1234 Ovod [gadfly] small missile ships (MRK), which are part of the Pacific Fleet's 114th Harbor Defense Brigade, will be upgraded. In addition to the new missiles, they will receive modern radar and telecommunications, and more efficient and powerful diesel engines. It will be the 'Supervods' [Super Gadflies] mission to protect the nuclear-armed submarine missile cruisers' base, to defend the coast against enemy landing forces, and to provide protection for the Borey-class strategic submarines as they are taking to the sea.

The experimental project 1234 MRK Smerch upgrade proved successful. As a result, the Defense Ministry decided to upgrade the rest of the Kamchatka small missile ships...

The Navy now has 12 Ovod. The largest grouping is part of the Pacific Fleet. The MRK Smerch, Moroz, Iney, and Razliv, built in 1985-1991, are consolidated into a single group responsible for protecting the water zone.

According to Colonel Vladimir Anokhin, the vice president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, the strategic defensive arch of Vladivostok -- the Kuril Islands -- Sakhalin -- Kamchatka is now being created in the Far East. "As expected, the defense is multi-layered. The fleet, supported by air will meet enemy ships, aircraft, and airborne assets on distant approaches to the Russian coast. Then -- by the new Bal and Bastion coastal missile systems... The Bastion can destroy ships at a distance of up to 500 kilometers. On the land, the enemy landing force will have to face the Pacific Fleet coastal troops. It is practically impossible to penetrate such a multilayered shield. Kamchatka takes a special place in this defensive configuration. An important part of the Northern Sea Route is monitored from its territory. Nuclear-armed strategic submarine missile cruisers are based at this peninsula. Such an arch is necessary for Russia, so long as 'calm' is not the term to describe the situation in the region." According to Vladimir Anokhin, Japan has not yet parted with the dream of getting the Kuril Islands. And the United States has a large number of military bases nearby, including on the territory of South Korea.

Admiral Valentin Selivanov, former chief of the Navy's General Staff, believes that the MRKs are well suited for employment in the inland seas and the coastal zone, "They are needed to prevent foreign ships from approaching our naval bases. Foreign fleets have always been interested in Kamchatka. A base of submarine missile cruisers carrying nuclear weapons is located in Vilyuchinsk, which will also be covered by the Ovod ships. These submarines are part of Russia's strategic nuclear forces. The MRK will also cover these missile carriers as they put out to sea....

The upgraded MRK Smerch has a modern electronic reconnaissance station installed in place of the old Titan system. It operates without emitting a signal. A special receiver is built into it, which analyzes signals, reflected from other objects. This equipment makes it possible to determine the class of waterborne platforms automatically, without having to activate the main radar, since the majority of modern ships signals' configuration is well known. As a result, the MRK can be the first to detect an enemy and, carry out a missile strike against it.

The Ovod, has a significantly-reduced radar signature and will be able to get within the striking distance of a carrier, and disable it. The upgrade includes the modern Kh-35 Uran anti-ship cruise missile with a 260 kilometer firing range. These missiles are equipped with modern homing heads, which, once in the designated area, find and strike the target without the operating officers' help. Moreover, the Kh-35 are capable of delivering strikes against ground targets...

Theoretically, the MRK may be armed with the latest Oniks antiship supersonic missiles, which are designed to combat surface groupings and single ships under conditions of heavy fire and electronic countermeasures.

The ships' artillery will also be upgraded. The Ovod will receive the latest AK-176MA artillery mount. It is capable of firing 150 rounds per minute at a target up to 15 kilometers away. The gun ... has a digital command and control system and the latest Sfera-2 optronic station. Nighttime and bad weather are no obstacles -- an assured strike is guaranteed in heavy rain, a flurry, or even a storm.

The MRK is capable of guiding the Bal and Bastion anti-ship missiles onto targets. With the aid of radar, the ships detect surface targets and transmit the data to the coastal crews in real time. The ships' onboard systems and radar are integrated with the reconnaissance coverage of the coastal troops and the Navy.

In the future, the coastal defense should get the latest Tsirkon missiles which are capable of reaching Mach 8 speed and striking targets at a range of up to 500 kilometers. It is impossible to repel a Tsirkon missile attack, as the existing anti-missiles are incapable of catching up with them.

Kamchatka has been receiving special attention lately. The Murmansk-BN electronic warfare system, capable of disrupting communications of ships, aircraft, and headquarters at a distance of up to 8,000 kilometers, has deployed here. The naval infantrymen, stationed at the peninsula, have received amphibious BTR-82A armored personnel carriers ...The new diesel submarine Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy and two of the latest project Alexandrit minesweepers will arrive in Kamchatka in 2020. There are also plans to deploy a new regiment of MiG-31 aircraft-interceptors here.



Russia's Hot Response to NATO's 'Cold Response' Exercise

OE Watch Commentary: 'Cold Response,' this year's major NATO allied exercise in Norway, started on 2 March with over 15,000 personnel from nine countries. Initially planned to continue until the 18th, it ended prematurely on the 11th due to Norway experiencing an outbreak of coronavirus, which turned the Norwegian military's focus to dealing with the crisis and containing the virus. Russia normally responds to Norway's military exercises in the Arctic with an exercise of its own and, as the accompanying passage from the *Barents Sea Independent Observer* discusses, has held true to form this year as well.

As the article discusses, "over 1000 troops and 220 pieces of equipment including [122mm] Grad multiple rocket launchers, the [122mm 2S1] Gvozdika and [152mm 2S3] Akatsiya-propelled howitzers as well as guided anti-tank guided missiles are involved." The training includes "supporting fire by heavy howitzers for a counter attack against enemy forces and subsequent 'destruction of the enemy'." The artillery involved in Russian firing is familiar to veterans of the Cold War. This does not mean that this self-propelled artillery is outdated or less lethal than the latest Russian artillery. Russians upgrade and rebuild their older weapons systems while gradually introducing their latest equipment into the force. The new systems use identical parts from the old systems. Their modernization program saves money, requires fewer replacement parts and insures that the new equipment reaching the force has been thoroughly 'soldier-proofed.' **End OE Watch Commentary (Grau)**

“[T]his year’s Russian drills along Norway’s NATO border are seen as a response to the allied exercise Cold Response in northern Norway. While the western soldiers ended their war games ahead of schedule because of the corona virus, the Russian troops are unlikely to reciprocate.”

Source: Atle Staalesen, "Big bang from Arctic Brigade near Scandinavian border," *The Barents Sea Independent Observer*, 11 March 2020. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/03/big-bang-arctic-brigade-near-border>

Big bang from Arctic Brigade near Scandinavian border

It is not uncommon when the Northern Fleet holds exercises in the Pechenga area in early spring. But this year's Russian drills along Norway's NATO border are seen as a response to the allied exercise Cold Response in northern Norway. While the western soldiers ended their war games ahead of schedule because of the coronavirus, the Russian troops are unlikely to reciprocate.

According to the Northern Fleet, more than thousand troops and 220 pieces of equipment including [122mm] Grad multiple rocket launchers, the [122mm 2S1] Gvozdika and [152mm 2S3] Akatsiya-propelled howitzers as well as guided anti-tank guided missiles are involved. The training scenario includes supporting fire by heavy howitzers for a counter attack against enemy forces and subsequent "destruction of the enemy." The artillery fired at targets up to 15 kilometers away...

The training takes place on the Pechenga firing ranges, only few kilometers from the border with Norway. The 200rd Motorized Rifle Brigade is the primary unit involved. These troops are based in Pechenga area and is part of Russia's Arctic Brigade. The 80th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade in Alakurtti and the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade in Sputnik are other elements of the Arctic ground forces. The Northern Fleet has kept a close eye on NATO's Cold Response exercise in northern Norway. Russian ships and aircraft are evident in areas adjacent to the Norwegian training grounds....



Russian/Belarus Combined Airborne Training Near Estonian Border

OE Watch Commentary: The 76th guards Airborne Division is an elite Russian unit headquartered in Pskov. The accompanying passage from *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star) discusses the year's first combined tactical exercise of the Russian Pskov Guards Airborne Assault Division subunits and the Republic of Belarus Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade, stationed in Brest, which concluded near Pskov. As the passage notes, the exercise entailed repelling a hypothetical illegal armed formation with the combined efforts of over 400 Russian airborne and around 80 guardsmen from Belarus.

Russian and Belarus paratroopers and Spetsnaz have a history of combined training and interoperability and this tactical exercise is a continuation of that cooperation. Part of their 18-20 February training was located about 12 miles from the Estonian border. According to the article, the Zavelichye training center has a 'killhouse,' apparently a tactical shooting building, complete with bullet traps and computerized firing results, for urban combat training. Presumably it has a "Hogan's Alley" similar to the tactical shooting training sites used by US special units. Unit and national integrity were maintained throughout the exercise. (Also see: "Tactical Shooting: Integral Part of Russian Combat Training," *OE Watch*, October 2019) **End OE Watch Commentary (Grau)**

“This exercise again confirmed that the paratroopers of the two armies are ready to act together under any conditions.”

Source: “Десантный сплав двух братских армий (Airborne fusion of two fraternal armies),” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 28 February 2020. <http://redstar.ru/desantnyj-splav-dvuh-bratskih-armij/>

Airborne fusion of two fraternal armies

The year's first combined tactical exercise of the Russian Pskov Guards Airborne Assault Division subunits and the Republic of Belarus Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade, stationed in Brest, concluded near Pskov. For the paratroopers of the two fraternal nations, these exercises are not unique. And this exercise again confirmed that the paratroopers of the two armies are ready to act together under any conditions.

Over 400 Russian airborne and around 80 guardsmen from Belarus repelled a hypothetical illegal armed formation. The soldiers of the two nations fulfilled this mission with utmost responsibility, since this is the type of exercise which allows rehearsing cooperation, achieving instant mutual understanding, and generating a cohesion, which makes them invincible.

Aviators supported the training mission of the “winged” guards. Two Mi-24 and eight Mi-8AMTSh helicopters of the Western Military District as well as four IL76MD military transport aircraft of the Russian Airspace Forces supported the airborne troops. Guards Colonel Roman Samokhin, the deputy commander of the Pskov Airborne Assault Formation, stated during opening ceremony: “In the course of the exercise, the personnel will have to perform a number of combat training tasks, including landing and seizing a facility, carrying out a raid, and conducting a defensive battle, which will require the combined subunit personnel to exert maximum efforts, and to demonstrate durability, endurance, and team spirit.”

In accordance with the exercise scenario, the soldiers of the two countries conducted a landing on an enemy-controlled airfield, where they destroyed the enemy headquarters and defending forces and blocked approaching enemy reserves. Then the paratroopers raided a newly-designated area.

After a short break, the guardsmen rehearsed drills to destroy the militants and liberate hostages on the Zavelichye range complex. Training took place on the obstacle course and in the killhouse -- a special structure simulating a building seized by terrorists and equipped with live-fire targets and a kill registration recording system. The second stage of the exercise took place at the Strugi Krasnyye range, where the “enemy” defended. The combined subunits conducted a road march to this range, where they performed support tasks for the main forces raid, and also conducted offensive and defensive actions.

Under the cover of Ka-52 attack helicopters, the Belarus tactical airborne assault team landed in three groups from Mi-8AMTSh helicopters on facilities, occupied by an “illegal armed formation,” and blocked the enemy. Following a massive fire strike against the enemy, the Pskov paratroopers went on the offensive. Dismounting from their BMD-2 airborne fighting vehicles, the servicemen attacked the enemy defensive positions and transitioned to the defense, holding it until the main forces' approach....

The final phase of the exercise was simultaneously carried out on three sectors of the Strugi Krasnyye range. On the Gogol Plateau, the Republic of Belarus subunits fired small arms and RPGs. On the Green Mountain, the main forces of the guards airborne assault regiment performed live firing using on-board BMD-2 weapons. Around 30 combat vehicles deployed in attack line and delivered concentrated fire, striking all targets.

A separate tank battalion company team -- the reserve of the senior commander -- awaited in full readiness... Upon receiving the command, the tankers went on the offensive firing 100-mm cannon and coaxial machine guns....



The “Creeping Integration” of the Donbass

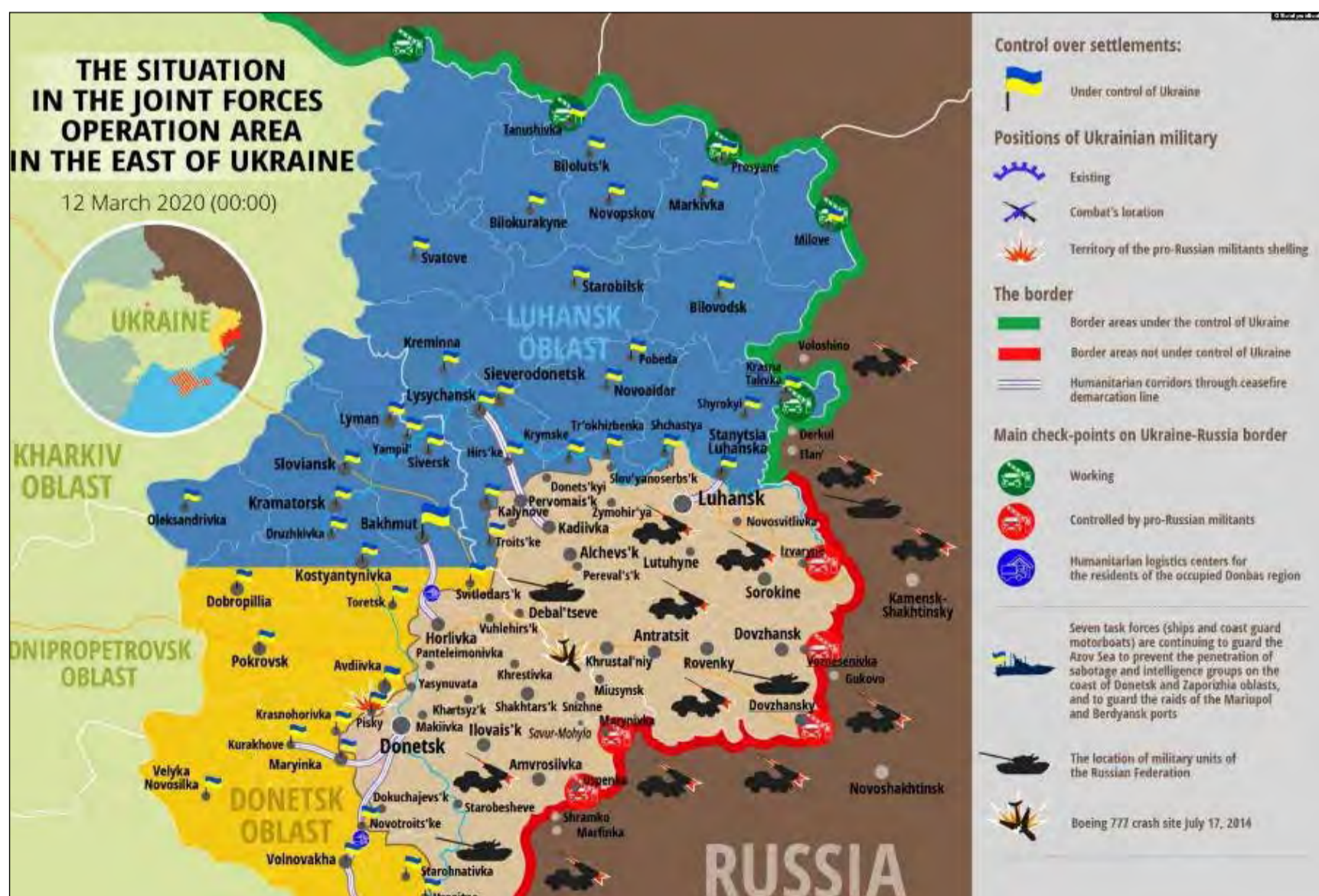
OE Watch Commentary: The conflict in the Donbass region between pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk/Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR) and Ukrainian forces grinds on into its sixth year. While the front line has largely stabilized, sporadic fighting continues to claim military and civilian lives. Officially, the political status of these separatist republics remains in limbo, but as the two accompanying excerpts suggest, these separatist enclaves are slowly being incorporated into Russia.

The first excerpt from the blog of Russian military journalist Boris Rozhin (“Colonel Cassad”) describes how the residents of the two separatist republics “who have already managed to get Russian passports (approximately 168,000) will be able to vote on a vote to amend the Constitution of the Russian Federation” sometime later this year. More importantly, he also alleges that these Russian passport holders are eligible to “serve in the Russian armed forces.” Rozhin characterizes this process as “a creeping integration without recognition.”

The second excerpt comes from the military weekly, *Voyenno-Promyshlennyi Kuryer* (Military-Industrial Courier), and deals with recent comments by Vladislav Surkov, the former top Kremlin official for the country’s policy regarding Ukraine and the separatist republics. During a recent interview (after he had left his Kremlin position) Surkov insisted that “there is no Ukraine. There is ‘Ukraine-ness.’ That is, a specific disorder of the mind... But there is no nation... there is no Ukraine.” The article then describes other Russians who have voiced similar sentiments over the past several years, placing the blame for the ongoing conflict on “the junta in Kiev... who did not want to peacefully settle relations with the Donbass.” The article concludes, by again quoting Surkov who claims that “the DPR and LPR will not return to Ukraine.”

Six years of fighting has done little to persuade the warring sides to become more amenable to compromise and to undertake negotiations toward a peaceful settlement. These two articles suggest that the prolonged conflict has hardened the position of the Kremlin, which will turn this into another frozen conflict rather than allow Ukraine to reestablish political control over the Donbass region. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“...In addition, residents of the DPR and LPR who received Russian passports can serve in the Russian armed forces on a common basis...”



Map showing current status of conflict in the Donbass region.

Source: mil.gov.ua, CCA 4.0 Intl



Continued: The “Creeping Integration” of the Donbass

Source: Boris Rozhin, “Коротко по Донбассу и Украине (Briefly in the Donbass and Ukraine),” *Colonelcassad*, 6 March 2020. colonelcassad.livejournal.com/5690206.html#cutid1

Residents of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic who have already managed to get Russian passports will be able to vote on a vote to amend the Constitution of the Russian Federation....

...In addition, residents of the DPR and LPR who received Russian passports can serve in the Russian armed forces on a common basis.

In the DPR reported that at the moment on the territory of the republic there are 83,000 citizens who have already received Russian passports. In the LPR, officially 85,000 Russian citizens.

...Such a creeping integration without recognition.

Source: Alexander Utkin, “Донбасс на Украину не вернется (Donbass will not return to Ukraine),” *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer*, 3 March 2020. <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/55591>

An interview with Vladislav Surkov, which he gave to the director of the Center for Political Conjuncture Aleksey Chesnakov, published on February 26 in the online publication “Actual Comments”, is actively discussed in the media space of Russia and Ukraine. Some statements by the ex-adviser to the president of the Russian Federation have brought Ukrainian officials and experts into a real fury.

...“There is no Ukraine. There is Ukraine. That is a specific disorder of minds.... But there is no nation. There is a brochure “Self-Ukraine,” but there is no Ukraine.... And Vladislav Surkov has the right to emphasize that in Ukraine there is no nation.

...That is why the junta who got up at the helm as a result of the coup d’etat did not want to peacefully settle relations with the Donbass, whose inhabitants at first simply did not recognize the accomplishment as a legal act. Russophobic changes in the mass consciousness occurred due to the war unleashed by the Kiev regime in the east...

...Meanwhile, in Ukraine there are already two people’s republics - Donetsk and Lugansk, which have proved their right to exist by victories near Izvarino and Ilovaysk... It is not surprising that Surkov is sure that the DPR and LPR will not return to Ukraine.



THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR by LESTER W. GRAU and CHARLES K. BARTLES

At any given time, assessments of the Russian Armed Forces vary between the idea of an incompetent and corrupt conscript army manning decrepit Soviet equipment and relying solely on brute force, to the idea of an elite military filled with Special Operations Forces (SOF) who were the “polite people” or “little green men” seen on the streets in Crimea. This book will attempt to split the difference between these radically different ideas by shedding some light on what the Russian Ground Forces consist of, how they are structured, how they fight, and how they are modernizing.

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Kazakhstan's Armored Vehicles to Get New Combat Modules

OE Watch Commentary: In 2014, the government of Kazakhstan and the South Africa-based global defense company Paramount Group formed a joint venture called Kazakhstan Paramount Engineering (KPE), to produce various armored vehicles for the country's armed forces, such as the Arlan 4x4, and Barys 8x8. This marked a significant step in the government's overall effort to build a defense industry. The first series of armored vehicles produced in Kazakhstan tested well and there are now reportedly a few dozen in service with the country's ground forces. The accompanying excerpted article from the Russian-language news website *Inform-Buro* discusses three new combat modules designed and created by KPE for use with the Arlan 4x4 and the Barys 8x8 armored vehicles "to give [them] optimal fire power."



Arlan armored vehicle.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Army2016demo-109.jpg>, CC BY SA 4.0

The article notes how KPE developed Barys as "a new BTR for the ground forces." It is reported that KPE developed three combat modules, the "Ansar," designed for the Barys; "Sunkar," designed for the Arlan; and a marine module "Turan," which will be put into service on ships in the Caspian Sea." It also mentions how the "modules are based on the "Shughyla" platform, which is a unified management system with uniform software." The head of KPE states that the company studied Russian, Turkish and European systems while developing the modules, but that "not one of the companies with whom we negotiated planned to transfer their technology."

Enterprises within Kazakhstan's defense industry have utilized technology transfers to improve their own capabilities to design and produce weapons and equipment and while there was no reported technology transfer for the modules, the article mentions how "KPE established a subsidiary company, Weapon System Engineering" to fulfill this role. The article goes on to mention how one of the new modules "has already shown itself to be of use in the army" and that KPE has created a simulator to allow soldiers "to train at a home station." While the new combat module by KPE still appears to be at an early stage, the article provides insight into the capabilities the industry is looking to build. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**

“The results and efforts by engineers and designers of KPE to give the armored vehicles optimal fire power was the development of three new combat modules: “Ansar,” designed for the Barys; “Sunkar,” designed for the Arlan; and a marine module “Turan,” which will be put into service on ships in the Caspian Sea.”



Continued: Kazakhstan's Armored Vehicles to Get New Combat Modules

Source: Grigoriy Bedenko, ““Барыс” и “Арлан” на огневом рубеже. Фоторепортаж (“Barys” and “Arlan” at the firing range. Photo report),” *Inform Buro*, 16 February 2020. <https://informburo.kz/stati/barys-i-arlan-na-ognevom-rubezhe-fotoreportazh.html>

At the military base “Mailan,” located in the Akmola Oblast, 50 kilometers from the capital, Kazakhstan’s Arlan 4x4 and the Barys 8x8 armored vehicles are equipped with new combat modules...

The Arlan armored wheeled vehicle (BKM), produced by Kazakhstan Paramount Engineering (KPE is a joint venture with investors from Kazakhstan and South Africa), has already been well established among Kazakhstan’s security forces. At the same time, KPE specialists developed a new BTR for the ground forces, called Barys. There are currently two prototypes of armored personnel carrier, with an 8x8 and 6x6... Various types of combat modules are tested on these machines in order to find the best configuration for our military in areas of fire and performance characteristics...

The results and efforts by engineers and designers of KPE to give the armored vehicles optimal fire power was the development of three new combat modules: “Ansar,” designed for the Barys;

“Sunkar,” designed for the Arlan; and a marine module “Turan,” which will be put into service on ships in the Caspian Sea. All of the modules are based on the “Shughyla” platform, which is a unified management system with uniform software.

“Choosing the best weapon for our armored vehicles, we carried out a detailed analysis of the market for these kinds of systems,” said Erbol Salimov, CEO of KPE... “This is specifically combat modules that can use 30mm automatics... “We studied Russian systems, the best Turkish systems as well as European designs that could be applied to our Barys 8x8 and 6x6 armored vehicles,” said Salimov – and in the negotiation process, we found out that not one of the companies with whom we negotiated planned to transfer their technology, because we are a market with a small amount of demand.”...

As a result, KPE established a subsidiary company, Weapon System Engineering. The company specializes in the development of fully domestic software for new combat modules. A design office was also created. It began work on the Ansar and Sunkar modules as well as the Turan shop module... As mentioned, all of the software is based on the “Shughyla” platform...

The combat module Sunkar, designed specifically for the Arlan 4x4 armored vehicle, has already shown itself to be of use in the army. This system has two machine guns: a NSVT (12.7mm) and a PKT (a tank variant of the PKM, 7.62mm)...

If a soldier has been trained on at least one of the modules, he could easily work on all three... The system includes special training programs that allow a gunner to train at a home station. In this case, there is no need for the entire combat module, it is enough to use a simulator.

“I would like to note that the designs of the Ansar, Sunkar and Turan combat modules are completely domestic and there will be a very high percentage of local production,” Salimov summed up...



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Armenian Appeals to the Collective Security Treaty Organization

OE Watch Commentary: The framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) includes an article on collective defense that states an attack against a member state is an attack against all members. Armenian government officials have voiced frustrations with the CSTO that this article has not been implemented during the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and singled out criticism at fellow members for not providing support to Armenia, while selling weapons and equipment to Azerbaijan. The accompanying excerpted article discusses a recent statement from the CSTO Secretary General on this issue.

The article, from the Russian-language news website *Eurasia Daily* reports that the CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas said at a recent visit to Yerevan, that the CSTO “will provide Armenia necessary assistance if Yerevan requests it in connection with incidents on the border with Azerbaijan.” Secretary General Zas also stated that “in the event that Yerevan turns to the CSTO for assistance, the organization will express its position and provide the necessary assistance,” though he did not mention what type of assistance would be provided.

In addition to the statement on providing assistance, Secretary General Zas said, “within the CSTO’s framework and agreements on military-technical cooperation, no weapons are provided to governments that exhibit hostile policies.” At the same time, the article notes how “Armenian officials have repeatedly criticized CSTO members, particularly Russia and Belarus, for their voluminous security cooperation with Azerbaijan.” The article includes a list of the weapon systems provided to Azerbaijan from Russia and Belarus, including “the Smerch and Polonez multiple rocket launch system, the Tochka-U tactical missile system, the TOS-1 heavy flamethrower system, attack helicopters and other weapons.”

As the second passage notes, in April 2016, during a flare-up of the conflict, the organization’s position was that the collective security article only applied to attacks against Armenia’s internationally recognized territory, leaving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone outside of CSTO’s collective defense obligations. In light of this precedent and Armenia’s viewpoint of the CSTO, it is unclear in what situation the Armenian government would turn to the CSTO for assistance, despite these recent comments by the CSTO Secretary General. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**



General Secretary of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, State Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus, Lieutenant General Stanislav Vasilyevich Zas.
Source: Mil.ru via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stanislav_Zas_\(2020\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stanislav_Zas_(2020).jpg), CC BY 4.0

“Concerning incidents on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, in the event that Yerevan turns to the CSTO for assistance, the organization will express its position and provide the necessary assistance.”



Continued: Armenian Appeals to the Collective Security Treaty Organization

Source: “Зась: ОДКБ поможет Армении в случае обращения из-за инцидентов на границе (Zas: The CSTO will help Armenia in the event of a request for assistance due to incidents on the border),” *Eurasia Daily*, 28 February 2020. <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2020/02/28/zas-odkb-pomozhet-armenii-v-sluchae-obrashcheniya-iz-za-incidentov-na-granice>

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) will provide Armenia necessary assistance if Yerevan requests it in connection with incidents on the border with Azerbaijan. This was announced today, February 28, by the CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas...

Concerning incidents on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, in the event that Yerevan turns to the CSTO for assistance, the organization will express its position and provide the necessary assistance...The CSTO leaders also commented on the issue of weapons sales to Azerbaijan by the organization's member states. “Within the CSTO's framework and agreements on military-technical cooperation, no weapons are provided to governments that exhibit hostile policies...,” said Zas, answering questions in Yerevan.

...As reported by EA Daily, on November 28, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, at a CSTO Collective Security Council meeting in Bishkek, called upon the organization's countries not to sell weapons to Azerbaijan...In his Bishkek speech, Pashinyan also said that “the militaristic statements by Baku are hopeless.”

...Armenian officials have repeatedly criticized CSTO members, particularly Russia and Belarus, for their voluminous security cooperation with Azerbaijan. Yerevan is most concerned with Moscow and Minsk supplying offensive systems...Among these systems are the Smerch and Polonez multiple rocket launch system, the Tochka-U tactical missile system, the TOS-1 heavy flamethrower system, attack helicopters and other weapons.

Source: “CSTO Secretary General warns against turning the Caucasus into a war stage,” *Panorama.am*, 26 April 2016. <https://www.panorama.am/en/news/2016/04/26/CSTO-Secretary-General/1569639>

Asked whether the CSTO may provide assistance to Armenia in case of an attack to the republic within its internationally recognized borders, while Nagorno Karabakh is out of those borders, the Secretary General responded briefly: “Yes, you got it right.”



Geoff Demarest's *Winning Irregular War* is about a broader set of conflicts than just 'insurgency.' In its 144 sections, Geoff Demarest uses a distinct, reconciled, more effective strategic grammar that draws on the disciplines of law and geography over political science. As Geoff Demarest puts it: “I hope that some of the ideas in it will be contagious.”

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/195392/download>



Fair-Weather Friends: The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Strategic Partnership Between Russia and China

by Johan van de Ven

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For the full article, see: <https://jamestown.org/program/fair-weather-friends-the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-on-the-strategic-partnership-between-russia-and-china/>

OE Watch Commentary: In June 2019, during a visit to the Kremlin by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation announced that they had “agreed...to upgrade their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.” This continued the warming of bilateral relations nurtured by Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who have met at least 30 times during their respective tenures. The strengthening of ties has seen unusually relaxed encounters between the pair, such as when they made blini (traditional Russian pancakes) together in Vladivostok in September 2018. In more substantive terms, support from Chinese state-linked financial institutions has played a critical role in the construction of a new wave of Russian energy infrastructure, ranging from the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas Project to the “Power of Siberia” gas pipeline.

However, the ongoing COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak has opened a stress fracture in the bilateral Sino-Russian relationship. After weeks of gradually escalating restrictions, reports emerged in late February that Moscow public transit drivers had been instructed to call police if they witnessed Chinese passengers using the transit system. The PRC Embassy in Russia warned that such actions “will harm the good atmosphere for developing Chinese-Russian relations.” While China was initially restrained in its public criticism of Russian measures taken in the course of the COVID-19 epidemic, the decision of the PRC Embassy in Moscow to highlight the discrimination being faced by Chinese citizens in Moscow is a reminder of just how quickly tensions can arise between the two countries, even in the age of “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.”

Russia Raises the Drawbridge

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a “public health emergency of international concern” on 30 January 2020. Two days prior to this, the Khabarovsk regional government had announced the closure of all border crossings connecting Khabarovsk Krai with China. Following the WHO declaration, the closure was extended across all checkpoints in the Far Eastern Federal District, which covers much of Russia's border region with China. Authorities announced the suspension of e-visa issuances to Chinese nationals, and prepared an evacuation of Russian nationals from Wuhan. A further evacuation operation took place in Heilongjiang Province, utilizing the newly-constructed bridge between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk, which had been portrayed as a symbol of greater economic integration between the two countries.

In the aftermath of the border closure, authorities from both China and Russia appeared to be intent on containing the impact of the crisis on bilateral relations. Chinese state tabloid Global Times said that while the closure is “a bit of an overreaction,” it was “understandable for Moscow to make the hard decision for the health of its own people.” Russian authorities attempted to mollify China by arranging a donation of 23 tons of medical supplies, although there was some consternation that Russia was not among the first 20 countries to do so. On 4 February, the Kremlin shared samples of Russian H5N1 drug Triazavirin with Chinese counterparts to assess its effectiveness in treating COVID-19, and dispatched a team of five experts to provide support. In the background, however, cross-border connectivity continued to worsen: all flights from points of origin in China to airports in Russia other than Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport were cancelled. On 18 February, Russian flag carrier Aeroflot announced that it would pare down its China service to just two daily flights, one each to Beijing and Shanghai.

The Economic Impacts Hit Home

On 20 February, all Chinese nationals on tourist, private, student, or work visa were blocked from entering Russian territory. In a bid to minimize damage wrought by COVID-19 on economic ties, Chinese citizens holding business or official visas would still be permitted to enter. Some companies implemented pragmatic work-arounds, such as Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation who held their scheduled meetings via teleconference. However, the economic impact has been readily apparent. According to Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, bilateral trade volume in February 2020 was down as much as 50% year-on-year—a considerable setback to previous Russian ambitions for bilateral trade to reach \$200 billion by 2024. The volume of Alipay and UnionPay payments processed in Russia fell by approximately 70% year-on-year in the first week of February, while one consultancy estimated that in St. Petersburg alone, hotels were facing a revenue shortfall of around \$8 million per month.

Conclusion: The Unsteady Underbelly of Strategic Relations between Russia and China

As recently as September 2019, President Xi described President Putin as his “best friend.” However, the diplomatic tensions resulting from Russia's COVID-19 restrictions serve as a reminder that the Sino-Russian bilateral strategic partnership is premised on maintaining overlapping interests. When that overlap diminishes, memories can quickly return to periods of historical enmity. While the current predicament is benign in comparison to historical periods of hostility, the tensions show that a strategic partnership between the two countries does not necessarily rest on a bed of strategic trust. As such, despite the vaguely-defined “comprehensive strategic partnership,” Putin and Xi have refrained from describing the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship as an alliance. Furthermore, PRC state media has also declined to use the term “all-weather friendship” (which it uses to characterize ties with Pakistan) to describe relations with Russia. The restrictions imposed by Russian authorities over the COVID-19 outbreak, culminating in alleged discrimination against Chinese users of Moscow's public transit system, show that positive leader-level relations have not produced strategic trust between the two countries. Instead, strong bilateral ties are reliant on overlapping interests. While the retort from the Chinese Embassy is unlikely to produce a fundamental shift, it nonetheless offers a warning not to overestimate the ability of Moscow and Beijing to construct an enduring alliance. **End OE Watch Commentary (van de Ven)**



China and Cambodia Conduct Joint Military Training Amid Coronavirus Outbreak

OE Watch Commentary: On 12 March, the Chinese state-run media outlet *People's Liberation Army Daily* reported that China and Cambodia conducted joint military training in Cambodia. This was the fourth joint training between the two militaries as part of “The ‘Golden Dragon’ series-- “an important project of pragmatic cooperation Chinese and Cambodian military.”

According to the article, the Chinese soldiers were primarily elite troops from the 75th Group Army, who are part of the Southern Theater Command Ground Force in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The training equipment of the joint military exercises included helicopters, armored vehicles, self-propelled artillery, and “wheeled vehicles.” The article claims the training was divided into two phases: mixed training and comprehensive training. The first phase focused on counter-terrorism equipment use, light weapons training, “assassinations” (which likely involves knife combat training), “fighting” (which probably refers to hand combat), capturing targets, identifying explosives, landing aircrafts, and hunting. The second phase involved comprehensive counter-terrorism exercises.

The article concludes with a paragraph discussing previous efforts to host joint military training between China and Cambodia and the improvements that have been made in 2020. It notes that “compared with before, the joint training has a larger troop strength, a more advanced and diversified weaponry arsenal, and China has deployed a new type of helicopter and self-propelled artillery for the first time. Simultaneously, the content of this joint training is more prominent in actual combat, focusing on the training of coordinated command and joint action capabilities.”

An additional article published on 12 March by the Chinese state-run *Xinhua News Agency* elaborated on the importance of the joint training for both China and Cambodia amidst the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). “During the joint training, officers and soldiers of the two armies will also jointly carry out humanitarian assistance and organize activities such as conducting inspections, delivering medicine, and giving supplies to local villagers and students.” The article also stated the joint training “is a concrete measure to implement the spirit of the Beijing meeting between Chinese and Cambodian leaders. It will help deepen the exchanges and cooperation between the two armed forces in the field of military training and enhance the ability to respond to terrorist security threats and further enhance strategic mutual trust between the Chinese and Cambodian armies... It truly achieved ‘two successes’ in training preparations and epidemic prevention and control.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Hartnett)**

“The ‘Golden Dragon’ series of joint training is an important project of pragmatic cooperation between the Chinese and Cambodian military.”

Source: Chen Dianhong & Li Yang, “‘Golden Dragon-2020’ Chinese and Cambodian Joint Training,” *People's Liberation Army Daily*, 12 March 2020. www.mod.gov.cn/action/2020-03/12/content_4861846.htm

The Chinese participants are mainly composed of the elite troops of the 75th Ground Army. The training equipment includes helicopters, armored vehicles, self-propelled artillery, and wheeled vehicles. Land, sea, and air will be used for three-dimensional delivery to Cambodia. Among them, the air transport and helicopter echelon will arrive in Cambodia before the 14th, and the sea transport echelon will arrive in Sihanoukville, Cambodia before the 12th.

According to reports, the joint training is divided into two phases: mixed training and comprehensive training. The first phase mainly focuses on counter-terrorism equipment operation and use, live-fire shooting of light weapons, assassinations, capturing, fighting, searching for explosives, aircraft landing, and hunting. The second phase organizes comprehensive counter-terrorism exercises.

The ‘Golden Dragon’ series of joint training is an important project of pragmatic cooperation between the Chinese and Cambodian military. This is the fourth joint training. Compared with before, the joint training has a larger troop strength, a more advanced and diversified weaponry arsenal, and China has deployed a new type of helicopter and self-propelled artillery for the first time. Simultaneously, the content of this joint training is more prominent in actual combat, focusing on the training of coordinated command and joint action capabilities.

Source: Zhou Guoqiang & Mao Pengfei, “‘Golden Dragon-2020’ Chinese and Cambodian Armed Forces Jointly Train, Chinese Army Participates,” *Xinhua News Agency*, 12 March 2020. www.mod.gov.cn/action/2020-03/12/content_4861852.htm

During the joint training, officers and soldiers of the two armies will also jointly carry out humanitarian assistance and organize activities such as conducting inspections, delivering medicine, and giving supplies to local villagers and students.

It is a concrete measure to implement the spirit of the Beijing meeting between Chinese and Cambodian leaders. It will help deepen the exchanges and cooperation between the two armed forces in the field of military training and enhance the ability to respond to terrorist security threats and further enhance strategic mutual trust between the Chinese and Cambodian armies. This is the fourth joint training. During the epidemic, our army was part of the only real-arms live ammunition exercise jointly led by foreign forces. It truly achieved ‘two successes’ in training preparations and epidemic prevention and control.



The Royal Cambodian Army, 2014.

Source: R Army via Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Cambodian_Army_soldiers,_2014.jpg, CC BY SA 3.0



China Seeks to Improve its Blue Force Training Scenarios

OE Watch Commentary: The Chinese military has been striving to improve its training through the development of “combat-realistic training,” to be better prepared to fight and win wars. Part of this effort includes the use of red-blue training scenarios. In People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military exercises, the blue forces represent the opponent, while the red forces represent Chinese forces. In the first article extract, published in *Jiefangjun Bao*, the author explains that the Chinese military still has a way to go before it achieves combat-realistic training. Some of the deficiencies mentioned include a lack of “difficulty and intensity,” a failure to create a realistic and reliable “blue force” to avoid “immediate defeat,” and a failure to apply “high-tech measures” during confrontation training.

The second article, published in *Jiefangjun Bao* nearly one month later, reports on a brain-storming session in which commanders from various training bases throughout China’s armed forces, and commanders from various blue force units gathered to discuss ways to improve blue force scenarios. They discussed training bases, some key attributes of a blue force, and who to include in an ideal blue force.

The session put a lot of emphasis on the actual training base and what constitutes an effective training base. The commanders described the primary goal of a training base as an “incubator” of combat power, a “testing ground” in the design of war, and a “quasi battlefield” for defeating a strong enemy. An effective training base, they felt, must use confrontation to apply pressure and stress confrontation through the whole course of an exercise.

One of the commanders in the brainstorming session, Zhu Qichao, argued that the training must have a virtual blue force in addition to a real blue force. While some blue force participants would wear military uniforms, others should be in civilian clothing. The blue force should consist of top individuals and military systems. For example, the air force blue force brigade “has steamroller superiority.” It is equipped with the most advanced aircraft in service in the air force. The brigade’s aviators are selected from members throughout the air force, many of which are winners of the “Golden Helmet,” which are awarded to the PLA air force’s best pilots, and experts in air combat. Based on the brainstorming session, blue force scenarios faced at a training base could end up being more challenging than some actual battles. **End OE Watch Commentary (Hurst)**

“Blue force construction is not a matter of one size fits all. Instead it must address the core function of a simulated blue force, which is to be a “whetstone.” It must stick close to war realism. It must create a “notional enemy” suited to the mechanisms for victory in modern warfare.”

Source: Xue Jinjeng, “Sharpening Combat Skills on the Battlefield with Confrontation Training – The Third in a Series of Discussions on Complying with the Commander’s Order to Focus on Military Training,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, 22 January 2020. http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-01/22/content_9723256.htm

Sharpening Combat Skills on the Battlefield with Confrontation Training – The Third in a Series [of] Discussions on Complying with the Commander’s Order to Focus on Military Training
Confrontation training is the type of military training the most closely resembles actual combat during peacetime... In order to best prepare for war in the new era, whether it is in tactical exercises, campaign exercises, or strategic exercises, it is necessary to improve confrontation training...

Source: Fan Jianghuai and Wu Xu, “我们从这里走向战场 ——“蓝军司令”与“基地司令”头脑风暴纪实 (From Here We Go to the Battlefield: Brainstorming by ‘Blue Force Commanders’ and ‘Base Commanders’),” *Jiefangjun Bao*, 17 February 2020. http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-02/17/content_9744110.htm

From Here We Go to the Battlefield: Brainstorming by ‘Blue Force Commanders’ and ‘Base Commanders’

Commander of an army combined tactical training base Huang Fangmin tied in with experience from organizing a series of live, opposing-forces exercises in recent years and said that a base must use a confrontation to apply pressure and stress confrontation through the whole course of an exercise, it must use speed to apply pressure and stress fast paced training exercises, and it must use difficulty to increase the pressure and stress asymmetric tests, so as to create a war-realistic battlefield environment for live-forces confrontations, to force units in opposing-forces exercises to hurry up, to get busy, to speed up, and to get a bit mixed up, or even suffer defeat.

... Academy of Military Sciences researcher Li Shuyin explained to everyone that at present the big military power countries have training bases numbering in two or more digits, as well as a complete set of types of training bases, such that they can almost “clone” for you a very realistic battlefield environment for wherever you will fight a future war.

... one must strive to make a training environment as much the same as the battlefield as possible. Only when military personnel undergo tempering at a training base and experience real war there will they say, “Some actual battles will not even be as difficult and intense as that training base.”

Army blue force brigade commander Man Guangzhi, for whom the red force always “offers a bounty for capture,” said the blue force brigade he leads has been converted into a combined [arms] brigade...

Man Guangzhi described for a reporter the kind of blue force he had in mind. First is appearance. It should look similar, and enable the opponent in a training exercise to see a reflection of the strong enemy, and personally experience the strong enemy’s characteristics. Second is realism. The blue force’s style of operation should be sound, and stick close to real war in realistic confrontations. Third is strength. The blue force must have super-strong capabilities. It must be able to push its opponent to the limit, and make it face extreme difficulty.

Military hi-tech as represented by information technology sees new developments with each passing day. That profoundly influences the forms of warfare, the methods of warfare, and the composition of units...

The viewpoint expressed by Zhu Qichao stood out from the others. He said our training bases must not only have a real blue force, they must also create a virtual blue force...

Everyone believed that a blue force is crucial in base construction, and that besides a tactical blue force, campaign and strategic blue forces must also be created. Not only is it necessary to create a physical blue force in the traditional sense, it is also necessary to create an electronic blue force and other specialized virtual blue forces. Not only is it necessary to create a dedicated blue force, it is also necessary to create additional duty blue forces. And not only is it necessary to create a blue force which wears military uniforms, it is also necessary to create civilian blue forces in civvies...

In summary, blue force construction is not a matter of one size fits all. Instead it must address the core function of a simulated blue force, which is to be a “whetstone.” It must stick close to war realism. It must create a “notional enemy” suited to the mechanisms for victory in modern warfare.

In confrontations the blue force brigade has “steamroller” superiority. It is not by chance that it has that. The blue force brigade is equipped with the most advanced type of airplane in service in the air force, the brigade’s aviators are selected from throughout the air force, and there is no lack of “Golden Helmet” winners and air combat experts...



China to Supply Body Armor to Every Frontline Service Member

OE Watch Commentary: The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been enhancing its combat readiness and, according to some observers, "preparing for military conflicts, potentially against Taiwan secessionists and US provocations." According to the accompanying article excerpts, published in China's *Global Times* and *China Military*, the PLA announced plans to procure about 1.4-1.5 million units of high-quality body armor with plates. At a cost of \$1.85 billion, it is said to be the largest individual gear procurement in the history of the nation. According to China's latest defense white paper, entitled *China's National Defense in the New Era*, there are a total of about two million military personnel in the PLA, which includes 850,000 troops in China's 13 Group Armies. The articles explain that the high quantity of body armor would easily enable every "frontline service member to get one." *China Military* also pointed out that the "massive procurement" could indicate a new round of reform of PLA training with soldiers practicing with their body armors on, to adapt to the added weight. This would increase realism in training, in line with China's push to incorporate real-life combat scenarios into its training repertoire. **End OE Watch Commentary (Hurst)**



Soldiers with the People's Liberation Army at Shenyang training base in China, March 24, 2007.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PLA_Soldiers_Shenyang.jpg
Source: Staff Sgt. D. Myles Cullen, U.S. Air Force (Released) via Wikimedia, Public Domain

“The procurement [of armor suits] might aim at [the] threat from Taiwan secessionists and their US supporters.”

Source: Liu Xuanzun, "Chinese Army to Procure 1.4 Million Body Armor Units in 2 Years," *Global Times*, 23 February 2020. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1180499.shtml>

Chinese Army to Procure 1.4 Million Body Armor Units in 2 Years

... The PLA has about two million personnel, and the PLA Army is only a part of it, meaning every frontline army soldier could get one of these armor suits, with extra in reserve, analysts said.

A regular plate unit should cost under 7,950 yuan (\$1,135), or 7.4 billion yuan (\$1.06 billion) in total, and an enhanced unit less than 12,900 yuan (\$1,841), or 6 billion yuan (\$856 million) in total.

The products will be delivered in batches in the 24 months after contracts are signed. Both open tenders will end on March 6, according to the statements.

Some mainland military enthusiasts on the internet speculated that the procurement might aim at threat from Taiwan secessionists and their US supporters.

Source: "PLA Conducts Largest Ever Procurement of Individual Protective Equipment," *China Military*, 28 February 2020. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-02/28/content_9755115.htm

PLA Conducts Largest Ever Procurement of Individual Protective Equipment

...The program is expected to cost RMB13 billion, or USD1.85 billion, the largest individual gear procurement in the nation's history.

According to China's defense white paper in 2019, the PLA has about two million personnel, including 850,000 troops in 13 main Group Armies. A total of 1.4 million body armor units means every frontline service member could get one, probably with extra in reserve...

The massive procurement also might indicate a new round of reform of PLA training with soldiers being asked to wear body armors in routine training and drills to adapt to the weight in operation. This would be a great opportunity for the PLA to take a big step forward toward the international level. Soldiers used to not carry all the ammunition and equipment in order to facilitate movement, which wasn't consistent with real-combat scenario. In comparison, foreign troops are always fully-loaded with sufficient ammunition and protective gear either when on duty or during training.



Chinese Military Issues Order for Over 1 Million Ballistic Plates

OE Watch Commentary: In late February, the Chinese military's procurement website published tenders for over a million sets of ballistic plates and vests. As noted by the author of the excerpted article, while 'major units' have already been equipped with armor, the size of the order suggests that this is an attempt to rapidly improve the defensive capability of the majority of the Chinese armed forces.

According to the tender, the PLA wants 930,000 sets of regular ballistic plates and 467,000 enhanced protection plates which should cost 7,960RMB (\$1121 USD) and 12,900 RMB (\$1817 USD) per set respectively. This would represent a significant jump in the cost-per-soldier. In 2014, a *Xinhua* reporter estimated that on average, equipping a PLA soldier cost 9,200 RMB (~\$1300 USD). The International Institute for Strategic Studies, a UK-based think tank, estimated in 2019 that the PLA had over 2 million active-duty soldiers and paramilitary forces across all services and another half-million in reserve forces. The ballistic vests are not the only new equipment being issued. The PLA appears to be experimenting with equipment—a new set of uniforms was issued in 2007, followed by body armor in 2010 and a new combat helmet in 2015. These may yet be replaced by even newer equipment.



U.S. and Chinese Sailors conduct exercise in Gulf of Aden.

Source: Official U.S. Navy Page from United States of AmericaMC1(SW/IDW/DV) Gary Keen/U.S. Navy via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U.S._and_Chinese_Sailors_conduct_exercise_in_Gulf_of_Aden_\(9612687443\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U.S._and_Chinese_Sailors_conduct_exercise_in_Gulf_of_Aden_(9612687443).jpg), Public domain

In October 2019 several new individual soldier systems were put on display for the first time at the military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. New equipment shown included combat uniforms, new battle rifles and personal defense weapon (PDW) and optics (see “China Introduces New Battle Rifle for the PLA,” *OE Watch*, November 2019). As the PLA enhances the combat capability of its troops through the introduction of better communications equipment and now ballistic plates (much less additional training time for all of the above), this number can be expected to grow significantly.

Most PLA exercises within China do not feature ballistic plate carriers—soldiers wear webbing that holds their magazines and other equipment but not the heavier vests. In fact, Chinese peacekeeping units stationed abroad in locations like Mali and South Sudan were among the few shown wearing the additional gear, usually with additional ballistic groin and throat protectors. The People's Armed Police (PAP), which serves an internal security function and SWAT teams under municipal Public Security Bureaus (PSBs) appear to have been given access to a wider range and higher quality equipment—perhaps indicating a bigger budget for equipment or due to their roles in counter-terrorism and similar other situations.

Realism in combat training is at the core of many changes to the PLA's training exercises. While it is too much of a stretch to infer anything about China's broader intentions from such a purchase, giving as many units as possible the opportunity to train in full combat gear is very likely the goal. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

“The PLA’s lack of widespread employment of bulletproof vests compared to other countries has elicited questions from the public. But in fact, China’s major military units have already been equipped with the most advanced bulletproof gear. From the recent tender for 1.5 million sets of equipment on China’s procurement system, it can be seen that the Army is making significant strides in improving defensive capabilities.”



Continued: Chinese Military Issues Order for Over 1 Million Ballistic Plates

Source: “解放军一次采购150万件防弹衣 对外释放一强烈信号 (PLA Purchases 1.5 million Sets of Ballistic Vests, Sending a Strong Signal),” *Shipborne Weapons* [舰载武器杂志], 15 March 2020. https://mil.sina.cn/sd/2020-03-15/detail-iimxyqwa0585017.d.html?vt=4&c_id=65898

In military modernization, it is not enough to improve offensive capabilities—defensive capabilities should also be improved. China has made great progress in developing its defensive capabilities. So what does it mean for the PLA to purchase 1.5 million sets of body armor? Sending a strong signal.

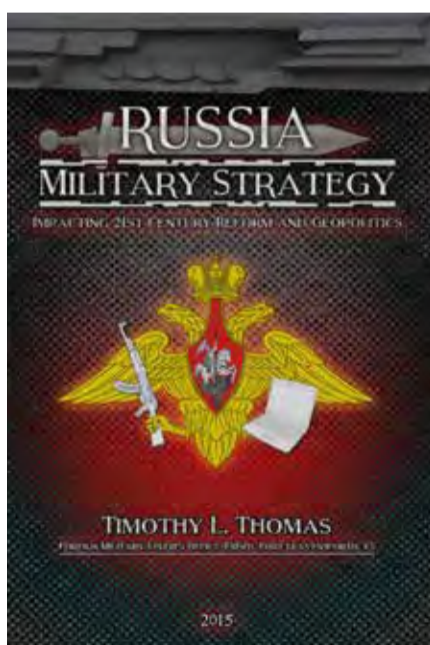
It is common knowledge that Chinese-developed body armor incorporates advanced production technology and new technological innovations, making Chinese bulletproof equipment the standard for many countries.

The PLA's lack of widespread employment of bulletproof vests compared to other countries has elicited questions from the public. But in fact, China's major military units have already been equipped with the most advanced bulletproof gear. From the recent tender for 1.5 million sets of equipment on China's procurement system, it can be seen that the Army is making significant strides in improving defensive capabilities.

It should also be noted that there are many types of 'major units' in China. The vests will be made available to units based on their requirements...Currently, China's special operations forces are predominantly equipped with bulletproof vests. At the (October 2019) military parade, many of the participating soldiers were equipped with enhanced body armor. Also on display were new improved rifles. The inclusion of both improved offensive and defensive systems was meant to send a strong signal.

...

It can be seen that in this process of purchasing bulletproof vests, our country attaches great importance to the overall defensive capability of the military. Although China has not yet provided vests for all PLA personnel, the purchase represents significant support for major combat forces. These units have a variety of complex missions, both at home and abroad, so they will be more assured after receiving the equipment. Therefore, China must continue the development of body armor. Only in this way can we ensure the safety of more soldiers.



RUSSIA MILITARY STRATEGY: IMPACTING 21ST CENTURY REFORM AND GEOPOLITICS by TIMOTHY L. THOMAS

Russian military's main tasks are to maintain the combat readiness of the Armed Forces and to ensure the Russian Federation's defensive capability. Russia's military heritage will assist this process tremendously. Combat readiness includes updated strategic thought, new equipment revelations, and future-war projections. Defensive capability includes not just protecting Russia's territory, but also the security of the nation's national interests and conduct of geopolitics. Capturing the essence of these developments is the goal of this book. In the process a few templates for understanding Russian military thought and actions are offered for further consideration and use.

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Maritime Satellite Communication System Now Reaches 95% of Global Trade Routes

OE Watch Commentary: A Chinese maritime satellite communications platform is nearing completion. In January 2020, MarineTel [海星通] achieved coverage of the South Indian Ocean and major fishing areas, achieving coverage of 95% of global routes in five years. In just five years, MarineTel has been able to provide autonomous and controllable satellite broadband communication services for 95% of global ocean routes. The platform is used by over 6,000 ships and oil platforms, including 4,000 fishing vessels. Launched in 2015, the system is based on a partnership between China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, Shenzhen and Sino Satellite Communications Corporations.



The satellite communication system can be used by fishing ships such as these, based in Sanya, Hainan.
Source: Jorge Cortell Dsc (226974477) via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dsc_\(226974477\).jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dsc_(226974477).jpeg), CC BY 3.0

The system uses Very Small Aperture Terminals (VSAT) aboard the ships to communicate with a constellation of communications satellites in geosynchronous orbit. The system is also supported by a network of ground stations in North America, Europe, and Sri Lanka, as well as stations within China in Kashgar in Xinjiang, Beijing and Hong Kong.

The article also highlights the role the system plays in helping fishermen get their catch to market but also increasing trust for consumers, who can better see when and where the fish were caught. This is particularly important as more customers become aware of the dangers of illegal and mislabeled fish, which has become a global problem.

The system also acts as an emergency link to coordinating agencies like the China Maritime Search and Rescue Center [中国海上搜救中心]. The full article included an example of Chinese fishermen far out to sea in the South China Sea that after encountering a severe storm and almost foundering was able to make emergency contact through the system and be rescued by a commercial vessel in the area.

Chinese companies are already experimenting with “smart” or “intelligent” ships which feature improved automation. According to its producers, the MarineTel system will “lay a foundation” for unmanned ships. In November of 2018, a Chinese company tested the world’s first “intelligent” cargo ship, Pacific Vision [明远]. The 362-meter long Very Large Ore Carrier (VLOC) harness sensors and satellite navigation systems to improve safety through continuous monitoring. (See: “China Launches First ‘Intelligent’ Cargo Ship,” *OE Watch*, March 2019). This system relies on satellite broadband like MarineTel, and China’s Beidou navigation satellite constellation (slated for completion in May of this year) to function. With the addition of high throughput high-throughput Ka-band satellites in 2019, the system will be able to handle the increasing demand from “internet of things” and smart ship applications.

This system is important for a number of reasons: First, it is another example of the commercial value that Chinese companies see from space applications which are helping drive a large number of space launches. Second, the system is explicitly part of China’s Military-Civil Fusion project [军民融合] which seeks to achieve strategic effects for both the military while enhancing the broader Chinese civilian economy. Deployed aboard civilian ships or acting as a backup for military systems, the MarineTel will augment Chinese existing maritime communications networks.

End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)

“Currently, more than 4,000 fishing vessels in China’s waters use the “MarineTel” service.”



Continued: Maritime Satellite Communication System Now Reaches 95% of Global Trade Routes

Source: “覆盖全球95%航线，卫星宽带服务6000艘中国船舶和海上平台 (Covering 95% of the World's Trade Routes, Satellite Broadband Serves 6,000 Chinese Ships and Offshore Platforms),” *The China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC)* [中国航天科技集团] Weibo Account, 18 March 2020. <https://www.weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404483882891214916>

On Chinese cargo ships at sea far from shore, ship information and video monitoring images are transmitted back to China in real-time through satellite broadband, and the land and sea are coordinated to realize the real-time monitoring and management of ocean-going ships by enterprises.

In China's littoral waters, fishermen can use the satellite broadband network to send video exchanges on WeChat to sell freshly caught fish and to conduct online transactions through trading platforms and traceability management systems. This improves profits for fishermen and ensures that buyers can get the freshest food.

More than ten satellites in geostationary orbit act as a datalink connecting China with Chinese ships at sea.

The China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation and Sino Satellite Communications Corporations' "MarineTel" [海星通] service provides satellite broadband integrated services for 6,000 Chinese ships and offshore platforms and covers more than 95% of global routes.

The "global network" created by this satellite constellation allows Chinese ships to travel to the ends of the earth and without disconnecting.

...

Over the past two years, due to the maritime environment and fishery resources in the past two years, China's fishery industry has been transformed and upgraded, and ships at sea can no longer afford to be cut off. Especially in Zhejiang, Fujian and other provinces, local ship service companies and shipowners have made increasing requirements for their ships to be able to have easy access to the internet and maintain links back to shore.

The ocean is vast, the weather is volatile, and stable and reliable satellite communications are an important guarantee for the safe sailing of fishing vessels. MarineTel connects to satellite equipment on fishing boats and is just like using wifi at home for fishermen. When they go out to sea, they can access the Internet with their mobile phones. ..Currently, more than 4,000 fishing vessels in China's waters use the "MarineTel" service.

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First Port Call in the Philippines for Chinese Coast Guard Vessel

OE Watch Commentary: On 14 January, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel arrived in Manila for high-level meetings with their Philippine counterparts. The arrival marks the first visit of a CCG vessel to the Philippines. The Joint Coast Guard Committee (JCGC), comprised of delegations from the China Coast Guard (CCG) and Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), was led by Major General Wang Zhongcai [王仲才], director-general of the CCG, and Vice Admiral Joel Sarsiban Garcia, 28th Commandant of PCG, respectively.

In October 2016, Philippine President Duterte and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the China Coast Guard and the Philippine Coast Guard on the Establishment of a Maritime Police Maritime Cooperation Joint Commission. The first and second meetings of the Joint Commission were held in Subic, the Philippines in 2017 and Guangzhou, China in 2018.



Indian Navy / GODL-India, "Chinese Coast Guard ship during DiREx-15.jpg,"
Source: Government Open Data License - India (GODL) via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese_Coast_Guard_ship_during_DiREx-15.jpg, Public Domain

Since his election in May 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has pursued closer relations with China, largely agreeing to table territorial disagreements in exchange for greater economic investment. At the same time, he has distanced himself from the United States, a treaty ally despite extensive counter-terrorism cooperation. In February, the Philippines informed the United States of its intention to terminate the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).

Tensions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and the Philippines have escalated significantly since 2010. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, a US-based think tank, has estimated in early March of this year for example that Chinese militia vessels have been present at Thitu Island for over 450 days using commercial satellite imagery. While closer bilateral relations between the two Coast Guards could serve as a useful mechanism to control escalation, the meeting also sends mixed signals about the Philippines' intentions and runs the risk of further legitimating Chinese involvement in Philippine waters.

However, at the same time, the Philippines appears to be taking concrete steps to improve its Coast Guard's capabilities. On 7 February, the Philippine Department of Transportation signed a deal with Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to purchase two 94-meter Multi-Role Response Vessels. Ten smaller patrol vessels were purchased over the last 4 years also from Japan and an 84-meter Offshore Patrol Vessel was delivered from French shipbuilder OCEA in 2019. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

“This is the first time that a CCG ship visited the Philippines.”

Source: “中国海警舰艇首次访问菲律宾 (Chinese Coast Guard Ship Visits Philippines For the First Time),” Xinhua, 14 January 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-01/14/c_1125461696.htm

Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessel No. 5204 arrived in Manila on January 14, the Philippines for the third meeting of the Joint Coast Guard Committee (JCGC) on Maritime Cooperation and friendly exchanges with the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) on the morning of January 14. This is the first time that a CCG ship visited the Philippines.

The Philippine side held a grand welcome ceremony for the Chinese ship. The Chinese delegation received the leaders of their Philippine counterparts and personnel from the Chinese Embassy in Manila as well as local people and overseas Chinese. Leaders of the Philippine Coast Guard boarded the Chinese ship and the two sides had a friendly and harmonious exchange of views.

In response to the recent eruption of the Taal Volcano near Manila, CCG ship 0524 donated its rice, flour, cooking oil and other foodstuffs for the affected people, and held a donation ceremony to express the most sincere concern for the Philippine people. Later, coast guard personnel from both side visited each other's ships.

The third meeting of the Joint Coast Guard Committee (JCGC) on Maritime Cooperation began on the afternoon of January 14. During the meeting, the two parties exchanged in-depth views on maritime law enforcement cooperation and issues of common concern. Both sides summed up the achievements and experiences of the JCGC since its establishment and discussed measures to strengthen cooperation in key areas including combating transnational crimes at sea, maritime drug interdiction, maritime search and rescue, and humanitarian rescue. In addition, they will also conduct joint maritime search, rescue and fire-fighting drills, as well as a series of activities such as ship open days, friendly sports matches, and deck receptions.



China Suspends Conscription Due to COVID-19

OE Watch Commentary: China appears to be suspending conscription this year due to the COVID-19 outbreak. In early March, the offices of the State Council and Central Military Commission issued a “Notice on Postponing Recruitment in the First Half of 2020” 《关于推迟2020年上半年征兵工作的通知》 indicating that this year’s conscription has been put on hold.

A previous issue of *OE Watch* had provided a translation of the announcement that the PLA was moving to biannual conscription with two groups beginning in mid-February and Mid-August (see: “China Modifies Military Conscription Cycle, Adopts Biannual Recruitment,” *OE Watch*, February 2020). This new approach now appears to be on hold, emphasizing the degree to which so much of regular activities have been disrupted nationwide.

Many young people who were already in the conscription pipeline were confused about their status, with multiple provincial offices for China’s conscription system posting sometimes contradictory answers on the official website of the National Conscription Office [国防部征兵办公室] over the course of early February.

Questions for the Shanxi, Heilongjiang, and Sichuan offices offered varying responses with the consensus being that the status was unclear, acknowledging that the physical examination for conscripts had been pushed back, or that at the very least conscription would be delayed for the first half of the year. Some responses appear to indicate that the physical exams and the rest of the cycle would start in August.

While the PLA has continued to train during the crisis, it is clear that having large parts of the country shut down will continue to have effects in delaying or slowing this year’s conscription cycle. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**



Soldiers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.

Source: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soldiers_of_the_Chinese_People%27s_Liberation_Army_-_2011.jpg, Public Domain

“The PLA’s heroics in battling the virus and helping people will encourage even more young people to sign up for the military.”

Source: “Postponement of military recruitment to have no impact on results: expert,” *Global Times*, 9 February 2020. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-02/07/content_9735243.htm

China had to suspend its military recruitment program for this year due to the novel coronavirus outbreak, but the postponement will lead to no significant impact on the number or quality of the eventual recruits, an expert with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) predicted on Thursday.

The PLA’s heroics in battling the virus and helping people will encourage even more young people to sign up for the military, the expert said.

China is facing a severe situation in controlling the epidemic, so the time for the physical examination phase of the 2020 military recruitment at various locations across China will be adjusted, according to a report by 81.cn, the PLA’s official website, released on its WeChat public account on Wednesday.

One place to enact the decision is Hunan Province, which lies next to the virus outbreak epicenter, Hubei Province. The physical examinations originally planned for early February will be postponed until a later date because large gatherings during the event could risk cross-infection, Hunan Province’s conscription office said on Tuesday.

The postponement will not hinder the determination of hot-blooded youth who yearn to join the military, 81.cn said, citing comments online saying they can’t wait to make their dream of becoming a soldier come true.

Li Daguang, a professor at the National Defense University of the PLA in Beijing, told the Global Times on Thursday that the postponement is needed (to prevent the virus from spreading) and the postponement “should not have much effect on the number or quality of the eventual recruits.”

The Chinese military is actively taking part in the battle against the coronavirus, sending 1,400 military medical personnel to Wuhan.

Many young people dream of joining the military because of a sense of honor and duty, 81.cn said.

Li said the military’s spirit of responsibility shown in this battle has encouraged people, and he expects more young people will sign up to join the PLA in the future.

About 1.24 million Chinese university students signed up online for military service in 2019, 81.cn reported, noting that countries like the US are having trouble recruiting enough due to war-weariness.



An Update on India-Russia Security Cooperation

OE Watch Commentary: The government of India continues to conduct security cooperation with the Russian government despite sanctions, including a 2018 agreement to purchase the S-400 surface-to-air missile system set to be delivered over the next few years. The accompanying excerpted article reports on additional agreements and provides an update on security cooperation between India and Russia, though sanctions could still be an issue.

The article, from the English-language news website *The Print*, reports how the two governments “are aiming to seal a multi-billion-dollar missile deal before Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Moscow in May” despite previous deals for “AK 203 assault rifles and the Kamov helicopters getting delayed.” The article notes that the deal set to be finalized in May is for “Russia’s IGLA-S system” (a man-portable surface-to-air missile system) and that the Indian Army “has an

immediate requirement for 800 launchers and over 5,000 missiles.” The article also notes that the effort to acquire the missile systems “began shortly after the Kargil War in 1999.” It does not mention why it has taken so long to acquire a man-portable system, but it appears to be a priority even as the agreements for the AK-203 rifles and the Kamov Ka-226T utility helicopters are delayed.

The article discusses that one of the issues holding back production of the new AK-203 rifles and the Kamov helicopters is the “Make in India” initiative. The article notes how the joint venture to produce the Kamov helicopters “won’t meet the 70 per cent indigenous content requirement” and that the initiative has been a factor in delaying production of the AK-203. One Indian official interviewed for the article states that “the only focus right now is the contract for VSHORADS (very short range air defense systems).” These deals show what equipment Indian officials believe they need for the armed forces and are looking to Russia to acquire. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**



Igla-S MANPADS and Strelets set for firing of missiles of Igla-type MANPADS.
Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/Engineering-Technologies-2010/I-BM4LF4Q/A>, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

“The Kamov deal will take much longer than the AK 203. And hence the only focus right now is the contract for VISHORADS.”

Source: Snehesh Alex Philip, “AK 203 and Kamov delayed, India and Russia aim for missile deal ahead of Modi visit,” *The Print*, 10 February 2020. <https://theprint.in/defence/ak-203-and-kamov-delayed-india-and-russia-aim-for-missile-deal-ahead-of-modi-visit/362606/>

With the much anticipated deals for AK 203 assault rifles and the Kamov helicopters getting delayed, India and Russia are aiming to seal a multi-billion-dollar missile deal before Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Moscow in May.

Russia’s IGLA-S system was chosen as the lowest bidder for India’s short-range air defence missile system (VSHORADS) programme. The Army has an immediate requirement for 800 launchers and over 5,000 missiles...

The procurement process for the VSHORADS began shortly after the Kargil War in 1999.

This was after two Indian aircraft — a MiG-21 and a MiG-27 — were possibly shot down during the war by a Pakistani close-in weapon called the Anza (probably the derivative of a Chinese system)...

“The issues with AK 203 will be resolved soon but not in time for Modi’s visit. The Kamov deal is still a work in progress. The only defence deal that can be completed by May is the VISHORADS,” a defence official told The Print...

The delay in the AK 203 assault rifle deal has been the cost factor. The Indo-Russian Rifles Private Limited, established between the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB), the Kalashnikov Concern and Rosoboronexport — the Russian state agency for military exports — have failed to arrive at an offer price for the rifles...

According to the plan, the 7.62×39 mm Russian weapon is meant to be manufactured at the Korwa Ordnance Factory in Uttar Pradesh’s Amethi district...It was expected that the price of each rifle would be around \$1,100 per piece but it has risen due to a number of issues, sources said.

Sources said that the problem is that while Make in India will work out to be cheaper in the long run with high volumes, the initial investment is very high keeping the requirements and setting up of facility is concerned...

The deal for the minimum 200 Kamov 226T, announced by Modi in 2015 to replace the ageing Cheetah and Chetak choppers, is also getting delayed.

The main issue is with the cost and the indigenisation content, sources said. Incidentally, the Indo-Russian joint venture, set up to make the light utility choppers in India, won’t meet the 70 per cent indigenous content requirement...“The Kamov deal will take much longer than the AK 203. And hence the only focus right now is the contract for VSHORADS,” one of the sources cited above said.



Malay Militants in Southern Thailand Change Tactics

OE Watch Commentary: For several decades, Thailand has been battling a relatively low-grade insurgency waged by ethnic Malays in the country's southern regions, who want autonomy and Islamic governance. In recent years, the levels of violence have gradually decreased and, according to the accompanying article in *Bangkok Post*, the insurgents are now targeting fellow Muslims for assassination.

According to the article, a Muslim army employee was shot multiple times and killed in a drive-by shooting in Pattani, southern Thailand, while on his way home from work. The article implies that the insurgents had spies tracking this individual before the assassin followed behind him on a motorcycle and carried out the assassination. Police investigators subsequently identified nine bullets used in the attack, but they have not apprehended any suspects.



Pattani mosque.

Source: Flickr via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pattani_mosque.jpg, CC BY 2.0

This case suggests that insurgents eliminate fellow Muslims who they view as collaborators with the security forces or police. This tactic is different than the sporadic, but sometimes large-scale, bombings or ambushes that have defined the insurgency in recent years, including an ambush in November 2019 that killed 15 people in Yala Province, southern Thailand. Some other bombings that led to multiple casualties in southern Thailand were reported in Malaysia's *The Star* in May 2019, as reported in the second accompanying passage.

Although this article indicates the victim only received around \$150 monthly for working with the army, one of the reasons why the Thai military is achieving counter-insurgency success is apparently that it is winning some civilians, including ethnic Malay Muslims, to its side instead of losing them to the insurgents. **End OE Watch Commentary (Zenn)**

“He was followed by a man on another motorcycle who fired many with a handgun, hitting him twice in the head.”

Source: “Man slain by motorcyclist in Pattani,” *Bangkok Post*, 18 February 2020. https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1860159#cxrecs_s

A man was killed by a gunman on a motorcycle in Khok Pho district on Monday afternoon, police said. Hama Dolo was going home from work to his house in Moo 2 village, Tambon Na Pradu, on a motorcycle. He was followed by a man on another motorcycle who fired many shots with a handgun, hitting him twice in the head. Police recovered nine spent shells of 9mm ammunition from the scene for examination. Police blamed insurgents. Hama was employed by a unit of the 4th Army Region under a jobs project, receiving a monthly pay of 4,500 baht.

Source: “Bomb blast, shootings rock Southern Thailand,” *The Star*, 6 May 2019. [thestar.com.my/news/regional/2019/05/06/bomb-blast-shootings-rock-southern-thailand/](https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2019/05/06/bomb-blast-shootings-rock-southern-thailand/)

A bomb explosion and shootings greeted residents in restive southern Thailand when Muslims observe the first day of fasting during the month of Ramadan.

...

Meanwhile in Pattani, an exchange of fire between security forces and an armed group took place in Kg Mananjung, Tung Yang Daeng, at about 10am (local time) on Monday.



Singapore: Donations to Islamic Organizations and Terrorism Financing

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying article from Indonesian *Antaranews* discusses the arrests of three Indonesian workers in Singapore for terrorism financing. According to the article, sometimes Indonesians in Singapore believe they are making donations to good causes, without realizing that the Islamic organizations receiving the donations are connected to terrorist or extremist groups. The article demonstrates Singapore's concerted effort to prevent its territory from being used for terrorism financing even when conducted inadvertently by Indonesian workers.

In the cases depicted in the article, four Indonesians were suspected of having violated Singapore's Terrorism Act, although one was subsequently released. The other three were tried and sentenced to between 18 and 48 months in prison for sending several hundred US dollars to charitable organizations in Indonesia. As the article notes, it is not clear whether "the three



Singapore Old-Supreme-Court-Building.

Source: CEphoto, Uwe Aranas via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Singapore_Old-Supreme-Court-Building-01.jpg, CC BY SA 3.0

Indonesian citizens know that the donations they have given were for terrorism activities." Following their sentencing, Singapore urged other migrant workers in the country to be highly cautious of where their donations were going because terrorist or extremist organizations mask themselves as ordinary charitable organizations to receive funding.

The article notes that one solution to the problem of Indonesian workers inadvertently sending money to terrorist or extremist organizations is for them to send the money through Indonesia's official zakat institution that has permission from the Ministry of Religion. The government will then ensure the money lands in the hands of genuine charitable organizations. This is imperative for many Indonesians because providing zakat, or charitable giving, is one of their Islamic obligations. In addition, the article notes that Singapore and Indonesia cooperated during the trials and that Indonesia was able to provide consular and legal support to the Indonesians who were convicted. **End OE Watch Commentary (Zenn)**

“Indonesian citizens were suspected of making donations to organizations which turned out to be financing radical activities.”

Source: “Tiga WNI di Singapura Bersalah, BNPT Ingatkan Berhati-hati Berdonasi (Three Indonesian citizens in Singapore were Guilty, BNPT Reminds about Being Careful when Donating).” *Antaranews.com*, 10 March 2020. https://sumsel.antaranews.com/nasional/berita/1346726/tiga-wni-di-singapura-bersalah-bnpt-ingatkan-berhati-hati-berdonasi?utm_source=antaranews&utm_medium=nasional&utm_campaign=antaranews

Head of the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) Suhardi Alius reminded Indonesians in Singapore to be more careful in making donations following three Indonesians' being convicted by Singapore authorities for sending money to organizations suspected of being affiliated with terrorists. He claimed to have reviewed three Indonesian citizens' cases who were found guilty by the Singapore government. From the information he obtained, Indonesian citizens were suspected of making donations to organizations which turned out to be financing radical activities. However, it cannot be concluded if the three Indonesian citizens know that the donations they have given were for terrorism activities because they cannot intervene in the authority of authorities in Singapore.

The Indonesian Embassy in Singapore also assisted during the trial process and provided legal assistance in the form of counseling by lawyers to ensure the three Indonesian citizens were treated fairly and obtained their rights. The Indonesian Embassy in Singapore appealed to all Indonesian citizens in Singapore not to easily trust certain teachings, persuasions, and pleas from irresponsible parties. “If you are going to send a donation, it can be submitted to the official Amil Zakat Institution that has obtained permission from the Ministry of Religion,” he said.



Syria's "Hybrid Counter-War" to Expel US Troops East of the Euphrates

OE Watch Commentary: The Syrian government has consistently portrayed the country's ongoing conflict as a foreign conspiracy orchestrated by the United States and Israel. The lead article in the latest issue of the Syrian Armed Forces quarterly publication *Military Thought*, for instance, summarizes it as follows: "The truth is that Syria was exposed to a conspiracy and a quasi-global war, launched by America and the Zionist entity with many allies and followers, with Gulf and Western funds and media support, using its regional tools in the Gulf and its domestic ones in the form of jihadist terrorist gangs." According to a recent monograph published by the *Damascus Center for Research and Studies*, this aggression on Syria is a "hybrid war" that can only be confronted through a "hybrid counter-war" strategy. The author conceives of his strategy as a form of "resistance" (Muqawama) that manifests as "more of an adaptation or containment than a direct confrontation." Resistance is regularly invoked as a guiding principle by the Syrian government and other members of the Iran-led "Resistance Axis," including Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and various IRGC-supported Iraqi militias and factions. Resistance doctrine views the battlefield expansively: "Resistance is a special type of confrontation, as it is not a direct or open war between armed forces of two warring parties, but rather a complex response by the resisting party to occupation forces, with an understanding of the differences in capabilities and strength." For the monograph's author, Syria's most effective approach to dealing with US presence east of the Euphrates will be to employ a hybrid counter-strategy that identifies, contains and dismantles the social, cultural, economic and other factors that enable US presence in Syria. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**



Euphrates River by Dura-Europus, Syria.

Source: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World from New York, United States of America, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Euphrates_River_by_Dura-Europus%2C_Syria_%28V%29_%285532991132%29.jpg, CC BY 2.0

“The dynamics of ‘Hybrid Counter-War’ are more of an adaptation or containment than a direct confrontation.”

Source:

Gen. Maher Saadeddine. "Syria Confronts the Terrorist War Imposed on It," *Military Thought* (al-Fikr al-Askari), Vol. IV 2019, <http://mod.gov.sy/SD08/msf/media/fkr/0.pdf>

سورية في مواجهة الحرب الإرهابية المفروضة عليها

The truth is that Syria was exposed to a conspiracy and a quasi-global war, launched by America and the Zionist entity with many allies and followers, with Gulf and Western funds and media support, using its regional tools in the Gulf and its domestic ones in the form of jihadist terrorist gangs. Its goal in essence was to target the resistance network in the region, to get rid of Syria and its nationalist role in fostering the resistance, and to prevent Syria from continuing its key role in defending the rights and the interests of the [Arab] nation, as a prelude to recruiting it and other Arab countries into the project for a New Middle East.

Source:

"Sand and Death! The United States and Hybrid Warfare in Syria," *Damascus Center for Research and Studies*, February 2020. <http://www.dcrs.sy/sites/default/files/Upload/ضوفح%20م%20دي%20ع%20لي%20ق%20د%20ت%20و%20ج%20ر.pdf>

رمل و موت! الولايات المتحدة وسياسات الحرب الهجينة في سورية

Syria is pursuing a "Hybrid Counter-War" dynamic, if one may say so, by insisting on the right of resistance and the removal of the American and other countries from its territory... The dynamics of "Hybrid Counter-War" are more of an adaptation or containment than a direct confrontation, and are based on... long-term policies and a proactive bet on leveraging the element of time... from this perspective there is no need to use more bombs and military weapons, as there are more powerful weapons that target the will and imagination of individuals and groups... When war or direct confrontation is not possible, it is necessary to choose and manage other means. If these methods do not exist or are not automatically present, the model used to interpret what is going on must be changed, and policies must be based on new foundations, beginning with the question: What makes it possible for Americans to be present east of the Euphrates, and which social, cultural, economic, security and other elements make this presence possible? "Dismantling" or "containing" these elements are the foundation to dealing with the American presence. Other alternatives in the form of "resistance" are possible, but they are conditioned by the balance of capabilities and a consideration of the consequences, or the utility and effectiveness if they are possible... Resistance is a special type of confrontation, as it is not a direct or open war between armed forces of two warring parties, but rather a complex response by the resisting party to occupation forces, with an understanding of the differences in capabilities and strength...



Russia, Turkey and Syrian Kurds

OE Watch Commentary: Damascus has shown time and again its eagerness to take control of Idlib, the last opposition stronghold. The last offensive in Idlib cost the lives of over 50 Turkish soldiers before the Turkish President went to Moscow to secure an agreement to end the Russian backed al-Assad regime's offensive in Idlib for now. However, the latest offensive in Idlib drove a wedge between Russia and Turkey. In this context, the accompanying article from *Al-Monitor* argues that Russia might be using the Kurds to realign its relations with Turkey.



The Syrian Democratic Forces announce Deir ez-Zor offensive.

Source: Voice of America via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_Democratic_Forces_announce_Deir_ez-Zor_offensive.jpg, Public Domain

Russia has pressured Syrian Kurdish groups to engage in dialogue with Damascus and promised to secure cultural rights for them. Russia's intent in securing an agreement between the Kurds and Damascus appears to

be aimed at pulling the Kurds away from their alliance with the United States. The article states that because of recent developments in Syria, "Kurds sense that the Russian door might open to them to an extent they have never imagined" while at the same time recognizing Russia might accommodate Turkey when its interest converge with that of Turkey.

While the Kurds recognize that tactical alliances might shift, the article notes that Kurds have the following tactical options while negotiating with Russian-supported Damascus. First, after Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, the Kurds have adapted to the changing reality on the ground and continue to negotiate with the Syrian regime. In December 2019, Russia hosted a Kurdish delegation at Russia's Khmeimim air base in Syria to plan and facilitate a meeting between the Kurds and representatives of the Syrian government which resulted in a deal between both sides "to set up joint committees with a view of furthering negotiations down the road." Second, deteriorating Russian and Turkish relations have encouraged the Kurds to collaborate with the Syrian regime on the battlefield especially near areas controlled by the Turkish Armed Forces. Third, Kurds seem to continue to capitalize on the collapse of Turkish-Russian relations as a result of Turkish military losses in Syria. Russia was mostly "acting as a brake holding up the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian military in the region" from attacking Turkish forces.

The article argues that the United States warned the Kurds that if they engage in an armed-conflict with Turkish forces, Washington would not back them up. However, a Kurdish source speaking to the author denied receiving any messages of that nature. According to the article's Kurdish source, if the rift between Russia and Turkey grows over Idlib, Russia is likely to "play the Kurdish card." While the Kurds view the tension between Russia and Turkey as a significant development that could potentially tilt the balance in their favor in the long-term, they also recognize that a full-fledged Russian-Turkish face off is unlikely at this point. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“Russia... appears to have unfolded the Kurdish card, albeit rather discreetly at this time, in a way that goes beyond reviving the dialogue between the Kurds and Damascus.”



Continued: Russia, Turkey and Syrian Kurds

Source: Fehim Taştekin, “Is Russia cozying up to Syria’s Kurds amid rift with Turkey?” *Al-monitor.com*, 20 February 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/turkey-syria-russia-idlib-unfolding-kobani-card-kurds-sdg.html>

Russia... appears to have unfolded the Kurdish card, albeit rather discreetly at this time, in a way that goes beyond reviving the dialogue between the Kurds and Damascus.

Until recently, the Kurds worried that Russia, in a bid to keep Turkey on its side in Syria, might allow it to take control of the Kurdish city of Kobani on the Turkish border in return for Turkish concessions in Idlib. In fact, this has been a fear recurring at each apparent progress in the Turkish-Russian partnership. Amid the recent head-spinning developments, however, the Kurds sense that the Russian door might open to them to an extent they have never imagined.

In general terms, the Kurdish position could be summarized as follows: The Kurds still place importance on their partnership with the United States on the ground, continue to consider Turkey’s military presence as a primary threat, and — while seeing Russia as the guarantor of any negotiations with Damascus — they keep in mind that Russia’s strategic interests might lead it to accommodate Turkey, as it did in 2018 when it acquiesced to Turkey taking over Afrin.

...The notion that Damascus should be the address of settlement on the Kurdish issue has gained weight as a general strategic choice for the Kurdish-led self-administration in northern and eastern Syria. In late December, the Russians had a meeting with Kurdish representatives at Russia’s Khmeimim air base, after which they arranged a meeting between the Kurdish team and Syrian government representatives in Damascus. The talks, in which intelligence chief Ali Mamlouk led the Syrian side, resulted in a deal to set up joint committees with a view of furthering negotiations down the road.

...The collapse of [the Sochi agreement] would mean that Russia, a guarantor of the cease-fire, would stop acting as a brake holding up the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian military in the region.

The straining of Russian-Turkish ties over Idlib has resulted in some undeclared changes in Kurdish tactical choices. According to Kurdish sources contacted by Al-Monitor, the Kurds are collaborating with the Syrian army in certain parts of the operations in northwest Aleppo, namely in areas along the boundaries of Afrin...

According to [a Kurdish] source, the deepening of the Turkish-Russian rift is significant for the Kurds in the sense that it could lead Russia to take the Kurds into account more prominently and result in a solution mechanism on the Kurdish question...

Nevertheless, the Kurds believe it is still premature to declare a clear position, not ruling out the possibility that the Russians might eventually lack the resolve to go into a full-fledged face-off with Turkey...



China’s cyber policy appears to have three vectors —peace activist, espionage activist, and attack planner— that dominate China’s cyber policy. Some are always hidden from view while others are demonstrated daily. Three Faces of the Cyber Dragon is divided into sections that coincide with these vectors.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/195610/download>



Diplomatic Channels for Syrian Kurds

OE Watch Commentary: The diplomatic efforts of Syrian Kurds continue. As a Kurdish academic notes, “until the rule of law is restored in Syria and Kurds can take part in the process,” Syrian Kurds are trying to engage in dialogue and diplomacy with external actors to make their voices and positions heard. While the first accompanying article from *Hawar News*, a news site closely monitoring developments regarding Kurds in Syria, provides insights into the engagement of Syrian Kurds in Geneva with the international community, the second accompanying article from *Kurdistan 24*, a news site supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), discusses the different avenues of diplomacy that Syrian Kurds are engaged in.

The first article covers the issues that a Kurdish delegation discussed with representatives of civil society, a group of activists, government officials of several countries and academics in Geneva recently. One of the issues was the attack of Turkey on the Kurdish self-declared autonomous region known as Rojava. The delegation also stated that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) still “poses a danger to” the region and international community and reiterated their continued fight against ISIS. The next issue was the future of ISIS detainees in make-shift prisons across the region and families of ISIS members who are in refugee camps in Syria. Most importantly, the Kurdish delegation made clear that they were open to engaging in dialogue with any player involved in Syrian conflict to find a resolution. The second article features an interview with Kurdish academic Vahap Coşkun who states that Syrian Kurds have three diplomatic channels to unify the Kurds in Syria and to find a resolution to the Syrian conflict and the situation of the Kurds. The first is that the two major Kurdish groups in Syria, TEVDEM (the Movement for a Democratic Society) which is a collation of Kurdish parties that governs the self-declared autonomous Kurdish region in North Syria and ENKS (the Kurdish National Council) which is supported by KRG, should engage in a dialogue to sort out tension between them. The second is a dialogue with Russia to mitigate the Syrian conflict. Finally, Kurds should continue their dialogue with Damascus. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“The [Kurdish] delegation stated that they are ready to engage in a dialogue with all power and countries to discuss the situation of Syria and to find a political solution...”

Source: “Di civîna Cinêvê de, piştgiyariya ji bo Rêveberiya Xweser (In Geneva Meeting: Support for Autonomous Administration)” *Hawar News*, 29 February 2020. <https://hawarnews.com/kr/haber/di-civna-cinv-de-pistgiyariya-ji-bo-rveberiya-xweser-h28831.html>

The political developments in North and East Syria and the resolution of the Syrian crisis were the main agendas of the meeting...

ISIS poses a danger to Syria, the region and international arena...

The delegation of the Autonomous Administration stated that they are ready to engage in a dialogue with all power and countries to discuss the situation of Syria and to find a political solution...

Source: Vural Erişmiş ““Li Pêşîya Kurdên Rojava sê rêyên diplomatîk hene (There are three diplomatic channels ahead of the Kurds of Rojava),” *Kurdistan 24*, 29 February 2020. <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ku/VideoReader/09b141a5-9327-47a2-855d-60ea33aed087>

When the rule of law is restored in Syria, the Kurds could take part in the process... However, now... Kurds have three channels for diplomacy. There is a need for a [dialogue] between Kurds. There is a diplomacy between ENKS and TEVDEM and they want to create a unity. There is another diplomacy efforts between the Kurds and Russia and diplomacy between the Kurds and Damascus continue...



Deciphering the Turkish-Russian Agreement on Idlib

OE Watch Commentary: On 5 March, Russia and Turkey agreed on a cease-fire to end the Russian-backed Syrian regime's offensive to take control of Idlib. The accompanying article from *Hürriyet*, a pro-Turkish government newspaper, tries to “decipher” what this cease-fire means for a Turkish presence in Syria.

First, the agreement draws new boundaries between the regime forces, and Turkish forces and Turkish supported opposition groups. The status quo in Idlib that was created by the Sochi agreement signed between Turkey and Russia on 17 September 2018 effectively ended with this new agreement. Since the signing of the Sochi agreement, the Syrian army has resumed full control of the M-5 highway that runs east of Idlib from north to south; and continued its offensive to take control of the M-4 highway that runs south of Idlib from east to west. After intense armed conflict in the past month, the Syrian army will control the east and south of Idlib while Turkey and the opposition groups will continue to control north of the M-4 highway and west of the M-5. The author states that this new status quo can be seen as “Turkey gradually setting up a “safe zone” adjacent to its border in Idlib's north.”



Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 26 July 2018.

Source: Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_and_Recep_Tayyip_Erdoğan_26_July_2018_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_and_Recep_Tayyip_Erdoğan_26_July_2018_(2).jpg), CC-BY-4.0

Second, the author states that in order to decipher what will happen on the ground, the phrase “the line of contact in the Idlib de-escalation zone” from the agreement is critical. This phrase refers to any border line where al-Assad's forces come in contact with the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the armed opposition groups.

Third, the memorandum establishes a “security corridor” along the M-4 highway to de-escalate the tensions between the TAF and the Syrian army. The security corridor will stretch nearly 4 miles deep to the north and south of the M-4 highway, and Syrian forces will not go beyond the M-4. Russian and Turkish forces will jointly patrol this security corridor to mitigate hostilities.

The fourth point is concern over radical elements in Idlib. It is still unclear whether the al-Qaeda linked Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other radical elements will comply with the terms and conditions of the deal. HTS “remains in the region controlled by the [TAF]” and it seems Russia has given Turkey one last chance to clear the region from HTS which seems unlikely. Preventing civilians from being targeted is another point of this deal, which says: “the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext.” The article states that with this point Russia commits not to target any civilians. Finally, Russia continues to pressure Turkey to engage in a dialogue with Damascus. This is seen as a fragile ceasefire that puts a temporary Band-aid on the situation, given that radical elements are seen as unlikely to comply with it in the long-term. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“With the new agreement a new status quo has emerged in Idlib...Turkey, together with the opposition, keeps under control a big chunk that is above the M-4 highway and west of the M-5.”

Source: Sedat Ergin, “10 maddede 5 Mart mutabakatının şifreleri (Deciphering the March 5 agreement in 10 points)” *Hürriyet*, 6 March 2020. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/10-maddede-5-mart-mutabakatinin-sifreleri-41462417>

The status quo that was shaped in Idlib with the Sochi agreement signed between Turkey and Russia on Sept. 17, 2018 was largely damaged due to the Bashar al-Assad regime's gains in the field since last May thanks to the massive bombing support of the Russian air forces.

Within this period that extended to the second week of February, the regime took under control the whole M-5 highway that runs from north to south in Idlib's east and at the same time started to advance to the north towards the M-4 highway that runs from east to west in Idlib's South.

...With the new agreement a new status quo has emerged in Idlib...Turkey, together with the opposition, keeps under control a big chunk that is above the M-4 highway and west of the M-5. We can read this development in a way as Turkey gradually setting up a “safe zone” adjacent to its border in Idlib's north.

...In order to understand what will happen on the field, let's focus on the expression “the line of contact in the Idlib de-escalation area...” Our understanding of the “line of contact” should be all the points of contact where the regime's army confronts Turkish Armed Forces...

The most important mechanism that comes to life with the memorandum is the “safe corridor” that will be established over the M-4 that starts from Saraqib, stretching 55 km westward to Latakia. This corridor will stretch 6 km deep on both sides of the highway. While it has not been expressed in a clear manner, we can guess that probably heavy weapons within the 12 km zone will be withdrawn behind the frontal lines...

The regime will not go beyond M-4: The safety of this road will be assumed by Turkish and Russian soldiers through joint patrols...

The emerging format shows that Idlib's city center above the M-4 highway will remain within opposition area in the period ahead...

Terrorist organizations in Idlib were the main focus in Putin's statements. The “determination to combat all forms of terrorism, and to eliminate all terrorist groups in Syria ... Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)... remains in the region controlled by the Turkish Armed Forces.

...Russia has come under a notable commitment. This commitment appears under the sentence “the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext,” in the protocol.



The Role of UAVs and Intelligence in Turkey's Syria Operations

OE Watch Commentary: Turkey has increased its warfighting capabilities by developing indigenous weapons systems for its military, including multiple-launch rocket systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and precision air-ground munitions. Turkey's domestically made UAVs, especially, the Bayraktar TB2 and ANKA have played a significant role in Turkey's fight in Syria. While the first accompanying article highlights Turkey's UAVs and weapons systems used in Idlib against the Russian-backed Syrian army, the second article discusses the role of intelligence in countering the Syrian regime's attacks.

The first article from the pro-government *Daily Sabah* states that the "air campaign against the Bashar Assad regime in northwestern Syria's Idlib are run entirely by locally developed armed drones" such as the Bayraktar TB2 and ANKA. One of those drones deployed to Syria, ANKA-S is satellite-enabled and has operational



TAI ANKA-S.

Source: N13s013 via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_ANKA-S.jpg, CC BY SA 4.0

range beyond 100 miles and "can collect intelligence and provide assistance for the operation center to precisely aim at targets and locate hostile elements." In addition to these UAVs, the article references videos shared by the Turkish Ministry of National Defense on Twitter which show Turkey's domestically made Bayraktar TB2 UAVs striking an "active Russian-made Pantsir S-1 air defense system deployed inside Idlib" with MAM-L, a laser-guided smart micro munition system produced by Turkish defense industry manufacturer ROKETSAN. The article also provides insights into other domestically produced weapons systems deployed to Syria such as the MAM-C, a smart micro munition that was developed for UAVs by ROKETSAN.

According to the second article, besides domestically made UAVs and weapons systems, several other factors helped Turkey avoid a disastrous outcome during Operation Spring Shield launched into Syria. The first factor that Ankara leveraged on the battlefield was signals intelligence (SIGINT). A former Turkish intelligence officer told the author that after the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) took over the Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF) Electronic Systems Command, it restructured as a Signals Intelligence Directorate to increase Turkey's SIGINT capabilities. The second factor was "spy commandos" engaged in activities on the ground and using human intelligence to coordinate attacks. MIT coordinated with TAF to engage in targeted strikes on Syrian high-profile targets using UAVs. According to a former MIT officer who spoke to the author, "MIT assets – especially members of militant opposition groups or intelligence operatives implanted into those groups" – must have played a significant role in conducting targeted strikes. However, a "Turkish defense and security analyst... expressed skepticism" to the author arguing that most of the targets TAF hit would not have required "careful intelligence work by 'spy commandos'" but attacks "on Nayrab airbase and an alleged chemical weapons factory in Aleppo" might have. As the article states, without realistic policies towards Syria, "good equipment and well-trained personnel only can do so much." **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“The expanded air campaign against the Bashar Assad regime in northwestern Syria's Idlib runs entirely by locally developed armed drones.”



Continued: The Role of UAVs and Intelligence in Turkey's Syria Operations

Source: “Ankara’s armed drone campaign against Assad regime shapes battlefield dynamics” *Daily Sabah*, 02 March 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/ankaras-armed-drone-campaign-against-assad-regime-shapes-battlefield-dynamics>

The expanded air campaign against the Bashar Assad regime in northwestern Syria’s Idlib run entirely by locally developed armed drones...

Among a large amount of video footage, including a series of those posted on Twitter by the Defense Ministry, showing Turkish drones strikes targeting a range of regime assets, the one showing a domestically developed Bayraktar TB2 armed drone striking an apparently active Russian-made Panstir S-1 air defense system...

...

Particularly homegrown drones, Bayraktar TB2 and ANKA, have both played a significant role and demonstrated the progress Turkey has made in the nationalization process in the defense industries.

...

The Bayraktar TB2, capable of carrying four MAM-L and MAM-C missiles produced by ROKETSAN on its wings, can make precise targeting with its built-in laser target marker...

Another UAV deployed, the ANKA-S, which has also made its way to the country’s inventory, can be controlled via satellite and has a task range of thousands of kilometers. It can also collect intelligence and provide assistance for the operation center to precisely aim at targets and locate hostile elements.

Source: Barin Kayaoğlu, “How Turkey’s soldiers and spies saved the day in Syria” *Al Monitor*, 8 March 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/turkey-syria-russia-turkish-spies-saved-the-day-in-idlib.html>

While global media outlets credit Turkey’s... [UAVs] for turning the tide, a wide range of weapons systems and the TSK and MIT’s intelligence work contributed to the partial successes of the recent Turkish military operation in northwest Syria...

...

The first factor enabling Ankara to hold its own was its “signals intelligence” (SIGINT) capabilities. SIGINT refers to intercepting the opposing side’s communications (telephones, radios, satellite transmissions) and electronic footprint (especially radars) and, where possible, producing actionable intelligence.

A former MIT officer... after the TSK turned over its Electronics Systems Command to MIT in 2012 (which restructured it as Signals Intelligence Directorate), Turkey’s SIGINT capabilities expanded considerably... “Successful steps have been taken in recent times in developing manned and unmanned aerial vehicles and the destruction of terror or military targets in foreign countries through ground units.

...

The second factor that helped Turkey to avoid a disaster in Syria were “spy commandos.”

The TSK and MIT operated along similar lines in northwest Syria on March 1-5. While Turkish military UAVs carried out much of the fighting in Idlib with MIT support, various attacks against high-profile Syrian targets... According to the former MIT officer from Istanbul, along with SIGINT capabilities and TSK military units on the ground, MIT assets — especially members of militant opposition groups or intelligence operatives implanted into those groups — must have been instrumental in locating Syrian targets.

An Istanbul-based defense and security analyst who spoke with Al-Monitor... expressed skepticism that Turkish special forces would have been involved for the sorts of targets destroyed in northwest Syria... But the expert outlined several exceptions in which Turkey may have used “spy commandos” or highly trained rebel forces to attack the Syrian military. He cited the attack on Nayrab air base and an alleged chemical weapons factory in Aleppo, which are not so close to the front lines between Turkish and Syrian forces.



Oil, Fighters, Mercenaries, and Diplomats: Increasing Flows Between Libya and Syria

OE Watch Commentary: Political and military relations between Damascus and the Tobruk-based government in Libya, aligned with Khalifa Haftar who leads the Libyan National Army (LNA), are taking root. The timing is ripe, as they face a perceived common enemy (Turkey) and seek to break their diplomatic isolation; they have much to gain from bilateral trade, as Syria thirsts for oil and eastern Libya for agricultural and manufactured goods. In early March, a high-level Libyan delegation visited Damascus to formalize diplomatic relations. In statements surrounding the reopening of the Libyan embassy in Damascus, officials from both governments underlined their shared conflict with Turkey. The accompanying excerpt from the official Syrian news agency *SANA* argues that “what is taking place in Syria and Libya is the same” and is caused by “Erdoğan’s regime, whose policies have become based on using terrorism to achieve its political interests which are the main factor... destabilizing the region as a whole.”



Cham Wings Airbus A320 at Kharkiv.

Source: Bogdan Skotnikov via Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/65/Cham_Wings_Airbus_A320_at_Kharkiv.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

Last summer, the privately owned Syrian airline Cham Wings began charter flights from Damascus and Lattakia to Benghazi, Libya. Members of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) accused the airline of trafficking in mercenaries and oil, something the airline denied. In early January 2020, a report from *Ain Libya* accused Cham Wings of shuttling more than one thousand fighters from the Iranian-backed “Liwa Fatemiyoun” (Fatimid Brigade) from Lattakia to Benghazi, to be deployed in support of the LNA on the Tripoli front. Already, the LNA is said to command groups of contract fighters from Sudan, Niger, Mauritania and Russia. A recent report in France’s *Le Monde* claimed that 1,500 Syrian military special forces had also been deployed to Libya under the authority of Ali Mamlouk, one of the Syrian government’s key intelligence and security figures.

Forces from the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group, in government-controlled Syrian territory also appear to be increasingly involved in recruiting fighters to support the LNA in Libya. The accompanying excerpt from a Damascus news website points to Douma, a former rebel bastion on the outskirts of Damascus, as a site where the Wagner Group has, through Syrian intermediaries, focused their recruitment efforts. The article singles out fighters from a disbanded loyalist militia called the Desert Hawks as being targeted with promises of high salaries. A news website from the Druze-majority Suwayda Province, in turn, explains how a Syrian political party called the Syrian National Youth Party has been recruiting locally on behalf of the Russian PMC. The party offered salaries ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per month and compensation in case of death, in exchange for fighting in Libya. The article adds that the National Youth Party had been recruiting for pro-Assad forces since 2014 and had, in at least one instance, not honored the commitments made to its recruits. Perhaps for that reason, its recruitment drive for Wagner in Libya does not appear to have gained much traction thus far. (Also see: “Deciphering Libya’s Crowded Battlefield (1): State Actors,” and “Deciphering Libya’s Crowded Battlefield (2): Proxy Forces,” in this issue of *OE Watch*) **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“What is taking place in Syria and Libya is the same...”



Continued: Oil, Fighters, Mercenaries, and Diplomats: Increasing Flows Between Libya and Syria

Source: President al-Assad to Libyan delegation: War against terrorism isn't the battle of Syria and Libya only," SANA, 2 March 2020. <https://sana.sy/en/?p=187167>

The meeting affirmed that what is taking place in Syria and Libya is the same, and that the war against terrorism isn't the battle of two countries only, particularly as it will determine the fate of the region in the face of the projects which some states are trying to impose on it through their tools, on top Erdogan's regime whose policies have become based on using terrorism to achieve its political interests which are the main factor of destabilizing the region as a whole.

Source: حفر مرتزقة قائمة في جديدة إضافة
"Shiite Fatemiyoun Brigade... New Addition to the List of Haftar's Mercenaries," *Ean Libya*, 27 January 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/r8uorwa>

Libyan political analyst Abdul Salam Al-Rajhi revealed that Khalifa Haftar had recruited a mercenary group from the Fatimid Brigade in Syria. In a television interview, he said that reliable sources and information indicate that the flights that leave from Latakia and land in Benghazi carry the fighters of the brigade, a militia with a religious orientation and ideology...

He explained that according to intelligence 1,300 of the brigade's mercenaries arrived in Libya.

Source: حصري: الروس يُجنّدون أبناء دوما للقتال في ليبيا
"Exclusive: Russians Recruit in Douma to Fight in Libya," *Sawt al-Asima*, 12 February 2020. <https://damascusv.com/archives/20685> (translation via Syrian Observer: <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/56052/russia-conscripts-young-men-in-damascus-countryside-to-fight-in-libya.html>)

The local Sowt al-Asima website said that the Russians had appointed city figures in Douma to conscript young men from the area and to send them to fight in Libya for large sums of money.

The site said that the mission included recruiting 50 young men from the city, on a salary of 800 dollars a month per fighter, to fight for three months and then one month of leave spent in his city. Russian issued the conscripted men with ID cards from the Hemeimeem military base called "Friend of Russia" cards, which ban any security agency from arresting or holding them, according to Sowt al-Asima. A group of 25 young men from Douma left Syria through the Damascus International Airport to the Libyan city of Benghazi over the first week of February.

The site said that the Russians had conscripted former fighters from Saqour al-Sahara, from the central areas of Syria to fight in Libya alongside the Haftar militia for salaries of up to 1,000 dollars a month.

Source: حزب سياسي مرخص يعمل على تجنيد مرتزقة في سوريا للقتال في ليبيا بدعم جهة روسية
"Licensed Political Party Recruits Mercenaries in Syria to Fight in Libya With Russian Support..!" *Suwayda24*, 8 February 2020. <https://suwayda24.com/?p=13043>

An investigation conducted by local news networks in Suwayda revealed the involvement of a political party licensed by the Assad regime, with support from a Russian security company, to recruit mercenaries from Suwayda and other provinces in order to send them to fight in Libya. As-Suwayda 24 confirmed that it had obtained information and documents proving that since last January, the Syrian National Youth Party has recruited mercenaries from various Syrian regions, including Suwayda, to send to Libya with support from the Russian Wagner Group.



Deciphering Libya's Crowded Battlefield (1): State Actors



Map of North Africa.

Source: Supmena via Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:North-africa-map.jpg>, CC BY-SA 4.0

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying passages from regional sources discuss the multitude of actors involved in the Libyan conflict and their varied interests. While Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and France are the main backers of the Tobruk-based, Libyan National Army (LNA) aligned with Khalifa Haftar; Turkey and Italy back the Tripoli-based Sarraj-led Government of National Accord (GNA).

Russia's interest in Libya, according to the first passage from *Africa News*, is to “preserve its presence in Libya through Haftar, including its oil interests.” The passage points out that Russia has deployed fighters through its private security contractor, the Wagner Group, even though Putin has denied this, as Moscow's official position has been to maintain contacts with both rival governments (see: “Russia's Increasing Military

Presence in Libya,” *OE Watch*, December 2019). Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are also “longtime patrons of General Haftar, who they see as the best hope of stabilizing the troubled country and combating the Islamist threat on Egypt's porous western border.” The passage points out that both countries deliver military aid to the LNA, “including powerful missiles and armed drones that have spurred Haftar's advances.”

Turkey has been supporting the Government of National Accord (GNA) and is seeking to “safeguard its interests in the eastern Mediterranean as part of a broader competition for oil and gas drilling rights with other regional players. These include Greece, Cyprus, and Israel,” according to the same passage. It also notes that Turkey has sent troops, weapons and military experts to back the Tripoli-based GNA.

Turkey's inclusion has raised the stakes for Gulf countries, who do not want to see Turkey militarily involved in an Arab country, and this has particularly been true for its regional competitor Saudi Arabia. As the second passage discusses, Saudi Arabia has been stepping up its support for LNA and Khalifa Haftar due to “concern over Turkey's growing engagement in Libya, which includes the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to prop up the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.” The passage points to a report of Saudi Arabia providing financial assistance to the Russian Wagner Group, to support Haftar's forces. According to the passage, Saudi Arabia's position in Libya “can be explained by its desire to counter Turkey's military intervention in support of the GNA and establish a long-term diplomatic foothold in Libya. Saudi Arabia views Ankara's military assistance to the Government of National Accord... as a threat to regional stability. In order to demonstrate its solidarity with Egypt, one of Saudi Arabia's leading allies in the Arab world, and highlight its opposition to Turkish conduct, Riyadh has deepened its alliance with Haftar.”

The first passage also discusses Italy and France's roles in Libya. The two important European countries have been supporting rival sides, disabling Europe from playing a leading role in the conflict. As Libya's former colonial ruler, Italy established close economic and political ties with Libya, located across the Mediterranean. According to the article, “recent Turkish and Russian involvement has raised concerns in Italy over its waning influence. When the war broke out, Italy bet on the Tripoli-based government to protect its stakes in Libya's vital oil facilities, including a natural gas pipeline, and to help stem the flow of migrants from Libya's Mediterranean coastline, which is a major conduit for thousands making perilous journeys to Europe.” In fact, Italy has had a policy of training and equipping the Libyan coast guard to intercept and divert Europe-bound smuggler boats to Libya. Meanwhile, “France's relationship with Haftar has put it at odds with other European countries that have professed support for the Tripoli government.” As the passage notes, France officially denies backing Haftar's forces, but at the same time, views him as “a key political player and military chief whose control over most of Libya cannot be ignored.” France also “seeks to prevent Islamic extremists from gaining a foothold in the Sahel region.”

The final passage discusses a relatively new actor in the conflict, though a very close one: Algeria, which shares a 615-mile border with Libya. According to the *Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB)*, Algeria advocates for the conflict to be resolved regionally. Algerians are “fiercely opposed to Gulf countries and Turkey stepping into their neighborhood and suspect French motives for backing Haftar.” Reportedly, Algeria wants to “act as a referee by thwarting Turkey's ambition to wage full-scale war” in Libya, in hopes that this policy “can help consolidate a ceasefire, stop the transfer of weapons from abroad into Libya and revive the Abu Dhabi agenda which envisaged elections in Libya.”

The various actors with conflicting interests in Libya complicate any possible solution and suggest that Libya may be at an impasse for a while, or worse, face an escalating arms race. (Also see: “Oil, Fighters and Diplomats: Increasing Flows Between Libya and Syria” and “Deciphering Libya's Crowded Battlefield (2): Proxy Forces” in this issue of *OE Watch*; “Libya Conflict: Oil as the New Weapon,” *OE Watch*, March 2020) **End OE Watch Commentary (Kaya)**



Continued: Deciphering Libya's Crowded Battlefield (1): State Actors

“Saudi Arabia’s increasingly assertive conduct in Libya can be explained by its desire to counter Turkey’s military intervention in support of the Government of National Accord and establish a long-term diplomatic foothold in Libya.”

Source: “Who supports who in Libya’s complex battlefield: Egypt, Russia, Turkey, Arab League,” *Africa News*, 14 January 2020. <https://www.africanews.com/2020/01/14/who-supports-who-in-libya-s-complex-battlefield-egypt-us-russia-turkey-europe/>

Russia has stepped onto Libya’s battlefield and into the political vacuum left by Western powers. It allegedly dispatched late last year hundreds of mercenaries to boost Haftar’s halting campaign to take Tripoli. Libyan and U.S. officials accuse Russia of deploying fighters through a private security contractor, the Wagner Group. Putin however says any Russians in the country are not in Moscow’s pay. “Moscow wants to preserve its presence in Libya through Haftar, including its oil interests,” he said.

Turkey has propped up the embattled GNA, becoming increasingly involved in a proxy war against regional rivals Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which support Haftar’s forces. Turkey is seeking to safeguard its interests in the eastern Mediterranean as part of a broader competition for oil and gas drilling rights with other regional players. These include Greece, Cyprus, and Israel.... Last week, Turkish Parliament authorized a troop deployment to Tripoli, where it is already sending weapons and military experts.

As Libya’s former colonial ruler, Italy has for decades cultivated close economic and political ties with the North African country located just across the Mediterranean from the Italian peninsula. Recent Turkish and Russian involvement has raised concerns in Italy over its waning influence. When the war broke out, Italy bet on the Tripoli-based government to protect its stakes in Libya’s vital oil facilities, including a natural gas pipeline, and to help stem the flow of migrants from Libya’s Mediterranean coastline, which is a major conduit for thousands making perilous journeys to Europe. Italy’s policy of training and equipping the Libyan coast guard to intercept and divert Europe-bound smuggler boats to Libya has raised alarm among human rights activists. Traffickers in Libya run illegal detention centers notorious for abuse.

France’s relationship with Haftar has put it at odds with other European countries that have professed support for the Tripoli government. Although it officially denies backing Haftar’s forces, France views the general as a key political player and military chief whose control over most of Libya cannot be ignored. France, which once colonised much of West Africa and still wields influence there, seeks to prevent Islamic extremists from gaining a foothold in the Sahel region, a potential powder keg it sees as threatening other North African countries and the Mediterranean.

The United Arab Emirates and Egypt are longtime patrons of General Haftar, who they see as the best hope of stabilizing the troubled country and combating the Islamist threat on Egypt’s porous western border. Despite a U.N. arms embargo, both countries deliver military aid to the LNA, including powerful missiles and armed drones that have spurred Hifter’s advances.

Source: Samuel Ramani, “Saudi Arabia steps up role in Libya,” *Al Monitor*, 24 February 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/saudi-arabia-role-libya-gna-hifter.html>

Saudi Arabia is stepping up its support for Libyan National Army chieftain Khalifa Hifter and its role as a potential power broker in a political settlement in Libya. The kingdom and the United Arab Emirates are both concerned about Turkey’s growing engagement in Libya, which includes the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to prop up the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.... On Jan. 24, the French newspaper *Le Monde* reported that Saudi Arabia provided financial assistance to the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization that deploys mercenaries to support Hifter’s forces.

Saudi Arabia’s increasingly assertive conduct in Libya can be explained by its desire to counter Turkey’s military intervention in support of the Government of National Accord and establish a long-term diplomatic foothold in Libya. Saudi Arabia views Ankara’s military assistance to the Government of National Accord... as a threat to regional stability. In order to demonstrate its solidarity with Egypt, one of Saudi Arabia’s leading allies in the Arab world, and highlight its opposition to Turkish conduct, Riyadh has deepened its alliance with Hifter.

Source: Francis Giles and Akram Khariief, “How Libya Impacts North Africa,” *Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB)*, February 2020. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_227/how_libya_impacts_north_africa

[Algerians are] fiercely opposed to Gulf countries and Turkey stepping into their neighbourhood and suspect French motives for backing Haftar. It does not openly oppose the support Ankara is giving Tripoli but attempts to act as a referee by thwarting Turkey’s ambition to wage full scale war in Libya. Algerian leaders hope that this policy can help consolidate a ceasefire, stop the transfer of weapons from abroad into Libya and revive the Abu Dhabi agenda which envisaged elections in Libya.



Deciphering Libya's Crowded Battlefield (2): Proxy Forces



Fighters in Darfur.

Source: Wikimedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Darfur_Jeep.jpg, CC BY SA 3.0

Observer reports on a UN report claiming “Sudanese Darfur fighters are fighting for Khalifa Haftar’s forces in Libya as mercenaries.” According to the report, “Haftar gives every ten fighters a military vehicle and weapons. They are tasked to attack institutions and properties... If they carry successful attacks, they are allowed to keep the vehicles and weapons they have looted.” Apparently, “the brokers pay the mercenaries \$3000 a month for fighting alongside Haftar’s forces. Meanwhile, Sudan Liberation Army fighters get 5100 Libyan dinars a month about (\$3650) and officers get 5200 (\$3700).”

According to the report, Haftar’s forces pay a lump sum to the Sudan Liberation Army, who gives it to a “financial military colonel” who then distributes the mercenaries their monthly salaries in cash. In addition, “Darfur armed groups are also involved in securing the passage of human traffickers, abduction of migrants to get ransoms, smuggling weapons, drugs and cars and many more criminal acts on cooperation with local criminals in Libya and Chad.” These local criminals are also involved in money laundering through car sales: “Sudanese car dealers pay money to armed groups in Libya to escort the convoys of cars from areas under Haftar’s command to borders with Chad and Sudan. The armed groups get 3000 Libyan dinars (\$2150) for every car.”

The final passage, also from the *Libya Observer*, discusses that Libya’s Foreign Ministry has accused the UAE of sending Sudanese citizens who applied for jobs in the UAE, as mercenaries in Libya. The Libyan Foreign Ministry claims that the UAE is “deceiving young people and luring them into the UAE under different pretexts, but later, they were forcibly sent to Libya, exploiting their need to improve their living conditions.” The mix of state and non-state actors with conflicting and varied interests do not bode well for peace in Libya. (Also see: “Oil, Fighters and Diplomats: Increasing Flows Between Libya and Syria” and “Deciphering Libya’s Crowded Battlefield (1): State Actors” in this issue of *OE Watch*; “Libya Conflict: Oil as the New Weapon,” *OE Watch*, March 2020 and “Russia’s Increasing Military Presence in Libya,” *OE Watch*, December 2019) **End OE Watch Commentary (Kaya)**

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying passages shed light on the various proxy forces involved in the Libya conflict. Russia’s use of its Wagner group to support the Libya National Army (LNA) and Turkey’s decision to send Syrian fighters allied with Turkey to support the Government of National Accord (GNA) are well known. However, there are many other proxy forces on the ground, to include Sudanese Darfur, Chad and Nigerien mercenaries sent to Libya to fight on the side of the LNA.

The first three passages address Russian and Turkish proxies (Wagner group and Syrian fighters), and discuss each side’s condemnation of the others’ proxy forces. In fact, the third passage claims that the Libya conflict has become an “overt Russia-Turkey proxy war.”

This article also notes that in addition to these two countries’ proxy forces, “there are also up to 3,000 mercenaries from Sudan, Niger, and Chad fighting for Haftar.” In fact, the fourth passage from the *Libya*

“Sudanese Darfur fighters are fighting for Khalifa Haftar’s forces in Libya as mercenaries as they aim to strengthen their military might by earning money and weapons through Libya...”



Continued: Deciphering Libya's Crowded Battlefield (2): Proxy Forces

Source: "Turkey's Erdogan confirms sending Syrian fighters to Libya," *Al Jazeera*, 21 February 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/turkey-erdogan-confirms-sending-syrian-fighters-libya-200221082443159.html>

Pro-Turkish Syrians are fighting in Libya alongside military trainers dispatched by Ankara, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan admitted for the first time on Friday. "Turkey is there with a training force. There are also people from the Syrian National Army," Erdogan told reporters in Istanbul, referring to the group of rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government.

Source: "Russia Accuses Turkey of Bringing Mercenaries into Libya," *Aawsat.com*, 26 February 2020. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2150746/russia-accuses-turkey-bringing-mercenaries-libya>

Russia accused Turkey of bringing in foreign fighters into the North African country.... Libyan Foreign Minister in the East Abdulhadi Lahweej made similar charges...

...

Turkey and the GNA signed a military cooperation deal last year and Ankara has since sent troops and allied Syrian fighters there.

Source: Frud Bezhan, "U.S. Vacuum: How Libya is Descending into a Russia-Turkey Proxy War," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 21 January 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-vacuum-how-libya-is-descending-into-a-russia-turkey-proxy-war-/30389900.html>

Russia has sent weapons, while there has been an influx of hundreds of mercenaries allegedly from the Kremlin-linked Vagner private security firm. Moscow has denied sending private mercenaries to support Haftar. With greater support from Russia, Haftar's forces have made a renewed push to seize control of Tripoli.

There are also up to 3,000 mercenaries from Sudan, Niger, and Chad fighting for Haftar.

...

Addressing the imbalance on the battlefield, Ankara this month sent dozens of military advisers to Tripoli and has deployed up to 2,000 Syrian fighters to support the government.

Moscow and Ankara have become the two most active international players in Libya.

Russia has condemned Turkey's decision to increase its military assistance to the Tripoli government. Meanwhile, Ankara has slammed the presence of Russia-linked mercenaries in Libya. The result ... was an "increasingly overt Russia-Turkey proxy war" in Libya.

Source: "UN report: Darfur armed groups are fighting for Haftar in Libya," *Libya Observer*, 12 February 2020. <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/un-report-darfur-armed-groups-are-fighting-haftar-libya>

Sudanese Darfur fighters are fighting for Khalifa Haftar's forces in Libya as mercenaries as they aim to strengthen their military might by earning money and weapons through Libya, a report by the United Nations Panel of Experts on Sudan said on Tuesday. "Haftar gives every ten fighters a military vehicle and weapons. They are tasked to attack institutions and properties, which make them earn more money than that they do in guarding institutions and facilities. If they carry successful attacks, they are allowed to keep the vehicles and weapons they have looted." The report says. It adds that the brokers pay the mercenaries \$3000 a month for fighting alongside Haftar's forces. Meanwhile, Sudan Liberation Army fighters get 5100 Libyan dinars a month about (\$3650) and officers get 5200 (\$3700).

The commander and deputy commander of the Sudan Liberation Army receive money from Haftar's forces, give it to a financial military colonel who pays the mercenaries their monthly salaries cash. The report said Darfur armed groups are also involved in securing the passage of human traffickers, abduction of migrants to get ransoms, smuggling weapons, drugs and cars and many more criminal acts on cooperation with local criminals in Libya and Chad. It also indicated that Sudanese car dealers pay money to armed groups in Libya to escort the convoys of cars from areas under Haftar's command to borders with Chad and Sudan. The armed groups get 3000 Libyan dinars (\$2150) for every car.

Source: "Libya's foreign ministry accuses UAE of thwarting peace settlement in Libya," *Libya Observer*, 29 January 2020. <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/libyas-foreign-ministry-accuses-uae-thwarting-peace-settlement-libya>

Libya's Foreign Ministry has accused the UAE of thwarting the political settlement efforts of the Libyan crisis, referring to the latest Abu Dhabi's scandal with Sudanese citizens who applied for jobs in the UAE to find themselves working as mercenaries in Libya.

"Such an act can only be explained in the context of the role the UAE is playing in supporting Haftar militia by deceiving young people and luring them into the UAE under different pretexts, but later, they were forcibly sent to Libya, exploiting their need to improve their living conditions," the Libyan Foreign Ministry said in a statement issued yesterday.



Saudi Drone Program to Get Boost from Turkish and South African Expertise

OE Watch Commentary: The centerpiece of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 Strategic Plan is economic diversification and one of its main components is the localization of defense industries. The plan aims to increase spending in the domestic military industry from two percent to 50 percent, with an emphasis on higher value, complex equipment such as military aircraft. To this end, in early March 2020, the Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones (MODON) signed a contract with the Saudi company INTRA Defense Technologies for the establishment of a drone development and manufacturing facility on the outskirts of Riyadh. This is one of several "military industrial clusters" that MODON intends to set up in collaboration with the Saudi General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI).

INTRA Defense is "a Private Saudi Company Specialized in Advanced Hi-Tech Defense Technologies," per its Twitter handle. On its website, the company touts itself as "a leader in Unmanned Aerial System technologies and Unmanned Combat Systems" as well as in "Optronics Systems" and "EW Systems." It appears to operate Karayel drones, manufactured by the Turkish company Vestel, and has also "developed and built" its own tactical surveillance and reconnaissance vertical take-off UAV called the ASEF Hybrid VTOL Unmanned Aerial System. At the Dubai Airshow last November, INTRA Defense and Turkish drone manufacturer ESEN established a joint entity called ESEN Saudi, which according to the excerpted passage from *Defence Turkey* will be "the contractor for the engineering and production of INTRA Defense Technologies unmanned aerial systems ground control units including different configurations of land and naval based ASEF Hybrid VTOL Unmanned Aerial System."

In the field of Optronics, INTRA Defense also signed a cooperation agreement last November with South Africa's Hensoldt Optronics "covering the development and co-production of airborne electro-optical systems." Together they aim to develop "a new high-performance airborne surveillance and targeting system that is typically deployed on platforms requiring very long stand-off ranges such as medium and high-altitude long endurance (MALE and HALE) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and high altitude surveillance aircraft." In line with the promises of Vision 2030, the system will be "a local Saudi product, free from third party government export restrictions." **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**



Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones (MODON) logo.
Source: Nq1112 via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Modon_Logo.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

“Strategic cooperation was launched in 2019 between MODON and the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) to promote the localization of military industries and support the Kingdom’s goal of making the military industries sector an important asset for economic development.”

Source: “Localized defense industries commitment,” *Saudi Vision 2030*, Undated. <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node/384>

Our aim is to increase the amount of military spending within the Kingdom – currently at 2 percent of our total defense spending – to more than 50 percent by 2030. This is already underway in less complex industries such as those providing spare parts, armored vehicles and basic ammunition. However, our goal is to expand into higher value and more complex equipment such as military aircraft.



Continued: Saudi Drone Program to Get Boost from Turkish and South African Expertise

Source: “Saudi Arabia’s MODON signs agreement on drone project,” *Arab News*, 5 March 2020. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1637031/saudi-arabia>

The Saudi Authority for Industrial Cities and Technology Zones (MODON) in Riyadh has signed a land-lease contract with INTRA Defense Technologies for the development of unmanned aircraft systems... Al-Salem said that strategic cooperation was launched in 2019 between MODON and the General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI) to promote the localization of military industries and support the Kingdom’s goal of making the military industries sector an important asset for economic development... “The two sides will work to establish industrial clusters for the targeted military sectors within the industrial cities...”

Source: “Establishment of ESEN Saudi in-line with the 2030 vision of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *Defence Turkey*, Vol. 14 Issue 96 (2019). <https://www.defenceturkey.com/tr/icerik/establishment-of-esen-saudi-in-line-with-the-2030-vision-of-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia-3790>

INTRA Defense Technologies and ESEN established ESEN Saudi as a Joint Venture in KSA... ESEN Saudi will be the contractor for the engineering and production of INTRA Defense Technologies unmanned aerial systems’ ground control units including different configurations of land and naval based ASEF Hybrid VTOL Unmanned Aerial System.

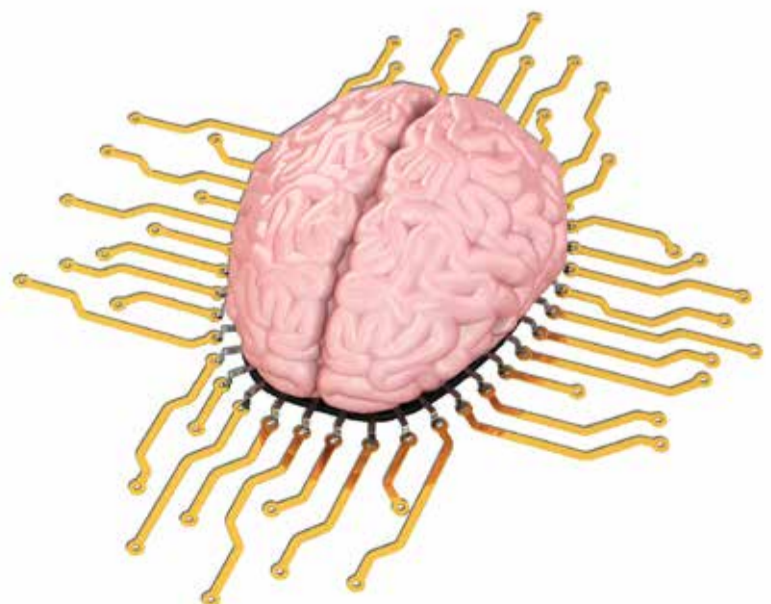
Source: “Hensoldt Optronics and Saudi Arabia’s Intra sign cooperation agreement,” *DefenceWeb*, 18 November 2019. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/industry/industry-industry/hensoldt-optronics-and-saudi-arabias-intra-sign-cooperation-agreement/>

South Africa’s Hensoldt Optronics and Saudi Arabia’s Intra Defence Technologies have signed a partnership agreement covering the development and co-production of airborne electro-optical systems... Hensoldt said the partnership is aimed at developing a new generation of electro-optical systems, specifically a new high-performance airborne surveillance and targeting system that is typically deployed on platforms requiring very long stand-off ranges such as medium and high-altitude long endurance (MALE and HALE) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and high altitude surveillance aircraft. The system will also be available for use on platforms such as helicopters and aerostats... According to van der Watt, the new airborne gimbal will be a local Saudi product, free from third party government export restrictions. While designed for specific applications in the Gulf and Middle East region as a whole, the product allows both companies to position themselves for future programmes in their own specific markets, Hensoldt Optronics said.

THE MAD SCIENTIST LABORATORY BLOG

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Mad Scientist Laboratory engages global innovators to report on the Operational Environment (OE), emergent disruptive technologies and their convergent impacts, and the changing character of warfare.





Houthi Air Defense Missiles

OE Watch Commentary: Since the start of 2020, Houthi-affiliated media outlets have focused extensively on their purported air defense capabilities. The accompanying excerpted article, from the semi-official Yemeni daily *al-Thawra*, provides an overview of these claims. It notes that per official Yemeni sources, between 2015 and 2019, they struck 212 coalition aircraft, including F15s, F16s, Apaches, Blackhawks, MQ-9 Reapers, MQ-1 Predators, Wing Loongs, CH-4s, Eurofighter Typhoons and other aircraft employed by the Saudi-led coalition. In August 2019, the Houthis for the first time unveiled two of their air defense systems. The first, called “Fater-1,” consists of 3M9 missiles from a Soviet-era air defense system (2K12 Kub/Kvadrat), likely salvaged from the pre-2011 Yemeni military arsenal. Per the Houthis, their Fater-1 missiles entered service in October 2017. The second system, which they have dubbed the “Thaqib-1,” is a modified R-73 (AA-11 Archer) short-range air-to-air missile adapted for surface-to-air use. Per the Houthis, it was first used in September 2017. In February 2020, the Houthis unveiled two additional air defense system missiles, the “Thaqib-2” and “Thaqib-3.” The former is a repurposed R-27 (AA-10 Alamo) air-to-air missile and the latter a repurposed R-77 (AA-12 Adder) air-to-air missile, likely salvaged from Yemeni Air Force stocks that accompanied an order of MiG-29SMTs delivered in the mid-2000s. Per the Houthis, these missiles were first employed in 2016 to target coalition F15s and F16s; according to the accompanying passage, the Thaqib-3s are to be integrated into a “Mersad” system, the name given to an Iranian mid-range AD system that entered service in 2010.



“Thaqib-3” Missiles (foreground).

Source: Yemen Military Media via ansarollah.com, https://www.ansarollah.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/photo_%D9%A2%D9%A0%D9%A2%D9%A0-%D9%A0%D9%A2-%D9%A2%D9%A3_%D9%A1%D9%A9-%D9%A3%D9%A8-%D9%A2%D9%A8-1.jpg, no copyright

According to the accompanying passage from a report by the Yemeni think tank *Abaad Center for Studies & Research*, Iranian Quds Force leader Qassim Soleimani was focused on transferring Iranian air defense systems to the Houthis in Yemen shortly before being killed by an early-January airstrike in Baghdad. Per the report, “48 air defense systems” that are likely “a copy of the Russian S-300,” with parts from the Iranian Bavar-373 system, were “smuggled in pieces and transported to Yemen by sea.” Perhaps in reference to the Iranian systems, the head of Yemen’s Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, recently claimed that the Russian missiles currently in use “will be the prelude to more advanced and effective defense systems in addressing hostile air targets.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“These defensive systems will change the course of the battle, and they will be the prelude to more advanced and effective defense systems in addressing hostile air targets.”

Source:

“Air Defense Harvest: 212 Adversary Aircraft,” *al-Thawrah*, 27 February 2020, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/607838>

الدفاعات الجوية تحصد 212 طائرة للعدوان

The outcome of the Yemeni air defense’s harvest of the Saudi-Emirati-American aggression exceeded 212 military aircraft of various types and country of origin. They were struck by Yemeni air defenses over the past 5 years, according to research carried out by al-Thawra based on data from the Ministry of Defense, the spokesperson of the Yemeni Armed Forces and the spokesman for the Yemeni Air Force.

Source:

“Iranian Influence in Yemen Post-Sulaimani... The Houthis Between Containment and Revenge for the General,” *Abaad Studies & Research Center*, January 2020, <https://abaadstudies.org/pdf-42.pdf>

نفوذ إيران في اليمن بعد سليمان... الحوثيون بين الاحتواء والانتقام للجنرال

Before Sulaimani’s killing, information obtained by Abaad indicates that the Iranian general has supervised his [Quds Force’s] latest operations in Yemen, smuggling 48 air defense systems that can hunt for coalition aircraft to the Houthis (Information monitored by Yemeni intelligence indicates that the system is a copy of the Russian S-300 and some of its parts may be from the Iranian Bavar-373 system). Information says that the systems were smuggled in pieces and transported to Yemen by sea over a long period of time. The systems are believed capable of hitting warplanes at high altitudes. The name of the system is unknown, but intelligence indicates that some missile parts were in the Iranian ship that the United States confiscated in the Arabian Sea early last December 2019.

Source:

“Remarkable Specifications for the Locally Developed Air Defense Systems,” *al-Thawrah*, 24 February 2020, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/613784>

مواصفات مذهشة لمنظومات الدفاع الجوي المطورة محليا

Even though they are still being developed as part of the “Mersad” system according to the Air Force, the [Thaqib-3s] entered service in December 2016 and scored precise hits on two F15s in Saada and an F16 in Najran... The four air defense systems that have been developed locally so far are not the end nor everything that can be done, rather the beginning in a long path of Yemeni development and innovation. According to Field Marshal Mahdi Al-Mashat, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and head of the Supreme Political Council, “These defensive systems will change the course of the battle, and they will be the prelude to more advanced and effective defense systems in addressing hostile air targets.”



Israel Establishes New 'Strategy and Iran Directorate' Under General Staff



Israel Defense Forces - Nahal's Brigade Wide Drill.

Source: Flickr via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_Israel_Defense_Forces_-_Nahal%27s_Brigade_Wide_Drill_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_Israel_Defense_Forces_-_Nahal%27s_Brigade_Wide_Drill_(1).jpg), CC BY 3.0

OE Watch Commentary: On 18 February, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) announced the creation of a new directorate within the General Staff, called the "Strategy and Iran Directorate" to address growing Iranian threats and coordinate actions against Iran under one roof. The accompanying passages from local sources discuss this new directorate and subsequent changes to the structure of the IDF.

The first article from *The Times of Israel* describes the design of the new Iran Directorate. Currently, the IDF has Major General Amir Baram leading the Northern Command in overseeing operations and threats stemming from Hezbollah while Major General Herzi Halevi and the Southern Command oversee the fight against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Similarly, the IDF will now have a major general overseeing operations and threats coming directly from Iran. This means that the responsibility for overseeing threats from and actions towards Iran is split between multiple different sections of the Israeli Military such as the Air Force, the Operations Directorate, the Planning Directorate, and Military

Intelligence.

The second article from *The Times of Israel* states the Strategy and Iran Directorate will not be responsible for overseeing threats from Iranian proxy forces but only Iran itself, even though Iran has ties to multiple organizations across the region. It reports that the directorate "will be responsible for countering Iran only, not its proxies, like the Hezbollah terror group, which will remain the purview of the IDF Northern Command." Brigadier General Tal Kalman, currently in charge of the IDF's Strategic Division, will be promoted to major general and will lead the Strategy and Iran Directorate.

The article from the *Jerusalem Post* describes the functions of the new directorate. In addition to cooperating with foreign militaries about strategy towards Iran, the new directorate will also be charged more broadly with maintaining connections with foreign militaries under the International Cooperation Unit. The IDF spokesperson Brigadier General Hidai Zilberman said, "We understand that it is important to make such changes in light of the emerging threat with Iran," and "we want someone to wake up in the morning and... focus... solely on Iran." The directorate intends to increase and expand the IDF's intelligence superiority over Iran and further utilize cyber assets both offensively and defensively. Lastly, the directorate wants to elevate the ability for IDF jets to strike Iranian targets. **End OE Watch Commentary (Fesen)**

"We want someone to wake up in the morning and... focus... solely on Iran."

Source: Judah Ari Gross, "In shakeup, IDF to create new general position to counter Iran," *The Times of Israel*, 18 February 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-shakeup-idf-to-create-new-general-position-to-counter-iran/>

...Just as there is a major general whose primary mission is overseeing the fight against Hezbollah — head of the Northern Command Maj. Gen. Amir Baram — and one for countering Hamas — Southern Command chief Maj. Gen. Herzi Halevi — so too should there be a major general responsible for Iran.

"Currently, the issue of Iran is divided between various parts of the military: Military Intelligence, the Operations Directorate, the Planning Directorate, the Air Force and others."

Source: Judah Ari Gross, "Ex-fighter pilot tapped to lead fight against Iran with new General Staff role," *The Times of Israel*, 25 February 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-fighter-pilot-tapped-to-lead-fight-against-iran-with-new-general-staff-role/>

IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi on Tuesday nominated Brig. Gen. Tal Kalman to lead the nascent Strategy and Iran Directorate...

Before he enters the position, Kalman, a former fighter pilot who currently leads the IDF's Strategic Division, will be promoted to the rank of major general.

The directorate will be responsible for countering Iran only, not its proxies, like the Hezbollah terror group, which will remain the purview of the IDF Northern Command.

Source: Anna Ahronheim, "IDF to make changes to General Staff as part of Momentum Plan," *The Jerusalem Post*, 19 February 2020. <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/IDF-to-make-changes-to-General-Staff-as-part-of-Momentum-Plan-617981>

The directorate will include the Strategic Division as well as the International Cooperation Unit and its commander...

"We understand that it is important to make such changes in light of the emerging threat with Iran," Zilberman said. "We want someone to wake up in the morning and whose focus will be solely on Iran."

The command will bolster the IDF's attack capabilities, including by technological means, for IAF jets to destroy enemy targets, increase the military's intelligence superiority and expand its intelligence gathering on the Islamic Republic, including by satellites, as well as bolster cyber (both defensive and offensive) capabilities.

According to Zilberman, there are three main reasons behind the changes, including the need to strengthen the IDF's multilateral force building, which is becoming more complex, the need to deepen the military's strategy in terms of international and interorganizational partners, as well as the need to strengthen the IDF's campaign against Iran.



Iran: Increasing Internet Access Capacity



One of the hundreds of Tehran internet cafés.

Source: Iran Student Correspondents Association, <http://iscanews.ir/Media/Image/1396/10/30/636520374848351273.jpg>

OE Watch Commentary: After an initial refusal to acknowledge the spread of the coronavirus across Iran, Iranian authorities sought to slow the outbreak by closing schools and asking many private and public sector workers to telecommute. As a result of these measures, data usage across the country increased by 40 percent according to Sajad Bonabi, the chairman of the state-run Telecommunications Infrastructure Company, as reported in the excerpted article from *Gerdab.ir*, an Iranian website focusing on cyber news. Bonabi discusses efforts to accommodate this increased demand by increasing the country's bandwidth and reveals that Iran theoretically could access as much data as was needed but that national internet service providers created a choke hold to suppress data. His interview also shows that the Iranian government seeks to direct traffic to its own websites by making them accessible at half the price of accessing websites and apps based outside of Iran.

While Bonabi has a general reputation as a technocrat focused on his portfolio and less guided by politics, subsequent to his interview, the Iranian government reportedly cut most internet access to prevent Iranians from accessing and exchanging information about the extent of the coronavirus' spread in Iran. This highlights a paradox in which technocrats like Bonabi see the internet as a means to control economic damage amidst the coronavirus outbreak, but the regime he serves seeks to cut communications to prevent uncontrolled flow of information about that same outbreak.

The internet cut will likely adversely impact ordinary Iranians, as it is their businesses that will be most impacted, while at the same time Iranian officials will try to accelerate their investment in a national intranet. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“Closures due to the coronavirus [have led to] a 40 percent increase in data usage.”

Source: “Afzayesh-e Zorfiyatha-ye Dastorsi beh Internet (Increasing Internet Access Capacity),” *Gerdab.ir*, 3 March 2020. <https://gerdab.ir/fa/news/29353>

Increasing Internet Access Capacity

Sajad Bonabi [vice chairman of the board at the Telecommunications Infrastructure Company] said, “Following a 40 percent increase in data usage in the country due to closures of schools, universities, and remote work in both the private and public sector due to the coronavirus and the need to use data, the country is increasing its bandwidth.” He added, “The Telecommunication Infrastructure Company has no capacity constrain in the international gateway layer, but different operators in the network access layer impose some restrictions, and since Saturday [29 February] morning, in collaboration with the operators, telecommunications, and fixed data providers, we have increased access capacity in the nation's infrastructure, and if one's internet capacity is doubled, the problems are somewhat resolved.” Bonabi added, “The tariff price of access to internal sites in the context of the National Information Network is in normal mode and half that of accessing external sites and apps, and most operators try to coordinate with content providers to reduce the cost.”



Iran: Sanctions Don't Impact Military Spending

OE Watch Commentary: It is not often that senior Iranian military leaders sit down with the Western press but on 24 February, Hossein Dehghan did just that with the *Financial Times* from his office in Tehran. Dehghan is a former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) air force officer whom President Hassan Rouhani appointed to lead the ministry of defense in his first cabinet. He currently serves as an advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

The Iranian press widely covered the interview in which Dehghan emphasized that the Iranian military budget had continued to grow despite US sanctions, as reported in the excerpted passage from *Mehr News*. His statement, which seems to telegraph to the West that US sanctions will not achieve their aims, seems at cross purposes with Iran's other frequent information operations theme, that sanctions have undercut the health of Iranians because of their inability to purchase necessary medicines. After all, if Iran has several extra billion dollars with which to fund the IRGC and other military organizations, that money might easily be utilized to purchase humanitarian goods through the Swiss humanitarian channel.



Hossein Dehghan sits for an interview, with a portrait of the late Qassem Soleimani in the background.
Source: <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2020/02/24/3/3393218.jpg>

Iran's increased military budget raises questions about what the Iranian military hopes to do with its enhanced budget. Dehghan did insist that Iran would neither reconsider its support to Hezbollah and other regional proxies nor would it stop work on its ballistic missile programs. Dehghan's statement that Iran "saw no reason to order" its proxies to act, but would not "prevent them from acting" fits the Iranian pattern of seeking plausible deniability when attacks do occur. Dehghan also questions the efficacy of any negotiations with the United States over Iran's use of proxies or ballistic missiles given the centrality of both programs to the regime. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“The sanctions have not had any impact on Iran’s defense budget.”

Source: “Ba Amrika Mozakereh Namikonim (We are not Negotiating with the United States),” *Mehr News*, 24 February 2020. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4862157>

“We Are Not Negotiating with the United States”

According to the Mehr News Agency, the Financial Times has published an interview with Hossein Dehghan, the former minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics. In his conversation and in answer to a question about U.S. sanctions from this English outlet, General Dehghan said that with regard to the economic problems, the sanctions have not had any impact on Iran's defense budget or military organizations. According to General Dehghan, “Today, our military situation is far better in all aspects than it was three years ago, before Donald Trump came, and this is true with respect to equipment, personnel, and organizations, and if Trump is re-elected, then in five years we will be even better off.”

General Dehghan also said, “Since the Islamic State was created and insecurity increased, we have used all our capacity to organize, train, and advise our allies.” The former defense minister also stressed in the conversation that Iran will not back down from developing its missile program or supporting its allies, and he added, “We do not negotiate with the United States at all; however, we also avoid a full-scale war.”

....At the end of the conversation, General Dehghan emphasized, “Iran does not seek a war with the United States, but negotiations are also meaningless. Washington thinks that we are in a weak position and need to negotiate. America wants to negotiate with us and they asked, ‘why do you have missiles? Why are you present throughout the region? And why do you need such military capability? What kind of negotiations are these?’”



Iran: IRGC Establishes Biological Defense Headquarters

OE Watch Commentary: In the excerpted article from *Tasnim News*, an outlet affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Mohammad Pakpour, the commander of the IRGC Ground Forces since 2009, discusses the IRGC's role in countering the coronavirus outbreak in Iran. He describes a crucial if not pivotal role for the Ground Forces in all aspects of the Iranian public health fight, from securing the supply chain to sending forces into the infected zones to spray disinfectant.

As the article discusses, the IRGC Ground Forces' actions include "a deployment of modern war battalions, including the 24th modern warfare group, the elite Steadfast Commando Battalions and the Mirza Kuchek Khan brigade, into areas where the coronavirus has spread... Experts from the IRGC Corps of Microbiology and Virology have also been deployed in the areas infected with the coronavirus." (Mirza Kuchek Khan, considered a national hero in modern Iranian history, led a Robin Hood-like movement in Gilan during World War I in the early 1920s.)

That these elite forces, alongside the Health Ministry and the IRGC's own microbiology and virology centers have joined together to form a biodefense base under the command of the Ground Forces highlights the primacy of the IRGC within the Iranian system. It also shows the domestic role the IRGC assumes in any time of crisis. The use of elite forces could suggest that even the most ideologically pure and well-paid IRGC troops would abide by the call to enter the infected zones.

More broadly, the severity of Iran's outbreak highlights Iran-China ties and has led to complaints by ordinary Iranians that the government's slow response and its initial refusal to suspend flights to China were due to the regime's prioritization of its relations with Beijing over the health and well-being of its own citizenry. That the initial epicenter of the Iranian outbreak was Qom also may focus some local animus toward the clergy and their prioritization of pilgrimage to Qom's shrines (and the money it brings them) over the public good. After the outbreak was well underway, the Iranian authorities began taking other measures such as the closure of schools and the disinfection of all buses and metros at the end of each line. Pakpour continued to report that he had implemented a careful hygiene regimen for military garrisons and had started health screenings for anyone entering the bases.

While Pakpour describes the nitty-gritty of Iran's response, the broader Iranian press continues to eschew responsibility and to spread the conspiracy that the coronavirus was a deliberate American plot to sabotage both Iran and the Chinese economy. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“There have been deployments...into areas where the coronavirus has spread.”



photo : Amir Hesaminejad

Anti-Coronavirus disinfection, Qom, March 2020.

Source: *Tasnim News*, <https://newsmedia.tasnimnews.com/Tasnim/Uploaded/Image/1398/12/10/139812101029196819806244.jpg>



Continued: Iran: IRGC Establishes Biological Defense Headquarters

Source: “Tashkil Qarargah-e Zisti dar Niru-ye Zamini Sepah (Opening of a biological defense base in the IRGC Ground Forces),” *Tasnim News*, 2 March 2020. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/12/12/2214777>

Formation of a Bio Headquarters in the Ground Forces

General Pakpour outlined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC]’ Ground Forces’ actions in recent days to combat the coronavirus, adding, “In recent days, there has been the deployment of modern war battalions, including the 24th modern warfare group, the elite Steadfast Commando Battalions and the Mirza Kuchek Khan brigade, into areas where the coronavirus has spread, and these units are now stationed in the areas of concern.” He added, “Experts from the IRGC Corps of Microbiology and Virology have also been deployed in the areas infected with the coronavirus.”

The commander of the IRGC Ground Forces further stated, “There have been meetings with the Self-Sufficiency Research and Jihad Organization for the use of spray systems and DSM machines for disinfection in the areas infected with the virus, and also to coordinate military units to combat coronavirus and to coordinate the purchase of necessary items for disinfection, tracking and supply of disinfectants and cleaners, etc., and these have been the most important steps the IRGC Ground Forces have taken in recent days to combat the coronavirus.”

Source: “Chinese Twitter diplomacy on coronavirus,” *Tehran Times*, 13 March 2020. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/446046/Chinese-Twitter-diplomacy-on-coronavirus>

The continuation of Mahan Air flights to China increased concerns among journalists and social media users as well.

Source: “Coronavirus in Iran: A case of misinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda,” *Deutsche Welle*, 9 March 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-in-iran-a-case-of-misinformation-conspiracy-theories-and-propaganda/a-52695116>

Hossein Salami, the current chief of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, has blamed the United States for the COVID-19 epidemic in Iran. “We will win in the fight against the virus, which may be the product of the American biological invasion, which it first spread to China and then to Iran and the rest of the world,” Salami said Thursday, without providing any evidence for his claims.



In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov instituted sweeping changes that have reorganized the country’s security forces and reestablished the nation’s military prowess. This study, *Kremlin Kontrol*, aims to describe how control over the security services and the military have hastened those changes.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/197266/download>



Turkey's Presence in Africa and Coexistence with China

OE Watch Commentary: Turkey's relations with Africa date back to the Ottoman period, when North Africa was under Ottoman rule for centuries. However, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has intensified its diplomatic and trade relationships with several countries in Africa and has extended its links to the continent beyond just North Africa, leveraging development assistance and humanitarian relief efforts. The Turkish President's visit to Gambia in January 2020 marked his 28th trip to Africa. This robust engagement with the African continent started in 2005 and continued with the opening of new embassies across sub-Saharan Africa. It also coincided with increasing Chinese trade and investment in the continent. The accompanying articles from Turkey's state-owned *Anadolu Agency* provide insight into Turkey's presence in Africa and its potential cooperation or rivalry with China in Africa.



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud open the new terminal of Aden Abdulle International Airport in Mogadishu, Somalia on January 25, 2015.

Source: Flickr via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2015_01_25_Turkish_President_Visit_to_Somalia-12_\(16176881957\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2015_01_25_Turkish_President_Visit_to_Somalia-12_(16176881957).jpg), Public Domain

The first article provides a historical background of Turkish relations with African countries and

notes that during the Ottoman period “military advisors were sent all over Africa to help train armies, envoys were exchanged to strengthen diplomatic and commercial relations.” After a waning period, in 1998, Turkey's interest manifested itself as an “opening towards Africa” with the objective of developing “diplomatic and commercial relations.” A turning point in Turkey's engagement with African countries came when the Justice and Development Party assumed power in 2002 and relations peaked with the first Turkey-Africa Summit in 2008. This summit resulted in the Istanbul Declaration on the Africa-Turkey Partnership and the Cooperation Framework for the Africa-Turkey Partnership. Then the article delves into Turkey's other engagements in economic and diplomatic sectors and Turkish President Erdoğan's visits to several countries in Africa. Besides these economic and diplomatic engagements, in September 2017, Turkey built its first military base and training center with the capacity to train 1500 soldiers in Somalia “to support Somali security forces in their fight against terrorism.” Additionally, Turkey also contributes to several ongoing peacekeeping missions across Africa.

The second article analyzes Turkish and Chinese presence in Africa and whether their presence will lead to a rivalry for influence or cooperation. According to the article, Turkey and China play a significant role in solving problems that African countries are grappling with. Therefore, unlike other major players present in Africa who are only interested in exploiting resources, Turkey and China ensure they provide an alternative that is a win-win for all sides. This win-win approach open doors to new trade and investment opportunities for both Turkey and China. Turkey has a \$ 22 billion trade capacity in Africa while China has a \$205 billion capacity. When it comes to investment, 15 percent of Turkey's total foreign investment is in Africa while China has 18.5 percent of its total foreign investment in Africa. The article states that both Turkey and China have created a positive perception of their countries in Africa through investment and trade. However, while Turkey and China's engagements in Africa seem to be in a cooperative manner, it could potentially take a turn in the opposite direction, causing tensions between them. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“It is obvious that a cooperation between China and Turkey across Africa will be beneficial to both countries.”



Continued: Turkey's Presence in Africa and Coexistence with China

Source: Moustapha Abdelkerim Idriss, "Turkey-Africa partnership: A development-oriented approach," *Anadolu Ajansi*, 08 January 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/analysis-turkey-africa-partnership-a-development-oriented-approach/1696640#!>

Even though the Ottoman presence was mostly limited to North Africa and some parts of the Horn of Africa, the Ottomans were able to develop relations with many African states on diplomatic, economic and military levels... military advisers were sent all over Africa to help train armies, envoys were exchanged to strengthen diplomatic and commercial relations... ..

Several decades later, in 1998, Turkey became more interested in sub-Saharan Africa with its project dubbed 'opening towards Africa', established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and whose primary objective was to develop diplomatic and commercial relations with the continent. The project included high-level mutual visits and the opening of new diplomatic missions in the continent.

But it took a long time until Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party came to power in 2002 so that a turning point in the Turkish-African relationship could be witnessed. The new government in Ankara attached special importance to Africa in its foreign policy and declared 2005 the Year of Africa.

... in 2008, the first Turkey-Africa Summit was organized with the participation of 50 African states. This summit aimed at exploring various development opportunities and building a solid economic relationship. ...

In addition to these economic and diplomatic relations, developments are observed on the security level as well. Ankara inaugurated its first military base coupled with a training center in the Somalian capital Mogadishu in Sept. 2017 to train and support Somali security forces in their fight against terrorism.

Source: Deniz İstikbal, "Afrika'da işbirliği ve rekabet: Türkiye ve Çin (Cooperation and Competition in Africa: Turkey and China)," *Anadolu Ajansi*, 13 February 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/afrika-da-isbirligi-ve-rekabet-turkiye-ve-cin-/1732911>

...China and Turkey are showing themselves to be effective actors on the continent's future... Unlike other alternative actors, China and Turkey have the potential to solve the continent's chronic problems with mutual trust and a win-win solution...

It is obvious that a cooperation between China and Turkey across Africa will be beneficial to both countries.

1986

2020



FOREIGN MILITARY STUDIES OFFICE:



The Fall of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)

OE Watch Commentary: The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was one of the world's most feared terrorist organizations in the 1990s and 2000s, with operations in northern Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The mere mention of the group conjured up images of abducted children and mutilated bodies. Now, as the accompanying article from *African Arguments* relates, the LRA is just a shadow of its former self. Its leader, Joseph Kony, who once saw the LRA as the means to overthrow the Ugandan government, appears to no longer look for revolution, but rather for his small band of followers to survive.

What caused this once feared group of terrorists, led by a notorious warlord, to dwindle to its present state? According to the article, there are several reasons for the decline, including better counterterrorism operations by the Ugandan government made capable in large measure by logistical, advisory, and intelligence support from the United States. Additionally, as the LRA started to fracture, Kony, as the article describes, lost control over his officers that commanded various factions. Some of these LRA factions in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where Kony and several dozen of his followers were hiding, stopped bringing him supplies. Today, the LRA survives by looting food, and, in a far cry from its original days, sometimes even trading peacefully with the locals.



While the LRA led by Joseph Kony reportedly had over 1,000 fighters at one time terrorizing the population of northern Uganda, today Kony and a few dozen of his followers live in a contested border area of Sudan, South Sudan, and the DRC where their new priority is described as simply to survive..
Source: U.S. Department of State/Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Kony_4.jpg, Public Domain

It is not disputed that at least some LRA factions are still violent. In 2019 they abducted 222 people, including dozens of children. However, this number, while still significant, is greatly decreased compared to the thousands it had abducted in its prime.

The fragmentation of the LRA, along with its drop in violent activity, encourages some that stronger efforts to persuade individuals to leave the group could be worthwhile. Though this might sound feasible, the article also notes the difficulties in convincing such would-be-defectors to leave, as many fear they have no place to go home to, and many also worry about retaliation from the military, government, and local populations. As for Kony himself, he presently lives in Kafia Kingi, a contested area on the borders of Sudan, South Sudan, and the DRC. There, the almost 60-year old leader of the group and several dozen of his followers, largely survive on subsistence farming and sometimes selling honey at local markets.

End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)

“The LRA is a declining fighting force, Sudanese support has stopped, and morale is eroding. The new priority is simply to survive.”

Source: Paul Ronan and Kristof Titeca, “Kony’s rebels remain a threat, but they’re also selling honey to get by,” *African Arguments*, 10 March 2020. <https://africanarguments.org/2020/03/10/joseph-kony-lra-rebels-threat-selling-honey/>

Kony himself is said to be healthy but is now almost 60-years-old. Other LRA commanders, with little or no direction from their leader, continue to roam remote regions of eastern CAR and northern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where they loot and abduct from small farming communities in order to survive.

The LRA came to notoriety in the 1990s through its large-scale abductions and violence targeting civilians in its conflict with the Ugandan government. In the late-2000s, after two decades of fighting, the rebel group shifted its operations to the borderlands of the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan and the CAR. Its last acts of major violence were in 2008 and 2009 when it committed large-scale massacres against the Congolese population.

It was in this context that a recent defector explained how Kony declared in his last “discussion” with fighters in June 2018 that the LRA was no longer fighting the Ugandan government and that its members were now “refugees” who had to find their own way to survive.

Testimony from defected rebels reinforce this data, highlighting how individual LRA commanders have given orders to stop killings. These evolving tactics are likely a response to the group’s increasingly fragile position. The LRA is a declining fighting force, Sudanese support has stopped, and morale is eroding. The new priority is simply to survive.



Protests Mount as Zimbabwe Sinks Further into Despair



Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa's security forces have been accused of violence against individuals protesting the economic and political decay of their nation,"

Source: Kremlin.ru/Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emmerson_Mnangagwa_\(2019-01-15\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emmerson_Mnangagwa_(2019-01-15).jpg), CC BY 4.0

OE Watch Commentary: Last year Zimbabwe's economy shrunk eight percent. This year is not looking much better. As the accompanying article from *The East African* reports, the country is also in the midst of its worst famine in over a decade, with more than half of its 14 million population impacted. The food shortage has become so bad that the government released 5,000 prisoners because it was unable to adequately feed them. Against this backdrop of a collapsing economy and millions facing starvation, and the people looking to the government for help, a political standoff has occurred between President Emmerson Mnangagwa of the Zanu-PF party and his main opposition rival, Nelson Chamisa of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Mnangagwa and Chamisa's feud stems from the 2018 election. While Mnangagwa was the announced winner, Chamisa still refuses to recognize the result, claiming the voting was rigged. Recently, Chamisa has stated he has given up on trying to hold a dialogue with Zana-PF. Following his declaration, MDC, which draws most of its support from the urban population, has resorted to protests in the capital, Harare, and the nearby town of Chitungwiza. These have been violently broken up, with MDC claiming the security forces are now acting a like a terrorist organization, and the government's heavy handed methods further enraging many citizens.

It is not just the MDC protesting. The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, (ZCTU) in the face of steep price increases for fuel last year, launched protests that forced businesses to close for three days. The ZCTU president, along with dozens of other activists, was charged with treason for organizing that shutdown. It has not stopped him, as this year he is mobilizing the union's members for a "national shutdown."

The MDC is hoping the protests will force the government to enact political and economic reforms before the 2023 elections. That may happen, but so far they have only resulted in

increased state-sanctioned violence. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

“Zimbabwe is headed toward the tipping point as the economy continues to implode in the wake of government clampdown against dissent.”

Source: Kitsepile Nyathi, “Zimbabwe on verge of sliding into deep crisis,” *The East African*, 9 March 2020. <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/Zimbabwe-on-verge-of-sliding-into-deep-crisis/4552902-5483678-r0pvq5/index.html>

Zimbabwe is headed toward the tipping point as the economy continues to implode in the wake of government clampdown against dissent.

“The police went on an orgy of violence in Chitungwiza, breaking down doors and barging into private homes in search of anyone suspected to be MDC leader,” the party spokesperson Luke Tamborinyoka said.

“If the government does not urgently address the bread and butter issues that citizens are grappling with, the country is likely to experience more pockets of such protests as citizens become more impatient.”

The Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), a human rights monitoring group, said the country was on the edge because of the economic and political crisis. ZPP said a heavy-handed response by the police against the protests will only serve to inflame the situation further as citizens, especially the youths, were now agitated.



Lassa Fever in Nigeria: An Epidemic During a Pandemic



This 2014 CDC map shows the general yearly distribution of Lassa fever. Countries reporting endemic disease and substantial outbreaks of Lassa fever are in blue. Countries in green report few cases, periodic isolation of the virus, or serologic evidence of Lassa fever infection. Grey represents countries where the status of Lassa fever is unknown.

Source: CDC/Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lassa_fever_Outbreak_Distribution_Map.svg, Public Domain

OE Watch Commentary: While much of the world is focused on the coronavirus pandemic, Nigeria is also dealing with another outbreak. As the accompanying article from the Nigerian news site *Premium Times* relates, as of early March, Lassa fever had claimed 132 lives during the country's latest outbreak. As with most other Lassa fever epidemics, this one coincides with Nigeria's dry season, when people contract the disease by touching food or household items that have been contaminated with feces or urine from the multimammate rat (African rat), which carries the virus. Those infected spread the disease through direct contact. With the dry season lasting from November to May, the number of infected people will surely rise, and not just in Nigeria. Though the disease is named for the town in the northern part of Nigeria where it was first found, several other West African nations also suffer from periodic Lassa fever outbreaks.

Lassa fever, like its relatives, Ebola and Marburg fevers, is a viral hemorrhagic fever, and, along with other symptoms, can present with bleeding from

multiple body orifices. Though Ebola and Marburg tend to have higher mortality rates, Lassa fever can also be deadly, especially during epidemics. In comparison to last year's Lassa fever epidemic, there are more deaths from the disease this year. One explanation for this is that climate change may be expanding the territorial range of the African rat. This, combined with an expanding human population, results in more opportunities for rats and humans to come into contact with each other.

The article describes how Lassa fever is being overshadowed by COVID-19. The Nigerian public health infrastructure is not particularly well resourced even in the best of times and is now fighting to contain Lassa fever as well as numerous other diseases it must often contend with, including malaria and HIV. It is not clear if or how it will be able to mount an effective campaign against COVID-19. Indeed credit should go to the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and the many health workers on the frontlines of disease prevention, but with an epidemic of Lassa fever occurring at the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria's already strained resources will be strained even more. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

“Although news of the Lassa outbreak in the country has been overshadowed by the new coronavirus outbreak, Nigeria is still monitoring and responding to the disease.”

Source: Ayodamola Owoseye, “Lassa Fever: Nigeria records 11 new deaths – NCDC,” *Premium Times (Nigeria)*, 5 March 2020. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/health/health-news/380382-lassa-fever-nigeria-records-11-new-deaths-ncdc.html>

Although news of the Lassa outbreak in the country has been overshadowed by the new coronavirus outbreak, Nigeria is still monitoring and responding to the disease.

Of all confirmed cases, 73 per cent are from Edo (34 per cent), Ondo (32 per cent) and Ebonyi (7 per cent) states.

Also, the predominant age-group affected is 21-30 years and the male to female ratio for confirmed cases is 1:1.2.

General symptoms include fever, headache, sore throat, general body weakness, cough, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle pains, chest pain, and in severe cases, unexplainable bleeding from ears, eyes, nose, mouth, vagina, anus and other body orifices.



Nigeria: Borno Governor Urges Change in Strategy against Boko Haram

OE Watch Commentary: Borno governor Babagana Zulum has shown increased interest in curbing the Boko Haram insurgency, given that his state has been hardest hit by the group's violence. The excerpted article for *The Nigerian Voice* mentions an attack in Auno, near the state capital Maiduguri, which led to the deaths of 30 people and destroyed 18 vehicles, prompting Zulum to criticize Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari's approach to addressing Boko Haram.

Zulum called on Buhari to return the military to its strategy from 2016 and 2017 when Nigerian soldiers brought the battle to Boko Haram in its enclaves and camps, especially around Lake Chad and in Sambisa Forest. At the same time, Zulum commended Buhari because Borno's situation is still more secure now than it was when Buhari came into office in 2015. At that time, 20 of Borno's 27 local government areas were under Boko Haram's control.

In fact, Zulum lauded Buhari, including commending him for empathizing with the people of Borno. Buhari, for his part, committed to ending the insurgency during his visit to Borno as well as to fighting corruption and promoting economic recovery. The article indicates that despite Zulum's discontent with the current security situation in Borno, both Zulum and Buhari remain publicly cordial ties, recognize that Boko Haram's violence has been curtailed, but not ended, and are willing to take measures to further eliminate the threat from Boko Haram. Whether their ambitions will be achieved, however, remains to be seen in the next phase of the counter-insurgency effort.

End OE Watch Commentary (Zenn)



Statue of President Muhammadu Buhari.

Source: FaridhaSL via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_President_Muhammadu_Buhari.jpg, CC BY 4.0

“We need to keep taking the war to enclaves of the insurgents in the fringes of the Lake Chad, in Sambisa forest and some notable areas.”

Source: “Zulum to Buhari: Let's Change our Strategies against Boko Haram,” *The Nigerian Voice*, 12 February 2020. <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/285188/zulum-to-buhari-lets-change-our-strategies-against-boko-ha.html>

Borno Governor Professor Babagana Umara Zulum has said there was need for change of strategies in the ongoing fight against boko haram. The Governor, who however acknowledged successes recorded by the same military in the state, spoke in presence of President Muhammadu Buhari at the Shehu of Borno's palace in Maiduguri. Buhari was in the state on sympathy visit following Boko Haram attacks in Auno which left 30 persons killed with 18 vehicles and houses burnt.

“We are calling upon the Nigerian military to change strategies and we can borrow a leaf from the success our military was able to hugely record in the years 2016 and 2017 with a view to ending the insurgency. We need to keep taking the war to enclaves of the insurgents in the fringes of the Lake Chad, in Sambisa forest and some notable areas” Zulum said. Governor Zulum however commended the President for his commitment to ending the insurgency. The Governor although he could not ignore the current unfortunate situation, said the people of Borno state still remember the days before Buhari's emergence, when 20 out of the 27 local government areas in the state were in the hands of Boko Haram.



Mozambique Requires Humanitarian Aid After ISIS Attacks

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpt from the Portuguese-language publication *Noticiasmundo* discusses the role of the UN in alleviating the humanitarian emergency in northern Mozambique. According to the article, the UN coordinator in Mozambique believes the UN is under-resourced and embattled in the country due to threats of armed violence and the after-effects of Cyclone Kenneth, which occurred in April 2019. More resources for the region are urgently needed, according to the UN coordinator.

The article also notes that terrorist groups in Cabo Delgado have killed at least 350 people and displaced over 156,400 people since 2017. The UN coordinator suggests that the cities and urban centers of northern provinces could act as logistics hubs for humanitarian relief since they were still safe. However, if those urban hubs were to fall to insurgents, it would significantly affect the UN's ability to provide relief.

In the long-term, the UN coordinator advises creating jobs in the region and especially using the preexisting gas exploration industry in northern Mozambique to improve the livelihoods of the people. This can deter recruitment to the militant factions operating under the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) banner in northern Mozambique, while also helping victims of Cyclone Kenneth. Altogether, the UN is appealing for over \$120 million dollars, but it is not clear whether it would obtain these funds. If the UN is unable to carry out its mandate effectively in northern Mozambique, the security and humanitarian situation can be expected to further deteriorate. **End OE Watch Commentary (Zenn)**

“At the moment there is security at the headquarters of the districts and it is very important to preserve this security.”



Karte von Kap Delgado in Mosambik [Map of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique.

Source: CIA via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kap_Delgado.png, CC BY 2.0

Source: “ONU antevê “oportunidade” para mudar situação em Cabo Delgado (UN sees “opportunity” to change situation in Cabo Delgado),” *Noticiasao minuto.com*, 6 March 2020. noticiasao minuto.com/mundo/1427304/mocambique-onu-antevem-oportunidade-para-mudar-situacao-em-cabo-delgado

The coordinator of the UN in Mozambique said that there is an “opportunity to completely change the situation in Cabo Delgado” through “a joint effort” in the province affected by a cyclone and armed violence. “We need a lot more resources, because it is very important to invest now in humanitarian aid and also in development in the Cabo Delgado area, underscored Musa Lyria Kaulard. “There is an opportunity to “develop and create jobs and use the opportunities that exist in Cabo Delgado,” referring to natural gas exploration. Support for the region’s population is included in a total appeal of US \$120 million that the UN system needs “urgently.”

Kaulard notes that there are safe zones. “At the moment there is security at the headquarters of the districts and it is very important to preserve this security,” he said. The province of Cabo Delgado has been the target of attacks by armed groups that international organizations classify as terrorist threats and that in two and a half years have killed at least 350 people, in addition to 156,400 people affected by loss of property or forced to abandon their homelands in search of a safe location.



France to Evaluate Counter-Terrorism Operations in the Sahel

OE Watch Commentary: As a result of growing threats from terrorist groups in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, France has increased its counter-terrorism presence in the Sahel. The excerpted French-language article from *Ouest France* assesses the extent to which France has been successful. The article indicates that French officials believe there has been an improvement in the security situation in the three countries' border region, except in Burkina Faso. In Mali and Niger, for example, land has been retaken and is now under government control, which the article notes is attributable to better intelligence-sharing, especially between the French and Sahelian military forces, and larger deployments of soldiers to conflict zones.

The article also notes that the turning point against the jihadists in the tri-border region was when French president Emmanuel Macron invited the G-5 Sahel, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to a meeting in Pau for talks on security in mid-January. The results of the meeting, however, will be only formally evaluated six months after the talks. These talks occurred after Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger were all struck by devastating attacks from a group allied with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), operating in the tri-border region.

The article notes that anti-French sentiment had been growing in the Sahel because of the perception France was not ameliorating the security situation in the region. Nevertheless, if the article's account of improving security in the region lasts, and especially extends to Burkina Faso, the Pau meeting may not only result in preserving lives of the region's citizens, but also France's reputation.

End OE Watch Commentary (Zenn)



Écusson de l'Opération Barkhane.

Source: Futurhit12 via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:C3%89cusson_de_l%27Op%C3%A9ration_Barkhane.svg, Public Domain

“There is satisfaction because the situation is improving on the Niger side and on the Malian side, but it is not improving on the Burkina side.”

Source: “La situation au Sahel en ‘amélioration’ dans la zone des ‘trois frontières’, estime l’Élysée (The situation in the Sahel in ‘improvement’ in the area of the ‘three borders,’ says the Elysee),” *Ouest France*, 5 March 2020, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/mali/la-situation-au-sahel-en-amelioration-dans-la-zone-des-trois-frontieres-estime-l-elysee-6766537>

In the tri-border area (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso), there has been an improvement since the summit in Pau, said an official of the French presidency in front of journalists of the Association of the French diplomatic press. We are indeed in a state of regaining control of land that had been lost. This improvement is attributable to the joint staff, which was formed between French and Sahel forces and allows for planning of operations. It is also about better intelligence sharing and massive deployments of armies.

There is satisfaction because the situation is improving on the Niger side and on the Malian side, but it is not improving on the Burkina side. Jihadist violence, often interspersed with inter-community conflicts, left some 4,000 dead in 2019 in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, according to the UN. In the wake of the summit of Pau, there was set a period of six months to assess whether the commitments made are kept. At the end of this period, the president will reassess whether it is changing its posture or not. France and the G-5 Sahel countries (Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali) had decided in Pau to close ranks in the face of the resurgence of jihadist attacks in the region, against the backdrop of rising anti-French sentiment.



Coronavirus Challenges Brazil's Federal Open Border Policy

OE Watch Commentary: On 16 March, Brazilian news organization *Correiobraziliense* featured a video clip of Argentine President Alberto Fernandez announcing the closure of its borders in an effort to slow down the spread of coronavirus into Argentina. Columbia has also closed its borders. Earlier the same day, Brazilian President Bolsonaro confirmed on a radio broadcast with *Radio Bandeirantes* that although the governor of the northern Brazilian state of Roraima had asked the federal government to close its border with Venezuela, closing any of Brazil's borders would likely be impractical as there was no legal basis given Brazil's open border policy and it wouldn't physically be feasible.

In recent years Brazil has been hit by waves of immigration that have challenged the state's ability to assimilate migrants. Years ago it was Haitians in the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes in Haiti. More recently, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have crossed the border into Roraima to escape the turmoil in Venezuela. Now the global coronavirus poses a challenge, as a threat that will emanate from all ten countries that border Brazil.



Brazilian Navy boat pilot patrols the river between Bolivia and Brazil.
Source: Photo by Dodge Billingsley

A high level meeting was held at the Ministry of Defense in Brasilia as to whether or not Brazil should close its borders with neighboring states. According to the passage, "the Ministries of Health and Justice and Public Security [were] in favor of the closure, to avoid the expansion of the problems in the State, which suffers from the overcrowding of its hospitals, and the constant arrival of immigrants, due to the lack of neighboring country resources." However, the meeting ultimately came to the same conclusion as President Bolsonaro's radio broadcast. The general consensus was that even if the borders were to officially close, there were many unauthorized routes into Brazil along its frontier.

The Brazilian armed forces share much of the responsibility for most of the land border security duties across the Brazilian frontier. Due to logistical challenges, the armed forces have nearly all of the responsibility for border security in the rugged Amazon region, much of it relying on the placement of Special Border Platoons along the frontier.

This is in contrast to Brazil's southern frontier with Argentina and Uruguay, which is geographically dominated by vast plains and is very easy to cross. In many places, simple concrete blocks mark the border. The twin cities of Santana do Livramento (in Brazil) and Rivera (in Uruguay) share a central square in which the border between Uruguay and Brazil is noted by a simple yellow line. Police checkpoints and customs facilities are located on the interior edges of cities rather than at the border allowing for free movement throughout the dual city metropolis. Brazilians routinely live in Brazil but work in Uruguay, and vice versa. Families are intermingled; households consist of both Brazilians and Uruguayans.

Before coronavirus, military and police agencies from both countries worked together to counter transnational crime across open borders like the twin cities of Santana do Livramento and Rivera. The new viral concern may challenge the openness of Brazil's borders, especially in the south where these twin cities may force the Brazilian government to look for a unique approach to control the border. **End OE Watch Commentary (Billingsley)**

“Military personnel warn that, with the border open, it is possible for Brazilian authorities to have control over who enters and who leaves, including an assessment of the health status of immigrants. They estimate that, [if they] close the border, people would start looking for the countless trails and continue to enter Brazil in search of help, only without any kind of control because the paths are innumerable.”



Continued: Coronavirus Challenges Brazil's Federal Open Border Policy



Interagency AAR border operation on frontier with Paraguay.

Source: Photo by Dodge Billingsley



Border Marker between Uruguay and Brazil in Santana do Livramento.

Source: Photo by Dodge Billingsley

Source: “Governo federal discute fechamento de fronteiras em reunião na Defesa (Federal government discusses closing borders at Defense meeting),” *Correiobraziliense*, 16 March 2020. <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/app/noticia/brasil/2020/03/16/interna-brasil,834610/governo-federal-discute-fechamento-de-fronteiras-em-reuniao-na-defesa.shtml>

On Monday (3/16), the federal government will hold a meeting at the Ministry of Defense to discuss the issue of whether or not to close Brazilian borders. The most delicate situation is between Brazil and Venezuela. Last week, the governor of Roraima, Antonio Denariu (PSL), asked that the border with the neighboring country be closed in the state, as anticipated by the newspaper O Estado de S. Paulo. The subject is considered delicate and divides opinions.

President Jair Bolsonaro may go to the Ministry of Defense to participate in part of the meeting. Defense Minister General Fernando Azevedo e Silva is following the meeting by teleconference because he is still doing self-isolation until he repeats the coronavirus exam, as he was part of the presidential party to the United States, where Communication Secretary Fábio Wajngarten was. , who tested positive for the disease.

The Minister of the Civil House, General Braga Netto, participates in the meeting. Also present at the meeting are the Minister of Justice, Sérgio Moro; the minister of the Government Secretariat, Luiz Eduardo Ramos; the executive secretary of the Institutional Security Office, General Douglas Bassoli, among others. Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta is expected to participate.

As the State found out, the Ministries of Health and Justice and Public Security would be in favor of the closure, to avoid the expansion of the problems in the State, which suffers from the overcrowding of its hospitals, and the constant arrival of immigrants, due to the lack of neighboring country resources. The military, in turn, while recognizing the difficulties and concerns of the governor, warn about the complexity of the measure, which could end up proving innocuous, given the size of the border and its porosity.

Military personnel heard by the report warn that, with the border open, it is possible to have control by Brazilian authorities over who enters and who leaves, including an assessment of the health status of immigrants. They estimate that, closing the border, people would start looking for the countless trails and continue to enter Brazil in search of help, only without any kind of control because the paths are innumerable.

Earlier, President Bolsonaro himself, in an interview with Rádio Bandeirantes, spoke about how the decision to close the border with Venezuela could be innocuous. According to the president, “it may even close the border, but crossings would occur elsewhere” There are numerous unofficial passages and trails between the two countries.

The president also said that Brazil can adopt greater control and demand tests for anyone who wants to enter the country from Venezuela. Asked if there is a possibility of closing the border, Bolsonaro said he considered the measure ineffective. The president did not detail what exams would be required of those who intend to enter the country from the neighboring country.



Colombia Rejects UN Suggestion to Modify Internal Organization



Maria Emma Mejia, Permanent Representative of Colombia, and Jeffrey Feltman, United Nations Under Secretary General for Political Affairs during the signing ceremony of the Agreement between the United Nations and the Government of Colombia Concerning the Status of the United Nations Mission in Colombia, also known as Special Political Mission for the verification and implementation of the Peace Agreement between Colombia and the FARC-EP. 15 September 2016.

Source: Luis F. Orozco via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maria_Emma_Mejia_and_Jeffrey_Feltman16.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

Colombian Vice President responded “that the internal organization of the country is its own [business] and... does not depend on any multilateral organization.”

This stance is received in Colombia as a major change in posture and response style. The second reference is by Colombian Edwardo Mackenzie, one of the most prolific and attentive observers of Colombian politics and society. In a long article, Mackenzie is effusive and enthusiastic about the administration’s reaction, writing that he read the administration’s attitude “with much pleasure.” He notes that in his many years of observing Colombian political life, he has never witnessed “such a clear, energetic and patriotic attitude, by responsible high government officials, in the face of meddling international organizations.” He also uses the occasion to criticize the extensive presence of the UN in Colombia and their work, which he describes as “almost always copied from socialist circles.”

Given the accelerated influence of multilateral bodies since 2016 (with the unfolding of the FARC-Colombian government power-sharing agreement), this new nationalist attitude on the part of the administration of Iván Duque might come to be seen as a high water mark, peak anti-UN moment in Colombian affairs. **End OE Watch Commentary (Demarest)**

OE Watch Commentary: Colombia’s National Police is a public force under the country’s Ministry of Defense, as is the military proper. This January, the UN, through its human rights commissioner in Colombia, Alberto Brunori, made a suggestion that the national police force in Colombia be taken from the Ministry of Defense and put under the Ministry of Interior. As the first passage notes, the UN suggested that such a move would “strengthen institutional capacity,” while criticizing “the absence of police and the prosecution in large parts of the country, leaving citizens at the mercy of illegal armed groups.” The expression by Brunori may have been made to move the Overton window, that is, to place the idea into the realm of discussion. As the accompanying passages demonstrate, Brunori’s comment was received poorly by the Colombian government, however.

The Colombian reaction was unusually direct, unequivocal and rapid. All of the senior executive leaders responded that the internal organization of the Colombian state was none of the UN’s business. For example as the first accompanying passage reports, the

“The internal organization of the country is its own [business]...”

“I do not remember having seen such a clear, energetic and patriotic attitude...”



Continued: Colombia Rejects UN Suggestion to Modify Internal Organization

Source: Adriaan Alsema, “Colombia fiercely rejects UN’s crushing human rights report,” *Colombia Reports*, 28 February 2020. <https://colombiareports.com/colombia-fiercely-rejects-uns-crushing-human-rights-report/>

The OHCHR recommended transferring the National Police from the Defense Ministry to the Interior Ministry to “strengthen institutional capacity.” And it criticized the absence of police and the prosecution in large parts of the country, leaving citizens at the mercy of illegal armed groups.

Source: Osvaldo Alfonso Parra Ponce, “Las normas de un país no dependen de ningún organismo multilateral: Vicepresidenta a la ONU (A Country’s norms do not depend on any multinational organization: Vicepresident to the UN),” *RCN Noticias*, 28 February 2020. <https://www.rcnradio.com/politica/las-normas-de-un-pais-no-dependen-de-ningun-organismo-multilateral-vicepresidenta-la-onu>

“The Vice President of the Republic, Martha Lucía Ramírez responded to the UN representative in Colombia, Alberto Brunori, after the suggestion that the National Police become part of the Ministry of the Interior, indicating that the internal organization of the country is its own [business] and that it does not depend on any multilateral organization.”

Source: Eduardo Mackenzie, “Colombia: Saludable repudio a la injerencia abusiva de la ONU (Colombia: Healthy repudiation of the UN’s abusive meddling),” *La Linterna Azul*, 3 March 2020. <http://www.lalinternaazul.info/2020/03/03/>

“I have read with surprise, but with much pleasure, the news about the attitude of the administration of President Iván Duque facing the foot-in-mouth of Mr. Alberto Brunori, ‘human rights’ agent of the Office of the United Nations in Bogotá... In my many years observing Colombian political life I do not remember having seen such a clear, energetic and patriotic attitude, by responsible high government officials, in face of meddling international organizations, and even less in the face of the pronouncements of the 26 offices that the UN has been able to embed in our country to dictate a particular conduct, almost always copied from socialist circles, as if Colombia needed such ordinances.”



In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov instituted sweeping changes that have reorganized the country’s security forces and reestablished the nation’s military prowess. This study, *Kremlin Kontrol*, aims to describe how control over the security services and the military have hastened those changes.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/197266/download>



Latin American Protests and Social Media Warfare

OE Watch Commentary: In mid-February, *Alto Analytics*, a think-tank with offices in Spain, Brazil and Washington, released a report entitled “Protests in South America: An Analysis of New Trends in Digital Disinformation and Influence Campaigns.” The report claimed, “40% of the 20 groups on Telegram that influenced the demonstrations [in Colombia] were located outside Colombia... [and] that one in three convocation events organized via Facebook came from outside the country.” The two accompanying references are reactions to this report.

The first reference is an article by María Fernanda Cabal, a well-known Colombian senator aligned with former president Álvaro Uribe. She asserts that the rioting of 2019 was not spontaneous, but a concerted initiative of the international Bolivarian left, and points to the *Alto Analytics* study as proof.

The second reference is to a televised Skype roundtable discussion about the same subject by the *NTN24* news network, headquartered in Bogota. On screen with network anchor personality Andrea Bernal were a Colombian political analyst, Miguel Fierro, a Chilean professor, Guillermo Holzmann, and a far left Colombian congresswoman, María José Pizarro Rodríguez. This discussion similarly pointed to outside influencers to the protests, noting that “in Colombia and Chile, a total of 175 abnormal identities were identified that actively participated in the street disturbances recorded last year. On investigating the public geo-localizations, 58% were from Venezuela.”

It is notable that the roundtable included Ms. Pizarro (daughter of a deceased communist guerrilla leader) who is a staunch defender of all things Bolivarian. She surprised but did not disappoint by saying that the Forum of Sao Paulo didn’t exist, to which another panelist responded by reminding her “that a principle part of her coalition [of political parties she represents] is the Unión Patriótica, extremist formation that is part of the Forum of Sao Paulo and is an unwavering defender of the Cuban and Venezuelan dictatorships.” (Also see: “ELN and FARC Involvement in Colombia’s Protest Marches,” *OE Watch*, March 2020). **End OE Watch Commentary (Demarest)**

“We are confronting a new reality ... only 1% of the users created 33% of the content that generated never before seen chaos in various Colombian cities.”

Source: María Fernanda Cabal, “La estrategia del caos (The chaos strategy),” *Costanoticias.com*, 23 February 2020. <https://www.costanoticias.com/la-estrategia-del-caos-por-maria-fernanda-cabal/> (citing *Alto Analytics*, https://www.alto-analytics.com/en_US/social-unrest-colombia-chile/)

“We are confronting a new reality: the media and channels, that permit access to an almost infinite universe of data, has brought with it disinformation and manipulation. Its reach is so vast and dynamic, that it is difficult for us to gain control...The statistical report revealed that only 1% of the users created 33% of the content that generated never before seen chaos in various Colombian cities... Alto Analytics found that 40% of the 20 groups on Telegram that influenced the demonstrations were located outside Colombia... The document also indicated that one in three convocation events organized via Facebook came from outside the country.”

Source: Andrea Bernal, “¿Tuvieron incidencia las redes sociales para manipular las protestas en América Latina? (Did social media have a role in manipulating the protests in Latin America),” *NTN24*, 17 February 2020. <https://www.ntn24.com/america-latina/zoom-la-noticia/chile/tuvieron-incidencia-las-redes-sociales-para-manipular-las>

“In Colombia and Chile a total of 175 abnormal identities were identified that actively participated in the street disturbances recorded last year. On investigating the public geo-localizations, 58% were from Venezuela...”

In the debate, Mrs. Pizarro surprised her audience when she said, with a straight face: ‘The Forum of Sao Paulo doesn’t exist.’... Miguel Ferro reminded her that a principle part of her coalition [of political parties she represents] is the Unión Patriótica, extremist formation that is part of the Forum of Sao Paulo and is an unwavering defender of the Cuban and Venezuelan dictatorships.”



Another Bolivarian Armed Force?

OE Watch Commentary: The Bolivarian regime headed by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has had control of a wide array of armed organizations inside Venezuela. In February, Nicolás Maduro announced the creation of another one, which may be roughly translated as “the National Special Counter-Terrorism Team.” The accompanying passages from local sources discuss this new organization.

The first accompanying reference includes a tweet from Nicolás Maduro announcing the creation of this team “for defense of the country and the dismantling of terrorist groups that come from Colombia, the United States or that hope to threaten the Peace and stability of the Homeland...”

The second reference is from an outlet of the Venezuelan expatriate community in Spain, and similarly seems to highlight the new unit’s ostensible mission against interventions from Colombia and the United States, writing that the “new anti-terrorist police body ...will defend Venezuela from “the scourge of terrorism that is sewn from Colombia, financed from Colombia, and ordered from Washington...”

The third reference is from *TeleSur*, an outlet with direct access to regime officials and highly sympathetic to the Bolivarian movement generally. It seems to confirm the name of the new organization and is evidence that this is a genuine organizational initiative. However, some of the reportage, such as the second passage, describes it is a police unit, and if so, the police character may influence the final naming convention.

The fourth accompanying reference provides a window into why the choice Major General Hernán Gil Barrios as the new unit’s leader might be significant. That reportage, from Sebastiana Barráez, an Argentinian investigative journalist who has followed Venezuela affairs closely, is from August 2019. Barráez asserts that General Gil, who was the commander of the National Guard, is a close friend of General Padrino López, a figure at the center of the failed attempt in January 2019 to throw out the Maduro administration. In the aftermath of that failed attempt, Maduro began to take measures to shore up security. The new police unit is part of a larger reorganization effort to assure loyalties and refurbish control mechanisms within and among the various armed organizations. This precaution is probably being taken in view not only of outside actors, as suggested by the new unit’s mission statements, but also for purely intramural reasons. The Barráez piece reported on the occasion of the formal launch of a plan to incorporate some militias into the National Guard. The article title however, as headlined (“Nicolás Maduro furthers the Milicia and puts the Armed Forces in the service of the Government party”), goes more to the purpose of the integration, which was apparently the same purpose as the current stand-up of a new police element -- to formalize Bolivarian consolidation of the armed forces as being a military ‘of the party.’ **End OE Watch Commentary (Demarest)**

“...We create by decree the National Special Counter-Terrorism Team...”

Source: Editors, “Nicolás Maduro anunció la creación de cuerpo de policía contra el ‘terrorismo’ de Colombia (Maduro announces the creation of a police corps against Colombian ‘terrorism’),” *Colombia.com* and *EFE*, 28 February 2020. <https://www.colombia.com/actualidad/internacionales/policia-antiterrorista-nicolas-maduro-colombia-262385>

“The Venezuelan president accused Colombia and the United States of carrying out a plan by which they seek to do away with his government in Venezuela...”

Twitter screenshot: We create by decree the National Special Counter-Terrorism Team (Cuerpo Nacional Especial Contra el Terrorismo), for defense of the country and the dismantling of terrorist groups that come from Colombia, the United States or that hope to threaten the Peace and stability of the Homeland...”

Source: Editors, “Maduro crea nueva policía contra “el terrorismo que siembran desde Colombia (Maduro creates a new police force against ‘terrorism sewn from Colombia’),” *Runrun.es* and *EFE*, 28 February 2020, <https://runrun.es/noticias/399518/maduro-crea-nueva-policia-contra-el-terrorismo-que-siembran-desde-colombia/>

“The new police force will have intelligence units, counterintelligence and reaction capacity, action and coordination under the command of Major General Gil Barrios...”

This Thursday, Nicolás Maduro announced the creation of a new anti-terrorist police body that will defend Venezuela from “the scourge of terrorism that is sewn from Colombia, financed from Colombia, and ordered from Washington...”

Source: Editors, Presidente Nicolás Maduro anuncia creación de Cuerpo Nacional contra el Terrorismo para defensa de Venezuela (President Maduro announces creation of the National Team against Terrorism),” *Telesur*, 27 February 2020, <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/venezuela-nicolas-maduro-cuerpo-nacional-contra-terrorismo-20200227-0046.html>

“During the launch of the Great Quadrants Peace Mission [government multiyear plan], the executive indicated that this unit would occupy itself with dismantling terrorist groups that are sent by Colombia and the United States... On another note, he denounced a new plan of attack against the peace and Venezuelan sovereignty, devised by self-proclaimed opposition legislator Juan Guaidó during his overseas trip...”

Source: Sebastiana Barráez, “Nicolás Maduro avanza con la Milicia y coloca a la Fuerza Armada al servicio del partido de Gobierno (Nicolás Maduro furthers the Milicia and puts the Armed Forces in the service of the Government party),” *Infobae*, 5 August 2019, <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2019/08/05/nicolas-maduro-avanza-con-la-milicia-y-coloca-a-la-fuerza-armada-al-servicio-del-partido-de-gobierno/>

“I proceed to incorporate this first contingent of militiamen into the component of the Bolivarian National Guard, so that they can fully add to the work of security of our people.’... Additionally, he made some more promotions, this time of officers more closely related with his circle and with no affection for Diosdado Cabello [another senior PSUV personality]...”

The new Major General of the GNB [Bolivarian National Guard], Hernán José Gil Barrios, is known as a personal friend of Padrino López, in addition to being the only Chief of Staff promoted...

A high official [assumed Venezuelan] believes that to incorporate militias into the Bolivarian National Guard is ‘a significant step that foresees the intention of converting the FANB [Bolivarian Armed Forces], in a progressive and definitive manner, into an institution in service of the party, as is customary and necessary in totalitarian regimes....”



Cuba as the 'Tactical Owner' of Venezuela?

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying extracts are from an interview by renowned Colombian author and journalist Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, with a senior exiled Venezuelan politician and industrialist Pedro Carmona, published in *El Tiempo*. Mr. Carmona describes Cuba as the tactical owner of Venezuela, and gives a valuable categorization of eight actors with converging interests as being present in Venezuela: “Cuba, Russia, China, Iran, the Islamic world, the Forum of Sao Paulo, organized crime, and the Colombian guerrilla.” In other parts of the interview, Mr. Carmona points out that since the year 1998, there has been a strategic alliance between Cuba and Venezuela, “to the point that Chávez declared that “Cuba and Venezuela are one sole country with two presidents... fused in one sole process and one sole objective.”

Both interviewer and interviewee are aging anti-Communists, so *El Tiempo* newspaper readers would hardly have been surprised by their perspective regarding the geopolitical situation in the neighborhood. Still, the questioning was usefully incisive and the answers informed and organized. **End OE Watch Commentary (Demarest)**



Pedro Carmona.

Source: Zcriptz via Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pedrocarmona.jpg>, CC BY-SA 4.0

“In Venezuela, many hands ... converge: Cuba, which has been tactically the owner of the country; Russia, China, Irán, the Islamic world, the Forum of Sao Paulo, organized crime, and the Colombian guerrilla...”

Source: Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, “Cuba, Rusia y China, el poder oculto de Maduro (Cuba, Russia, China, Maduro’s hidden power),” Interview of Pedro Carmona, *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, 21 February 2020. <https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/mas-regiones/cuba-rusia-y-china-el-poder-oculto-de-maduro-464892>

Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza: Who is behind the political chaos in Venezuela?

Pedro Carmona: The regime tries to secure itself through power. In Venezuela, many hands that now have geopolitical and strategic significance converge: Cuba, which has been tactically the owner of the country; Russia, China, Irán, the Islamic world, the Forum of Sao Paulo, organized crime, and the Colombian guerrilla. Eight actors present on the Venezuelan stage. Obviously, [they are] very interested in having their point of entry and action on the American continent...

Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza: What role does Cuba play?

Pedro Carmona: Since the year ‘98... a strategic alliance to the point that Chávez declared ‘Cuba and Venezuela we are one sole country with two presidents; we are fused in one sole process and one sole objective’....

Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza: How certain is the radiation of the Venezuelan situation to the rest of the continent?

Pedro Carmona: The grave thing is that Venezuela is penetrated to its core by the darkest forces, not just in the political realm, but also by organized crime. Last July the Forum of Sao Paulo met in Caracas and indeed they discussed strategies for achieving infiltration and effect in protest movements in Latin America... We all heard Maduro say on television ‘the strategy of the Forum of Sao Paulo is going very well, we are advancing.’...For this reason I say; the worst enemy of democracy is incredulity. Because today in Colombia they say it is not Venezuela, and earlier we were saying Venezuela is not Cuba.”

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Venezuela and Iran Strengthen Relations



Venezuelan President, Nicolás Maduro in meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Saadabad Palace.

Source: Tasnim News Agency via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicol%C3%A1s_Maduro_in_meeting_with_Iranian_President_Hassan_Rouhani_in_Saadabad_Palace.jpg, CC by 4.0

OE Watch Commentary: During a three-day visit to Iran in late January, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza met with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. During the visit, Venezuelan news source *Telesur* printed Tweets made by Arreaza as well as a comment he made regarding Venezuela's resolve to maintain strong relations with Iran. Arreaza first tweeted that, "It was an honor to be welcomed by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. Venezuela sends warm greetings from President Nicolas Maduro and looks forward to providing you details regarding positive results achieved from cooperation by our nations during this visit." In a second tweet Arreaza indicated that, "We (Venezuela) have learned many things from Iran that have allowed us to develop our economy and overcome the blockade." Arreaza's second tweet refers to economic sanctions imposed on Venezuela by the United States. Arreaza also commented to *Telesur* that Venezuela would continue their relationship with Iran even if it meant that economic sanctions would not be lifted by the United States. This resolve is reflected in the continued planning for more visits between the two nations, during which time additional agreements will be signed. As the article from *Panam Post* reports, Venezuela and Iran also signed agreements in November 2019 but some security specialists fear these may strengthen the Maduro administration or serve as a front for the entrance of the Iranian military into Venezuela. **End OE Watch Commentary (Fiegel)**

"Our [Venezuela's] relationship with Iran will continue to prosper despite aggressions imposed by the United States against our sovereign nations."

-Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Arreaza

Source: Arreaza: Nuestra relación con Irán seguirá floreciendo (Arreaza: Our Relations with Iran Will Continue to Thrive)," *Telesur*, 21 January 2020. <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/venezuela-iran-canciller-jorge-arreaza-balance-gira-oficial-20200121-0007.html>

Jorge Arreaza Tweets regarding Venezuelan support to Iran, positive results obtained from cooperation between Iran and Venezuela and how Iran has helped Venezuela overcome economic sanctions imposed by the United States

--"It was an honor to be welcomed by Iranian President Hasan Rouhani. Venezuela sends warm greetings from President Nicolas Maduro and looks forward to providing you details regarding positive results achieved from cooperation by our nations during this visit."--

"Our (Venezuela's) relationship with Iran will continue to prosper despite aggressions imposed by the United States against our sovereign nations."

"We (Venezuela) have learned many things from Iran that have allowed us to develop our economy and overcome the blockade."

Source: Martin, Sabrina, "Venezuela e Irán firman acuerdo que afectaría la seguridad de la región (Venezuela and Iran Sign Agreement That Could Threaten Regional Security)," *Panam Post*, 13 November 2019. <https://es.panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2019/11/08/venezuela-e-iran-firman-acuerdo-que-afectaria-la-seguridad-de-la-region/>

Iran now has closer ties to Venezuela as they have signed new scientific and technological agreements. The Maduro regime claims that the agreements represent a plan of cooperation in areas to include education, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and engineering. However, security specialist Joseph Humire warned that the new agreements may represent a military and intelligence alliance that will strengthen Maduro's regime. He further indicated that in recent years, Venezuela has signed numerous commercial, military, and industrial agreements with Iran and that much of the trade could be a front for the entry of Iranian military.



Nicaraguan Perspectives on Daniel Ortega's Condemnation of Death of Iranian General

OE Watch Commentary: Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega released a statement just one day following the death of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in early January 2020, expressing solidarity with Iran in denouncing the death and categorizing it as an act of “international terrorism.” Ortega also urged the United Nations to take “serious, responsible and credible actions in response to the drone attack that killed Soleimani.”

Former Nicaraguan diplomats and a Sandinista General discussed Ortega's comments in international news source VOA and Nicaraguan news sources *La Prensa*. For example, Julio Icaza Gallard, a former UN Ambassador for Nicaragua stated that, “Ortega's statement did not even mention the United States or Donald Trump. He was clearly trying to avoid any consequences.” Nicaraguan sociologist and former diplomat Oscar Rene Vargas further classified Ortega's response as conciliatory towards Iran but as a direct stand-down to the United States. “On one side, Ortega condemned the death of Soleimani as an assassination just as the Iranian government did. On the other hand, Ortega was careful in how he used the word terrorism.” According to Vargas, this is because Ortega did not want to openly condemn the United States as he realized that it would lead to grave consequences in terms of possible increased sanction or worse.



General Qasem Soleimani.

Source: English.khamenei.ir via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major_General_Qasem_Soleimani_\(April_2016\)_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major_General_Qasem_Soleimani_(April_2016)_01.jpg), CC by 4.0

Former Sandinista Commander and retired Nicaraguan General Jorge Torres stated that, “Ortega was careful with his words. He classified the death of Soleimani as an act of international terrorism, but his words imply that he called whoever carried out the attack a terrorist whether he said it or not. Unfortunately, the message will likely bring grave consequences to Nicaraguan international interests as Ortega appears to be unwilling to change his stance on supporting Iran.” The retired General also commented on how Nicaragua's relationship with Iran brings no financial benefits to the small Central American nation. In addition to statements made by former diplomats and the Sandinista General, both *La Prensa* and VOA provide additional insight on Ortega's stance on Iran and how it may affect Nicaragua. **End OE Watch Commentary (Fiegel)**

“Ortega was careful with his words. He classified the death of Soleimani as an act of international terrorism, but his words imply that he called whoever carried out the attack a terrorist whether he said it or not.”

-Jorge Torres, former Sandinista Commander and retired Nicaragua General

Source: “Alianza Iran y Daniel Ortega pone a Nicaragua en situación delicada por conflicto con EEUU (Alliance between Iran and Daniel Ortega Puts Nicaragua in Delicate Position),” *La Prensa*, 5 January 2020. <https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2020/01/05/politica/2627116-alianza-entre-iran-y-daniel-ortega-ponen-a-nicaragua-en-una-situacion-muy-delicada-por-conflicto-con-estados-unidos>

Former UN Ambassador to Nicaragua Juan Icaza Gallard comments on Ortega's statement:

-- “Ortega's statement did not even mention the United States or Donald Trump. He was clearly trying to avoid any consequences.”--

Sociologist and former diplomat Oscar Rene Vargaras comments on Ortega's statement

-- “On one side, Ortega condemned the death of Soleimani as an assassination just as the Iranian government did. On the opposite side, Ortega was careful in how he used the word terrorism.”--

The following statements were released in Nicaraguan news source *La Prensa* and are related to the stance Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega has taken on Iran and the consequences that could result from the decision:

--The limited relations that the Daniel Ortega government currently maintains with Iran could result in grave conflicts with the United States in terms of possible sanctions.

Retaliatory claims made by Iran against the United States place Nicaragua in a delicate position given its geographic location.

In the case that Iran attempts to avenge Soleimani's death, Nicaragua could become an unprepared and unwilling partner.--

Source: “Relación de Ortega con Irán podría acarrearle conflicto con EE.UU., dicen expertos (Ortega's Ties to Iran could Result in Conflict with the United States According to Experts),” VOA, 07 January 2020. <https://www.voanoticias.com/a/relacion-de-ortega-con-iran-podria-acarrearle-conflicto-con-ee-uu-dicen-expertos/5235975.html>

Former Sandinista Commander and Retired Nicaraguan General Hugo Torres comments on Ortega's statement:

--“Ortega was careful with his words. He classified the death of Soleimani as an act of international terrorism, but his words imply that he called whoever carried out the attack a terrorist whether he said it or not. Regardless, Ortega's stance with Iran is unfortunate as it will likely bring grave consequences to Nicaraguan international interests and the Nicaraguan people.”--

The following statements were released in Nicaraguan news source VOA and are related to the stance Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega has taken on Iran and the consequences that could result from the decision:

--Dating back as recently as 2019, the Ortega administration has pushed for increased ties with Iran with limited reciprocation.

Any relationship between Iran and Nicaragua is political at best as (Iran) does not provide any financial backing to (Nicaragua).

A small country in political crisis (Nicaragua) should look for international relations that benefit it economically in the strictest speaking of the sense.

Those directly at risk of Ortega's stance are the Nicaraguan people.--



Strengthening Russian-Nicaraguan Ties

OE Watch Commentary: Over the past several years, there has been considerable focus on Russia's growing involvement within Venezuela. Less well known is that during the last decade, the Kremlin leadership has also done much to strengthen its relationship with Nicaragua. In March, the pro-business daily *Kommersant* provided a detailed article describing the history of Soviet/Russian interest in Nicaragua and where the relationship stands today.

The article begins on a light note, suggesting that “if a simple Soviet man fell asleep with a lethargic dream at the TV in 1982, listening to the news from Nicaragua, and woke up in 2020, ...he would not have noticed a time lapse. Our country still helps the fraternal people of the distant Nicaragua, led by comrade Daniel Ortega, to build a bright future.” The article then reviews the major events of the past 30 years, reminding readers that after the democratic elections in Nicaragua in 1990, “the Soviet Union lost its second-best friend (after Cuba) in the western hemisphere.”



Russian President Putin meets with President of Nicaragua Ortega in Managua, July 2014.
Source: Kremlin.ru, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46202>, CCA 4.0 Intl

Reflecting a popular Russian perception, the article asserts that “the more democracy flourished in Nicaragua, the poorer the vast majority of the population [became],” and by 2006, Daniel Ortega returned to the country's top leadership position. After his election, the article claims that Ortega turned to Russia “with a request to help replace the obsolete military equipment.” Russia responded to the call. The article describes in detail, the extensive military, cultural and economic support which the Kremlin has provided over the past decade, adding that “almost the entire top Russian leadership has visited Nicaragua.”

This Russian largesse has been partially repaid by Nicaragua becoming a “consistent and faithful ally of Russia.” Nicaragua counts itself among the handful of Russian allies who have recognized “the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” as well as “the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation.” The article concludes by describing the Russian diplomatic support to the Ortega government in 2018, when Nicaragua saw massive public protests over economic problems. The article claims that some in Nicaragua and Russia (to include the Foreign Ministry) interpreted these protests as a foreign attempt “to arrange... a ‘color revolution,’ and destabilize the situation in the country.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“... In foreign policy, it is difficult to find a more consistent and faithful ally of Russia than Nicaragua...”

Source: Alexey Alekseev, “Как СССР потерял Никарагуа, а Россия снова нашла (How the USSR lost Nicaragua, and Russia found again),” *Kommersant*, 1 March 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4274001>

...If a simple Soviet man fell asleep with a lethargic dream at the TV in 1982, listening to the news from Nicaragua, and woke up in 2020, then he would not have noticed a time lapse. Our country still helps the fraternal people of the distant Nicaragua, led by comrade Daniel Ortega, to build a bright future...

...In the February 26, 1990 elections, which were held under the supervision of UN observers and the Organization of American States (OAS), the Sandinistas were defeated. The Soviet Union lost its second-best friend (after Cuba) in the western hemisphere. The new leadership of Nicaragua began to focus on the United States of America. All Soviet institutions, except the embassy, were closed in the country.... From 1990 to 2006, three presidents were replaced in Nicaragua.... The more democracy flourished in Nicaragua, the poorer the vast majority of the population.

...While in Eastern Europe only individual citizens are nostalgic for the times of socialism, but there is no real chance of a return to the past, in Nicaragua the past returned after the 2006 general elections... As in the era of Brezhnev, the country is now again ruled by the SFSS, headed by its permanent leader, Daniel Ortega. Ortega himself officially stated that after winning the election, he turned to the United States and Russia with a request to help replace the obsolete military equipment. Russia responded to the call. And the friendship of our country with Nicaragua began to grow rapidly.

...Almost the entire top Russian leadership has visited Nicaragua.... In foreign policy, it is difficult to find a more consistent and faithful ally of Russia than Nicaragua. The authorities of this country promptly support all Russian initiatives, even causing ambiguous attitude in other countries.... The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is recognized by only six UN member states. Russia made it the first on August 26, 2008, Nicaragua was second - on September 5. Nicaragua recognized the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation just as quickly - on March 27, 2014, ten days after the Crimean referendum.

...In 1996, Russia forgave Nicaragua 90% of the debt, and provided a 15-year installment plan for the remaining \$ 344 million. In 2004, the remaining debt was also written off.

...After Ortega returned to power, military-technical cooperation resumed. Since 2009, Nicaragua began to receive new Russian military equipment. GAZ-2330 armored vehicles (Tiger), ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft mounts, Mi-17V-5 transport helicopters and a training complex for training the personnel of these helicopters, Mirage high-speed patrol boats, Lightning missile boats, training -Yak-130 combat aircraft, An-26 military transport aircraft, mobile hospitals, military trucks... In 2012, Colonel General Alexander Postnikov, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, announced plans to train Nicaraguan military personnel at Russian universities. ...In October 2017, the inauguration of the Russian Center of the Russkiy Mir Foundation at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (NUAN) in Managua took place. The center is open every day.

...In April 2018, social security reform was announced. It was planned to increase pension contributions for employers and workers and at the same time reduce the size of pensions. There are several versions of what happened next. The first is pro-government. A handful of oppositionists, together with crime, tried, with the support of their American patrons, to arrange a “tropical spring”, a “color revolution”, and destabilize the situation in the country.

...The reaction of Russia and the United States to the events of 2018 in Nicaragua differed radically. On April 25, 2018, a comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry was published: “We proceed from the fact that what is happening in this Central American country is its purely internal affair. We warn against destructive attempts to intervene from the outside.”



Russia Proposes Military Helicopter Deal to Mexico

OE Watch Commentary: As the first passage from *Indodefensa* reports, Rosoboronexport, the Russian state agency for defense imports and exports, has made a proposal to Mexico to build 50 military helicopters. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented on this possible deal during his three-day visit to Cuba, Mexico and Venezuela in early February, but did not provide details regarding the exact model of helicopter Russia is offering to Mexico, or any regarding price and financing.

According to news source *Telediario*, the deal proposed by Russia is not the first of its kind, as Mexico purchased 50 military helicopters (Mi-8s and Mi-17s; most commonly used as transport helicopters, airborne command posts, armed gunships, and reconnaissance platforms) from Russia in the past. The passage notes that Mexico is considering Russia's proposal at this time but has not yet accepted.

Bulgarian news source *Bulgarian Military* claims that the US State Department warned of sanctions on Mexico if they go through with the purchase of the 50 helicopters from Rosoboronexport. The sanctions would be imposed as the purchase of the military helicopters go against a US law passed in 2017 known as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), currently imposed on Russia, Iran and North Korea, as reported by Argentinian *Infobae*. **End OE Watch Commentary (Fiegel)**



Mi-8 RH.

Source: Jaypee by Wikimedia,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mi-8_RH.jpg, CC by SA 3.0

“Mexico is considering proposed agreements issued by Rosoboronexport regarding the purchase of helicopters.”

-Sergei Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs

Source: “Russia anuncia negociaciones con Mexico por un lote de 50 helicópteros (Russia Announces Negotiations with Mexico Regarding the Purchase of 50 Helicopters),” *Infodefensa*, 11 February 2020. <https://www.infodefensa.com/latam/2020/02/11/noticia-rusia-anuncia-negociaciones-mexico-helicopteros.html>

Lavrov affirmed that Rosoboronexport, the Russian state agency for defense imports and exports, would build the helicopters if Mexico accepts the deal proposed by the defense company.

Source: “México analiza compra de helicópteros militares a Rusia (Mexico Analyzes Purchase of Helicopters from Russia),” *Telediario*, 7 February 2020. <https://www.telediario.mx/internacional/mexico-analiza-compra-de-helicopteros-militares-rusia>

According to Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mexico is considering proposed agreements issued by Rosoboronexport regarding the purchase of helicopters.

Source: “Mexico may buy Russian military helicopters. The US threatened with sanctions,” *Bulgarianmilitary.com*, 14 February 2020. <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2020/02/14/mexico-may-buy-russian-military-helicopters-the-us-threatened-with-sanctions/>

The US threatened sanctions in response to Mexico acquiring Russian military helicopters, citing Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central America Hugo Rodriguez. According to Rodriguez, the purchase would go against the Law on Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions.

Source: “EEUU podría sancionar a México si compra helicópteros a Rusia (United States Could Impose Sanctions on Mexico if they Purchase Helicopters from Russia),” *Infobae*, 14 February 2020. <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/02/14/eeuu-podria-sancionar-a-mexico-si-compra-helicopteros-a-rusia/>

The Law, known as CAATSA, was passed by Donald Trump in 2017 to hold Russia, Iran and North Korea accountable for any destabilizing actions that are deemed as detrimental to the United States and its allies.



Attempted Murder of Mexican Mayor at Ciudad Juarez Airport

OE Watch Commentary: On 4 March, armed individuals attempted to assassinate Juan de Dios Valle Camacho, the Mayor of the municipality of Villa Ahumada (in the state of Chihuahua in northern Mexico) at the international airport in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. According to the accompanying excerpt from Mexican news magazine *Proceso*, the Mayor was waiting at the terminal with his wife for a flight to Culiacán, Sinaloa, when two armed men arrived at the airport entrance and opened fire. According to *La Opción*, a Mexico state media outlet, the mayor and his wife were headed to their native Sinaloa state, to return their son's body, Juan Uriel Valle Badillo, who was shot and killed two days earlier at the same airport.

Proceso reported the personnel from the State Investigation Agency seized twelve .223 caliber casings, seven 7.62 x 39 caliber casings, two .9mm and one .40mm caliber casings. Authorities also seized a 2015 Dodge RAM pick-up and a black AR15 MOD10-15 at the intersection of Tecnológico Avenue and Santos Dumon, Colonia Aeropuerto. According to *Infobae*, another state media source, a 2012 Chevrolet Express was also taken by authorities not far from the attack at the intersection of Tecnológico Avenue and Oscar Flores. While Chihuahua has been riddled by a cartel rivalry between the Sinaloa cartel and La Línea, it is unclear what motivated this attack and who the attackers were. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bunker/Keshavarz)**



2015 Dodge RAM pick-up used in the assassination attempt at González International Airport in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

Source: Fiscalía General del Estado (FGE) – Chihuahua, <http://fiscalia.chihuahua.gob.mx/inicio/?p=54879>

While Chihuahua has been riddled by a cartel rivalry between the Sinaloa cartel and La Línea, it is unclear what motivated this attack and who the attackers were. **End**

“The information indicates that the attack was aimed at the mayor of the municipality of Ahumada, Juan de Dios Valle...”

Source: “Presunto intent de asesinato de alcalde desata balacera en aeropuerto de Ciudad Juárez (Alleged attempted murder of mayor unleashes shooting at Ciudad Juárez airport),” *Proceso*, 5 March 2020. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/620505/presunto-intento-de-asesinato-de-alcalde-desata-balacera-en-aeropuerto-de-ciudad-juarez>

Moments of terror at the Abraham González International Airport in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, when armed individuals attempted to assassinate the mayor of the municipality of Villa Ahumada, Juan de Dios Valle, at an airport terminal.

Source: “Iban sicarios por el alcalde de Villa Ahumada (Assassins were targeting the mayor of Villa Ahumada),” *La Opción*, 4 March 2020. <http://laopcion.com.mx/noticia/263674/iban-sicarios-por-el-alcalde-de-villa-ahumada>

The Mayor was going to Culiacán, Sinaloa, to move the body of his son, Juan Uriel Valle Badillo, 21, who was shot last Monday.

Source: “Los detalles de la balacera que desató el terror en el aeropuerto de Ciudad Juárez: iban por el alcalde de Ahumada (Details of the Ciudad Juárez Airport shooting: they were targeting the Mayor of Ahumada),” *Infobae*, 5 March 2020. <https://www.infobae.com/americas/mexico/2020/03/05/los-detalles-de-la-balacera-que-desato-el-terror-en-el-aeropuerto-de-ciudad-juarez-iban-por-el-alcalde-de-ahumada/>

So far, the information indicates that the attack was aimed at the mayor of the municipality of Ahumada, Juan de Dios Valle, who was in the vicinity to take a flight and move the body of his son to another state.

The mayor's son, Juan Uriel Valle Badillo, 21, was executed Monday night outside the airport on the sidewalk of Avenida Tecnológico.



Seized black AR15 MOD10-15.

Source: Fiscalía General del Estado (FGE) – Chihuahua, <http://fiscalia.chihuahua.gob.mx/inicio/?p=54879>



Cordoned off terminal area of Abraham González International Airport in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua

Source: Fiscalía General del Estado (FGE) – Chihuahua, <http://fiscalia.chihuahua.gob.mx/inicio/?p=54879>



Car Bomb Explodes Outside National Guard Headquarters in Celaya, Guanajuato

OE Watch Commentary: On 8 March, a car bomb exploded outside of a National Guard Headquarters in Celaya, Guanajuato, during a women's march and the Celaya fair. According to the accompanying passage from Mexico state news outlet *Zeta*, at least five members of the National Guard were hurt with mild injuries that were treated at the scene. *Heraldo de Mexico* reported the explosion as occurring around 6:40 pm, initiating citywide response by State Public Security Forces, Firefighters, and Municipal Police.

According to another media source, *Reforma*, staff working in the facilities stated that they saw a person park and abandon the vehicle, and fled the scene to a nearby vehicle, which appeared to be waiting for him. Authorities later indicated that the vehicle was reported stolen. Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador stated during his morning press conference on 9 March that this was a "propaganda act." According to the first two sources, the explosion occurred after the arrest of Santa Rosa de Lima (CSRL) cartel leader Jose Antonio Yépez Ortiz's ("El Marro's") father on 5 March in Celaya. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bunker/Keshavarz)**

“It was a propaganda act.”



Burning car bomb debris outside of National Guard Headquarters perimeter fencing post-detonation with Guard members present in Celaya, Guanajuato.

Source: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública, <https://www.la-prensa.com.mx/republica/estalla-coche-bomba-en-cuartel-de-la-guardia-nacional-en-celaya-4944229.html>



Firefighters putting out burning car bomb debris outside of National Guard Headquarters in Celaya, Guanajuato.

Source: Secretaría de Seguridad Pública, <https://www.la-prensa.com.mx/republica/estalla-coche-bomba-en-cuartel-de-la-guardia-nacional-en-celaya-4944229.html>

Source: “Explosión de coche bomba en instalaciones de GN in Celaya, ‘acto propagandístico,’ afirma AMLO (Car bomb explodes near GN in Celaya, ‘a propaganda act,’ AMLO said),” *Zeta*, 8 March 2020. <https://zetatijuana.com/2020/03/explosion-de-coche-bomba-en-instalaciones-de-gn-en-celaya-acto-propagandistico-afirma-amlo-video/>

During his morning press conference, the President said that he has received the report of the explosion: “More information is already available, it is an artisanal explosive, there have already been similar cases in Guanajuato. Fortunately, there were no injuries, it was a propaganda act.”

Source: “Explota coche en sede de Guardia en Celaya (Car explosion on National Guard grounds),” *Reforma*, 8 March 2020. https://www.reforma.com/aplicaciones/articulo/default.aspx?id=1892168&utm_source=Tw&utm_medium=@Reforma&utm_campaign=pxtwitter

The explosion occurred near the C4 control center of the Ministry of Security.

Source: “Explota coche bomba en cuartel de la Guardia Nacional en Celaya (Car bomb explodes near National Guard Headquarters),” *Heraldo de Mexico*, 8 March 2020. <https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/estados/coche-bomba-cartel-de-la-guardia-nacional-celaya-guanajuato-inseguridad/>

An alleged car bomb exploded on the premises of the fair, where the headquarters of the National Guard is currently located. Preliminarily two injured people are reported.

The event was recorded around 6:40 in the afternoon, at the same time that the women's march was taking place on March 8, when inhabitants of the southern area of Celaya reported an outbreak in the vicinity of the Celaya Fair in the facilities that were from Celanese.

Various police and rescue companies moved to the scene, confirming that moments before a car had exploded.

It is known that the car bomb was a few meters from the barracks that are being used by the National Guard in the Fair facilities.

This caused the strong police mobilization of the State Public Security Forces, Fire, Municipal Police.