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FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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ON THE COVER:

South African peacekeeper during training.

Source: MONUSCO Photos/Flickr/Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FIB-training-01.jpg>
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China's Conceptualization Work on UAVs: Toward an Unmanned Battlefield

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

As military theorists in China's Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) analyze the impact of intelligent technologies on future warfare, a recent article in the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, the PLA's daily news journal, discusses concepts for employing UAV groups based on the progression from mechanized warfare capabilities to informationized and intelligent technological capabilities. This represents a technological progression from "UAV fleet operations" to informationized "UAV group operations" and finally to "UAV swarm operations" using intelligent technologies to achieve a degree of autonomy. This last stage leads the theorists to visualize what they described as an "unmanned battlefield."

The authors describe the concept of UAV fleet operations as rooted in mechanized warfare, placing this stage of UAV group employment within the current capabilities of the PLA. UAV fleet operations are described as a collection of three or more UAVs operating under a unified command and implementing the same combat action to achieve a common goal. UAV fleet operations reflect mechanized warfare capabilities in that their combat effectiveness is generated by quantity and scale enhancing firepower support and killing efficiency. The advantages include that this type of operation is conducive to centralized management and high efficiency for simple tasks; disadvantages include low efficiency for task coordination, weak distributed task capabilities, weak group scalability, and weak adaptability. The primary missions are firepower focused.

UAV group operations represent informationized warfare capabilities. Currently, the PLA is in the process of modernization based on information technologies with these capabilities growing within the force. UAV groups are interconnected by onboard computers and communications network. UAV groups operate under a unified command, which jointly manages the execution of a common task. The UAV group acts as a unified whole cooperating in a combat activity. UAV group operations generate combat power based on information empowerment, networking, and coordination of actions within the group. Advantages include high efficiency for task coordination, strong operational flexibility, the capability to perform distributed combat tasks, and group scalability; disadvantages include a high requirement for information technologies, complex UAV design, and vulnerability to electronic interference.

UAV swarm operations are described as a biological simulation of a bee colony enabled by intelligent technologies. A UAV swarm is defined as a group of autonomous, networked UAVs working to achieve a unified operational objective. The UAV swarm is based on groups of intelligent drones working in collaboration. The individual drones might have low intelligence, but through interactive and reactive rules they emerge as a complex group with self-organizational capabilities. Characteristics include decentralization, flexibility, and group intelligence working towards a common objective. The authors believe that UAV swarm operations subvert traditional warfare concepts through their autonomous combat capabilities of self-adaptation, self-organizing networks, self-coordination, and

self-decision making. Advantages include high efficiency for task coordination, strong operational flexibility and battlefield adaptability, strong capability to conduct distributed tasks, and group scalability. Disadvantages include a requirement for large numbers of advanced drones and high research requirements in biological simulation technology. While many of these UAV concepts are generally well-known, this current PLA research on intelligent technologies and operational concepts will assist in the eventual deployment of these capabilities within the military, and as the authors envision, toward an unmanned battlefield.

Source: “群式作战，演绎无人战场新图景” (Group type operations, deducing a new vision of the unmanned battlefield), *People's Liberation Army Daily* (PLA's daily news journal), May 20, 2021. http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-05/20/content_289733.htm

At present, UAV group type operations has entered the battlefield practice from the concept research, which indicates that the development of UAV new operation mode is becoming more and more mature. UAV group operations usually include UAV fleet operations, UAV group operations and UAV "swarm" operations. Because there is no authoritative concept description of the three systems at home or abroad, it is easy to cause conceptual confusion, which is not conducive to the in-depth study of UAV group operations. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the three concepts in order to clarify the understanding, so as to deepen the understanding of the characteristics and laws of UAV operations.

UAV group type operation is a new and practical operation mode, which has great operation potential and application prospect, especially for UAV "swarm" operations, which may subvert the traditional operation mode, and should receive great attention. A correct understanding of UAV fleet operations, UAV group operations and UAV "swarm" operations is an important foundation and prerequisite for accelerating the development of mechanized, information-based and intelligent integration of UAV group operations. In actual combat, we should not only pay attention to the application research of UAV fleet operation and UAV group operation, but also carry out the research of UAV "swarm" technology and operational applications in advance. Only through preparation can we grasp the initiative.

“the development of UAV new operation mode is becoming more and more mature.”

China Incorporates Electronic Warfare UAVs into Complex Training

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

The Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) has used UAVs for reconnaissance and strike operations in training for years. Recently the PLA press reported on an exercise by the 72nd Group Army in the Eastern Theater conducting a confrontation exercise with an "Electromagnetic Blue Army," employing electronic warfare UAVs to provide a complex electromagnetic environment for the brigade's training. The brigade had recently received new communications and air defense-related

equipment to be tested in the electromagnetic environment. The electronic warfare equipment manufacturer assisted the opposing force in the exercise. The equipment manufacturer also participated in an after-action assessment suggesting tactics, techniques, and procedures for the brigade to employ in the future. This unit's innovation was a unique example of "Blue" electronic warfare incorporated into the PLA's new military training system.

“At present, our army is speeding up the construction of a new military training system to comprehensively improve the training level and the ability to win.”

Source: “外请“强敌”磨砺对抗硬功 (A ‘Strong Enemy’ is invited to sharpen the hard skills of confrontation),” *People's Liberation Army Daily* (PLA's daily news journal), May 20, 2021. http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-05/20/content_289716.htm

In the air, a number of UAVs mounting jamming equipment launched a “surprise attack”; In a ground shelter, the operator flexibly adopts a variety of means to implement anti-jamming.... Recently, in a brigade training ground of the 72nd group army, a number of air-ground electronic countermeasures have been launched fiercely. What makes the reporter's eyes bright is that this time the “cunning blue army” is not a brother army, but an equipment manufacturer.

At present, our army is speeding up the construction of a new military training system to comprehensively improve the training level and the ability to win. This is a road that no one has ever gone through before. No stage is ready for everything. There will always be difficulties or contradictions in one way or another. If you encounter problems and take a detour, or simply “wait and see”, you will miss the opportunity and accomplish nothing.

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>

Kiribati Denies Chinese Upgrading of Airstrip Is Military Related

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

The excerpted 13 May Chinese language article for sohu.com, which reports on international affairs and has no clear political affiliation, discussed Chinese activities in the Pacific Ocean island nation of Kiribati. The article emphasized that Kiribati's government denied that China's upgrading the country's airstrip was for military purposes, while asserting that the project was only intended to improve transportation and promote tourism. However, the article acknowledged that China had a strong diplomatic reason for building the airstrip. It was a reward to Kiribati for its ceasing relations with Taiwan and establishing relations with China in 2019.

According to the article, Kiribati opposition politicians have raised concern that China will use the airstrip for military purposes and turn Kiribati Island essentially into a Chinese maritime aircraft carrier. As the article notes, historically Kiribati airstrips have served military purposes, including during World War II and in ensuing decades. However, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, like Kiribati's government, asserted the airstrip is only intended to further domestic transportation links and exemplifies mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Kiribati.

Despite these assurances, there is also skepticism in Australia. The Sydney-based daily newspaper The Sydney Morning Herald, for example, reported on 5 May that the plans for the airstrip had still not



Kiribati Island.

Source: Vladimir Lysenko (I.), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kiribati\(003\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kiribati(003).JPG), Attribution: CC x 4.0

been made public and that Kiribati was in a strategic location between Asia and the Americas. It further noted how a Kiribati opposition politician had inquired about whether China's plans in Kiribati related to China's Belt and Road Initiative. According to the article, any significant Chinese military build-up on Kiribati would provide China a foothold deep into areas that had been firmly aligned with the United States since World War II. In addition, the article asserts China has growing interest in Pacific Ocean islands. As evidence of this, not only has Kiribati established relations with China and seen some Kiribati politicians increasingly align with China, but also the same trends have become prevalent in the Solomon Islands.

“The government of Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, stated that China helped the country upgrade the airstrips and bridges on Kanton Island ‘for civilian use only.’”

Source: “基里巴斯：中国帮助升级南太平洋机场仅为民用 (Kiribati: China Helps Upgrade South Pacific Airstrip for Civilian Use Only),” sohu.com (on-line gaming platform that also reports on international affairs), 13 May 2021. https://www.sohu.com/a/466237372_115479

The government of Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, stated that China helped the country upgrade airstrips and bridges on Kanton Island “for civilian use only,” aiming to improve transportation and promote tourism. In response to this, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that China, at the invitation of the Kiribati government, is studying plans to upgrade and improve the airstrip to facilitate domestic transportation within Kiribati. The cooperation between China and Kiribati adheres to the concept of “mutually beneficial cooperation.”

In 2003, Kiribati “established diplomatic relations” with Taiwan; in September 2019, after Kiribati “severed diplomatic relations” with Taiwan, China and Kiribati resumed diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level.

Source: “China plans to revive strategic Kiribati airstrip,” smh.com.au (Sydney based daily newspaper with online edition), 5 May 2021. <https://omrmz.org/omrweb/publicacoes/or-109/>

Any significant build-up on Kanton, located 3000 kilometres south-west of Hawaii and US military bases there, would offer a foothold to China deep into territory that had been firmly aligned to the US and its allies since World War II. “The island would be a fixed aircraft carrier,” said one adviser to Pacific governments, who declined to be named because of the sensitivity of the project.

In late 2019 Kiribati severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of China, in a decision overseen by Maamau, who went on to win a closely contested election on a pro-China platform. The diplomatic shift, which mirrored events in the Solomon Islands, was a setback for self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as a province with no right to state-to-state ties.

Chinese Warplane Confrontation in Malaysian Airspace Raises Regional Concerns

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 31 May, a group of 16 Chinese military aircraft flew through the South China Sea (SCS) and close enough to or into Malaysian airspace that it caused Malaysia to scramble its own jets to track the Chinese aircraft. According to a 5 June Indonesian language article in *kompas.com*, which claims editorial independence but has historically been pro-Indonesian military, reported that Malaysian leaders, including its foreign minister Hishammuddin Hussein, condemned the Chinese aircraft's incursions and considered them a disruption to diplomatic efforts to resolve the two countries' overlapping claims in the SCS. According to the article, Malaysia viewed the Chinese military actions as a severe violation of Malaysian sovereignty.

Notwithstanding the Malaysian protestations, the article noted Malaysia's relations with China will be maintained. At the same time, the article indicated China has maximalist claims in the SCS such that China considers virtually the entire sea is its territory and has accordingly built military bases on a number of SCS islands. Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan, and Brunei, as well as Malaysia were mentioned in the article as having overlapping claims with China. While the article provides no reason for why China may have engaged in the military action in or near Malaysian airspace, it noted that China had previously sent a survey ship to negotiate with Malaysia about oil exploration in waters near Malaysian Borneo, which is the same area where the air intercept occurred.

“Although Malaysia and China have respective claims over the South China Sea, relations between China and Malaysia have still been maintained despite the incident.”



A Republic Of China Air Force F-16 fighter jet shadows a PLA Air Force Bomber that had approached the island of Taiwan.

Source: Military News Agency, ROC, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:An_ROC_Airforce_F-16_fighter_jet_shadows_a_PLA_Airforce_Bomber_that_had_approached_the_island_of_Taiwan.webp, Attribution: CC x 2.0

A separate 5 June Malaysian language article in *malaysiakini.com*, which prides itself on independence and challenging the authorities, especially on issues of corruption, also discussed the confrontation between the Chinese and Malaysian military aircraft. The article noted that China justifies its actions by asserting its aircraft were simply on a training mission and that no country was a target. Further, China's Foreign Minister stated the aircraft were acting in accord with international law and did not enter into Malaysian airspace. The article highlighted that although this aerial confrontation between Malaysia and China was new, there were 89 incidents between 2016 and 2019 where Chinese Coast Guard or Chinese People's Liberation Navy ships encroached on Malaysian territory. According to the article, the purpose of such incursions was to demonstrate Chinese sovereignty over the SCS, including near the borders of Malaysian Borneo.

Source: “Malaysia Kerahkan Jet Tempur untuk Cegat 16 Pesawat Militer China di Lepas Pantai Kalimantan (Malaysia Deployed Fighter Jets to Intercept 16 Chinese Military Aircraft Off the Coast of Kalimantan),” *kompas.com* (independent but historically pro military Indonesian language news source), 5 June 2021. <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2021/06/05/210000965/malaysia-kerahkan-jet-tempur-untuk-cegat-16-pesawat-militer-china-di-lepas?page=all>

Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein condemned the Chinese military action and considered it a violation of territorial claims in the South China Sea. Both China and Malaysia are known to claim each other's territorial waters. Although Malaysia and China have respective claims over the South China Sea, relations between China and Malaysia have still been maintained despite the incident.

Apart from Malaysia, the countries that also have claims in the South China Sea are Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan. Last year, a Chinese survey ship was involved in lengthy negotiations with a Malaysian oil exploration vessel off the coast of Borneo.

Source: “AS kecam pesawat tentera China terbang di ruang udara Malaysia (The US condemned Chinese military planes flying in Malaysian airspace),” *malaysiakini.com* (independent Malaysian news source), 5 June 2021. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/577677>

Following the incident of Chinese military planes flying suspiciously in Malaysian airspace on May 31, a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy said the planes were undergoing training and no country was targeted. The spokesman added that China and Malaysia are friendly neighbors, and China is ready to continue bilateral friendly talks with Malaysia to jointly maintain regional peace and stability.

Last year, the Auditor-General's Report (KAN) revealed that ships of the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the Chinese Peoples Liberation Navy (PLN) were encroached on Malaysian waters 89 times between 2016 and 2019. According to the report, the presence of the CCG and PLN is to demonstrate China's claims to the South China Sea, particularly in the Beting Patinggi Ali area, which is about 84 nautical miles off the coast of Miri, Sarawak and about 1,600km from mainland China.

Corridor Opened in Azeri-Armenia Ceasefire Might Strengthen Turkish-Chinese Relations

By Ihsan Gündüz
OE Watch Commentary

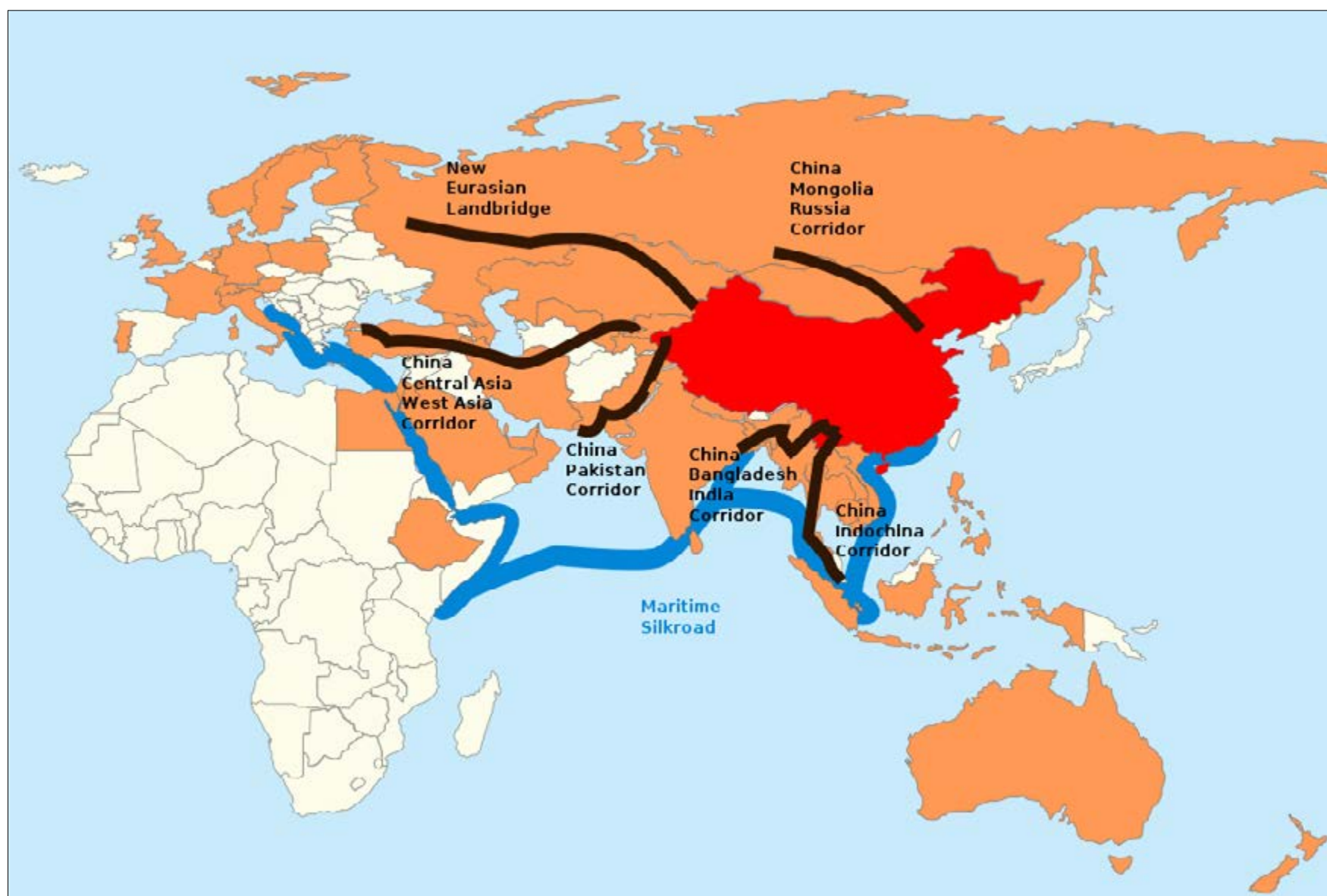
The ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia in November 2020 has created new opportunities for regional and global cooperation: in particular, opportunities between Turkey and China. The ceasefire stipulates the reopening of all economic and transportation routes in the region and one of the routes that would be revived is the Zangezur corridor. This corridor will link Turkey directly to Azerbaijan and create an alternative route for the Middle Corridor, which begins in Turkey and passes through Central Asia to reach China. In 2015, Turkey and China signed a memorandum of agreement aligning the Middle Corridor with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The accompanying article from Turkey's state-run news agency *Anadolu Ajansı*, claims that Turkey will benefit significantly from the reopening of this trade and transportation route. According to the article it will increase Turkey's chances of becoming a safe and stable transportation hub for China and China's trading partners in Europe for a few reasons. First, reopening this route will shorten travel time

for transporting goods between China and Europe through the Middle Corridor. Second, the Zangezur corridor will create another route for the Middle Corridor in addition to the one via Georgia, making it more stable and reliable for supply chain security compared to the Northern and the Southern Corridors.

With the added route, the Middle Corridor will reduce China's reliance on Russia as an alternative to the Northern Corridor. The Northern Corridor is less reliable and secure for transporting Chinese goods to Europe due to the tension between European countries and Russia. The Southern Corridor is unreliable because it passes through Iran, and due to terrorism-related issues. In addition, utilizing this new route as part of the Middle Corridor will mitigate the risk associated with political instability in the region, especially in Georgia. In a nutshell, a functional Zangezur corridor will likely lead to stronger Turkish-Chinese economic cooperation and mutual dependence on trade routes.

“The Zangezur corridor can have a positive effect on the political and economic development of China-Turkey relations and the strengthening of mutual dependence between the two countries.”



One Belt One Road.

Source: Lommes, via Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:One-belt-one-road.svg>, CC-BY-SA-4.0

Continued: Corridor Opened in Azeri-Armenia Ceasefire Might Strengthen Turkish-Chinese Relations

Source: Araz Aslanlı and Yunis Şerifli, “Zengezur koridoru, Pekin-Londra hattı ve Türkiye’nin artan önemi (The Zangezur corridor, the Beijing-London line and the increasing importance of Turkey),” *Anadolu Ajansı* (Turkey’s state-owned news agency), 26 May 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/zengezur-koridoru-pekini-londra-hatti-ve-turkiye-nin-artan-onemi/2254505#>

...First of all, transporting Chinese goods to Europe via the Middle Corridor is easier and more advantageous compared to the Northern Corridor passing through Russia. Goods transported via the Trans-Siberian route reach Europe in 20 days while goods transported through the Middle Corridor can reach the same destination in 12 days. In addition, the fact that the roads and railways in the Northern Corridor are not up to modern standards while the roads and railways of the Middle Corridor countries are of higher standards make the Middle Corridor more strategic and profitable than the Northern Corridor. In addition, the Middle Corridor offers China new opportunities in terms of reducing its dependence on Russia in terms of transportation. Finally, the fact that European countries have problems with Russia, especially Russia’s serious security problems with its Western neighbors, makes the security of the Northern Corridor questionable.

...Secondly, the Middle Corridor also has many advantages over the Southern Corridor that runs through Iran. Goods sent from China to Europe via the Southern Corridor reach their destination in 14 days, while goods sent from the Central Corridor arrive at the same destination in 12 days. As in the Northern Corridor, the infrastructure problems of the Southern Corridor, the tension in US-Iranian relations, and the sanctions against Iran devalue this corridor. In addition, frequent problems at the Iran-Turkey border cause delays in the shipment of goods and the existence of a terrorist problem on this route can be disadvantages. On the other hand, the fact that the Middle Corridor passes through politically stable countries and that there are no security problems in the countries located on this corridor makes the Middle Corridor stand out for China compared to other corridors.

Finally, the Middle Corridor has advantages over sea routes [as well since] goods sent from China to Europe by sea can reach their destination in 36 days.

...As stated above, one of the most striking issues in the Tripartite Declaration signed between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia was the revitalization of the Zangezur corridor. The Zangezur corridor can have a positive effect on the political and economic development of China-Turkey relations and the strengthening of mutual dependence between the two countries. In addition, the new corridor can play an important role in terms of transporting China’s goods to Europe faster and strengthening Turkey’s strategic position in China, the Middle East and European countries...

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>

Morocco Looking Increasingly to China in Western Sahara Dispute with Algeria

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Arabic-language media analyses increasingly see northwest Africa, specifically Morocco, Algeria, and the Western Sahara, as an emerging arena of U.S.-China competition. The accompanying article from the Saudi-funded Independent Arabia, for instance, argues that Algiers has already become a virtual “battlefield” following two Twitter spats over the Uighur issue, involving the U.S. and Chinese diplomatic missions in Algeria. The article cites an Algerian academic who sees the United States as seeking to drag China into a “war of statements” regarding Uighur rights, though he does not believe this approach will gain much traction, at least not in Algeria.

Uighur rights are likely to be even less popular in Morocco, given local sensitivities regarding external criticism of its policies vis-à-vis the Western Sahara, which Morocco considers an integral part of its sovereign state. China has sought to remain neutral regarding Moroccan-Algerian disagreements over the status of the Western Sahara, notwithstanding its strong ties with Algeria, which supports the Western Saharan independence movement (The Polisario Front). China has in recent years deepened its diplomatic and economic relations with Morocco and appears interested in investing in the Western Sahara, according to the accompanying excerpt from the Abu Dhabi-based news outlet SkyNews Arabia. In early May, several news outlets, including the Moroccan news website Ayam 24, reported that Morocco had purchased Wing Loong II drones from China, potentially for use in the Western Sahara.

According to an article published last September in the Moroccan daily al-Estiklal, Moroccan diplomats are intent on convincing China to officially recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

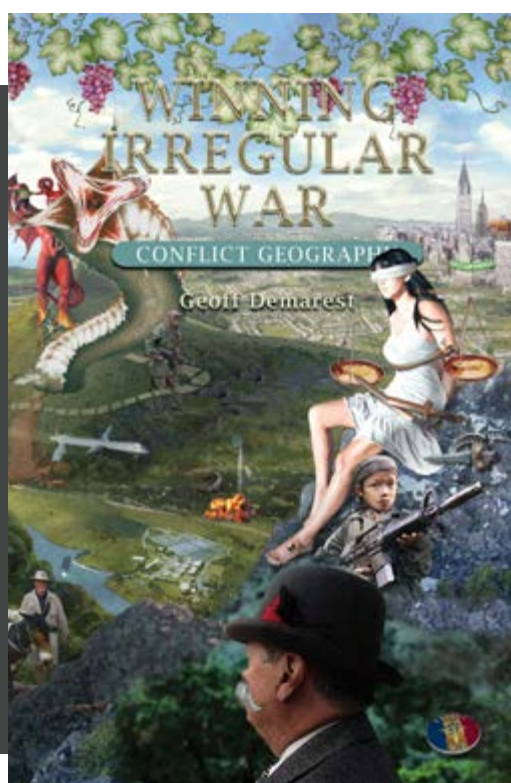


No Man's Land - Western Sahara / Mauritania border in Guarguarate (2013).

Source: jbdodane, Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jbdodane/8590893326/>,
Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>

A human rights activist from northern Morocco, writing in the pro-Hezbollah independent Lebanese news outlet al-Mayadeen, argues that Morocco should follow Algeria’s lead and forge a strategic alliance with China, which will “strengthen the possibility of resolving the Moroccan Sahara problem.” Per a researcher cited in the SkyNews Arabia article, both Morocco and China consider economic development as a key tool for resolving the dispute.

“...Chinese investments in Morocco have nearly doubled in recent years...”



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>

Continued: Morocco Looking Increasingly to China in Western Sahara Dispute with Algeria

Source:

“لماذا اتخذت واشنطن وبكين من الجزائر ساحة لمعركتهما؟

(Why have Washington and Beijing made Algeria their battlefield?),” *Independent Arabia* (Saudi-funded daily), 31 March 2021.<https://tinyurl.com/y5juhsvr>

Commenting on Washington and Beijing turning Algeria into their battlefield, the professor of political science and international relations, Mabrouk Kahe, told Independent Arabia that... the “war of statements” is evidence of the United States’ attempt to influence this axis by fabricating a human rights issue related to Uighur Muslims, despite the fact that Algeria’s position is clear and based on respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in its internal affairs. Kahi added that America wants to restrain China in Algeria by trying to influence and drag it into a game of declarations...

Source:

“بعد شمال المغرب.. هل تتجه الاستثمارات الصينية نحو الصحراء؟

(After North Africa... Will Chinese investments move toward the Sahara?),” *SkyNews Arabic* (Abu Dhabi-based news outlet), 28 February 2021.<https://tinyurl.com/xh56rv7s>

Chinese investments in Morocco have nearly doubled in recent years... The city of Dakhla has opened China’s appetite for investments in the renewable energy sector, in addition to other potential. Due to its maritime location and its geographical nature, the city provides dense wind masses and major ingredients for the production of solar energy, which according to analysts qualifies it to be the preferred destination for wind and energy companies... On the Chinese investment trend towards the Moroccan Sahara, which may be the prelude to a hoped-for Chinese recognition of Moroccan sovereignty, Jad Raad, a researcher on Chinese affairs, told Sky News Arabia in a special statement that... “China believes that extending the hand of aid and development will inevitably lead to the elimination of disputes,” referring to the congruence of views between Morocco and China regarding development as an entry point to end fabricated conflicts.

Source:

“الصينية Wing Loong المغرب يعزز قدراته العسكرية بالنسخة الثانية من طائرات

(Morocco strengthens its military power with the second-generation Chinese Wing Loong plane),” *al-Ayam 24* (Moroccan news website),12 May 2021. <https://www.alayam24.com/articles-322244.html>

Morocco signed a new deal with China to acquire Wing Loong 2 drones... This deal comes within the framework of Morocco’s endeavor to create a huge fleet of drones, and diversify the squadron of unmanned aircraft to counter the movements of the Polisario forces, which rely on hit and run tactics, without the complications of mobilizing on the field and taking risks...

Source:

“المغرب يقترب من الصين ويعطي ظهره لأميركا.. ما علاقة ملف الصحراء؟

(Morocco is moving closer to China and turning its back on America... What does the Sahara file have to do with it?),” *al-Estiklal* (independent Moroccan daily), 16 September 2020. <https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/view/5949/dep-news-1600004740>

In an analytical article published in the Moroccan newspaper Al-Osboa, in the first week of September 2020, the author considered that “the royal approach to China is a safety valve for the present stage”... The “safety” that the analysis discussed relates to Morocco’s key issue, the Western Sahara, which is disputed with the Algerian-backed “Polisario Front” and for which Morocco seeks to mobilize international support to enhance its legitimacy over the territory. China is one of the most important countries whose position the Moroccan diplomatic machine is keen to shift from neutrality to alignment. Has Morocco really succeeded in getting China to take its side?

Source:

“المغرب والجزائر نموذجا.. أي اختيارات استراتيجية للدول النامية؟

(Morocco and Algeria as a model... What strategic choices for developing countries?),” *al-Mayadeen* (pro-Hezbollah independent Lebanese news outlet), 6 April 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/yymy356uy>

Algeria’s move toward China has recently infuriated France and the European Union...

the Moroccan state must benefit from these transformations and direct its strategic relations in a way that serves Morocco’s interest in development by agreeing to permanent partnerships with China, which will constitute the new center of global power, rather than betting on the losing side. This will strengthen the possibility of resolving the Moroccan Sahara problem, through arbitration by the shared Chinese partner, through joint economic projects in the general interest of the two peoples.

Russian UAVs Envisioned to Replace Manned Reconnaissance Aviation

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from *Izvestiya*, a large-circulation pro-Kremlin daily, discusses Russian plans to transition its manned reconnaissance aviation to unmanned systems. According to *Izvestiya*, there are less than 100 Su-24MR reconnaissance aircraft remaining in the Russian inventory. Russia is now considering replacing the Su-24MR, which first entered service in 1975, with the *Altius* and/or *Orion* large UAVs that are in development.

Russian media sources have reported that the *Altius* UAV has a wingspan of 28.5 meters, length of 11.6 meters, 6-ton takeoff weight, operating altitude of 12,000 meters, flight range of up to 10,000 kilometers, and is capable of remaining aloft for up to 48 hours. By comparison, the smaller *Orion* UAV reportedly has a wingspan of 16

meters, length of 8 meters, 1-ton takeoff weight, operating altitude of 7,500 meters, and is also capable of remaining aloft for up to 48 hours. However, according to the accompanying excerpted article from *Voyennoye Obozreniye*, a Russian military affairs website, Russia is a late adopter of the UAV-borne satellite communications technology required to field a large unmanned reconnaissance aviation system that can report data in real time.

Voyennoye Obozreniye states that the *Altius* will be the first domestically built UAV with such a capability. Although Russia has become quite adept at developing and fielding small UAVs, efforts to field the *Altius*, *Orion*, or other larger UAVs may be hindered by Russia's lack of experience with UAV-borne satellite communications.

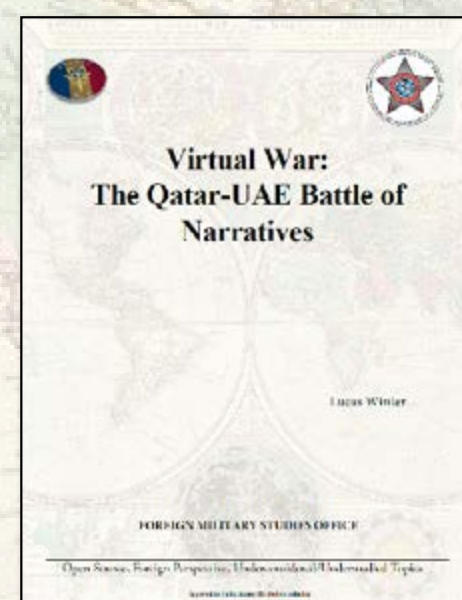
“The Ministry of Defense has decided to gradually transition Aerospace Forces (VKS) reconnaissance squadrons from aircraft to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).”

VIRTUAL WAR: THE QATAR-UAE BATTLE OF NARRATIVES

Lucas Winter

May 2020

For much of the past decade, Qatar and the UAE have been engaged in a battle of narratives. Their ongoing dispute dates to 2011 and is rooted in foreign policy and ideological disagreements. Following a hack of the Qatari News Agency in 2017, the nature of Qatari-Emirati competition shifted from being primarily the purview of government officials, spokespeople, journalists, analysts and authors, to one where coders, influencers, trolls and cybersecurity experts played a vital role. Since then, both countries have worked to increase their capabilities in the cyber and informational domains. Their relationship in these domains has evolved into one of strategic competition. This paper looks at how these dynamics may affect the regional operational environment, with a particular focus on the cyber and informational domains.



<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/329799>

Continued: Russian UAVs Envisioned to Replace Manned Reconnaissance Aviation

Source: “Встать в рой: подразделения ВКС переходят на беспилотную разведку (Get into a Swarm: VKS Subunits Are Transitioning to Unmanned Reconnaissance),” *Izvestiya* (large-circulation pro-Kremlin daily newspaper), 12 May 2021. <https://iz.ru/1162513/roman-kretcul-anna-cherepanova/vstat-v-roi-podrazdeleniia-vks-perekhodiut-na-bespilotnuu-razvedku>

*The Ministry of Defense has decided to gradually transition Aerospace Forces (VKS) reconnaissance squadrons from aircraft to unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Right now, these subunits are equipped with specially modernized Su-24MR aircraft, which were developed based upon the famous Soviet frontal aviation bomber. In the experts’ opinion, the “Orion” UAV and the advanced “Altius” unmanned aerial vehicle, which is capable of flying many thousands of kilometers, will be able to replace the Su-24MR aircraft...Everything depends on how rapidly the latest drones will complete testing and their launch into series production...In the process, the Defense Department does not intend to totally reject manned reconnaissance aircraft. If necessary, Su-34 fighter-bombers, which have been modernized based upon the “Sych” Project, will accomplish these functions, the publication’s sources reported. These aircraft can use standardized suspended reconnaissance pods. There are three of their variants: electro-optical, signals interception, and radar. The aircraft will be able to use this hardware to independently detect ground, naval, and airborne targets in any weather at greater ranges than before. In March, *Izvestiya* reported that the first modernized models have arrived at Central Military District units.*

Today Russia has only one type of reconnaissance aircraft the Su-24MR. They were developed based upon the frontal aviation bomber, which was accepted into the inventory in 1975. These aircraft are equipped with two turbojet engines and with a wing with variable geometry in flight. The crew consists of two men. Despite the aircraft’s considerable age, the Military Department will not rush to decommission it. Several years ago, the aircraft, having successfully proven themselves in Syria, completed modernization and remain in operation.

*“Today, there are approximately 12-15 Su-24MR aircraft in the Naval Aviation’s composition and another 60-70 are performing service in VKS units”, Military Historian Dmitriy Boltenev told *Izvestiya*. “We don’t have other reconnaissance aircraft right now. The Su-24MRs are far from new aircraft and the question about their replacement with more state-of-the-art aircraft looms large...”*

Source: “Разведывательно-ударный беспилотник «Альтиус-У» получил спутниковую связь (Reconnaissance-Fire Strike ‘Altius-U’ UAV has Satellite Communications),” *Voyennoye Obozreniye* (Russian military affairs website), 27 March 2021. <https://topwar.ru/181336-razvedyvatelyno-udarnyj-bespilotnik-altius-u-poluchil-sputnikovuju-svjaz.html>

The Russian Altius pilotless vehicle became the first domestic drone, equipped with a satellite communications terminal. Altius Project Main Designer Ilya Matveyev reported this.

Responding to a journalist’s question on the air on the “Rossiya-24” television channel, Matveyev explained, that the Altius UAV was the first among Russian unmanned vehicles to get a satellite communications terminal developed in Russia, positioned beneath the drone’s forward cowling.

This onboard satellite communications terminal was developed in Russia, and is included for use as part of our onboard equipment. Our unmanned vehicle is the first, in whose equipment such a type of radio communications capabilities was installed – he said.

Previously, it was reported that, thanks to the device installed, the unmanned vehicle can be controlled via satellite, and that makes its usable range almost unlimited...

In February of this year, it became public that the Defense Ministry had ordered an initial batch of “Altius” intelligence collection/strike unmanned vehicles. The delivery time and number of drones in the batch has not been reported.

Russia Employing Little Known Aviation Mines

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

Mines are typically thought of as only concerning the land and sea domains, but as the excerpted article from *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer*, a Russian weekly newspaper focusing on military and defense issues, explains, mines affecting the air domain are now fielded by the Russian Armed Forces. Russian planners envisage aviation mines being used against enemy helicopters in scenarios including airfield and runway operation interference, landing zone defense, and facility defense.

Aviation mines reportedly function by using an acoustic-infrared sensor to first identify the noise of an aircraft at up to 3.2 kilometers and then launch a projectile at the identified aircraft when it is within 150 meters. Although currently fielded Russian aviation mines can only hit low flying targets at a very short distance, their employment could greatly complicate Russia's adversaries' efforts to protect airfields, drop zones, and any other place where aircraft may fly low.



Anti-helicopter mines.

Source: Vitaly Kuzmin, <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/Engineering-Technologies-2012/i-nccSCNN/A>, Attribution: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

“Anti-helicopter mines are the ideal means for organizing mine ambushes on presumed routes of the flight of enemy helicopters and light aircraft, capable of significantly supplementing traditional air defense weapons. The option of using anti-helicopter mine for the purpose of blocking airfields and landing sites is no less interesting.”

Source: Vitaly Orlov, “Мина для «летающего танка»: «Бумеранг» ставит заслон авиации противника (Mine for ‘Flying Tank’: Bumerang Sets Barrier Against Enemy Aviation),” *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* (Russian weekly newspaper focusing on military and defense issues), 27 April 2021. <https://vpk-news.ru/news/62235>

The Russian Federation concerned itself with the need to create such weapons [anti-helicopter mines] only by the end of the 1990s, having launched a large-scale scientific research and experimental design work on this project...The technical tasking issued to the developer envisaged creating a system capable of ensuring effective blocking of airfields and runways, defend landing zones, and security of strategic, military, and civilian facilities. An important role was also assigned to psychologically impacting the helicopter crew, who realize the danger of being detonated and involuntarily elevate the flight altitude of the aircraft, thus making it more vulnerable to [more traditional] means of air defense.

An important characteristic of this development's combat capabilities is its autonomous operation time, depending entirely on the capacity of its power source. The key factors influencing the duration of combat operation are primarily the temperature of the surrounding air and the number of the mine target guidance system activations. Nevertheless, the minimum guaranteed time for its power source autonomous operation is 90 days. In this regard, a reasonable question arises: what happens after that? The anti-helicopter mine is equipped with anti-disturbance and self-destruct systems, which provide for its independent detonation...

Similar to its more traditional “partners in crime,” an anti-helicopter mine is employed via two main methods: remotely, that is, by means of air or ground equipment (mine-laying devices) and manually. It is noteworthy that this process does not take long. Thus, in March 2018, the Western Military District combat engineer troops subunits rehearsing anti-helicopter mining as part of a special tactical exercise, needed less than an hour to carry out this task. In such a short period of time, the sappers covered a defensive line over three kilometers in length. Thus, the actions of the army aviation of the notional enemy in this sector of combat operations were completely paralyzed.

Paradoxical as it may be, laying anti-helicopter mines from aboard helicopters is even faster. In this case, a special “aviation” version of the Bumerang anti-helicopter mine, with six (instead of four in the “ground” version) stabilizing slings, which ensures the accuracy of the installation of anti-helicopter mines in the vertical plane. These mines take stable vertical positions while still in flight, and the NVU is activated when coming into contact with the ground surface.

Anti-helicopter mines are the ideal means for organizing mine ambushes on presumed routes of the flight of enemy helicopters and light aircraft, capable of significantly supplementing traditional air defense weapons. The option of using anti-helicopter mine for the purpose of blocking airfields and landing sites is no less interesting.

Even heavy bombers and military transport aircraft reduce their speed to 280-320 kilometers per hour, and flight altitude -- down to 100-200 meters, when on landing approach. Moreover, the range of their location from the “native” airfield runway is at least 10 or even 15 kilometers. It is obvious that tight “closure” of such a zone is simply impossible. This in turn provides a real opportunity for the sabotage group to make a remote mining operation without entering the zone of operation of the airfield air defense and not fearing unpleasant “surprises” from the ground security...

Russian Engagement of British Naval Vessel in Black Sea Preceded by Mysterious Incident



Fake AIS signal showed Hr.Ms. Evertsen about 1 nautical mile from the Sevastopol harbor before it turns around as if it were a freedom of navigation operation.

Source: Marinetraffic.com

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Before Russia engaged the British HMS Defender in the Black Sea on 23 June, another similar but less examined incident occurred. According to *Marineschepen.nl*, a privately run Dutch news source that reports on Dutch and global naval news, on 19 June both a British and a Dutch warship on exercises in the Black Sea were tracked one nautical mile off the Russian-occupied port of Sevastopol on the coast of

Crimea. However, at the same time, according to multiple surveillance sources, video shows that both NATO ships were docked in Odessa, Ukraine during the time of the supposed incursion. The article's author pointed out that the global ship identification system (AIS) is not immune to error, and there have been previously documented misreadings due to inclement weather or temporary GPS failure.

The article posits a few possible explanations: Was the false reading some sort of error in the AIS, were either of the NATO ships engaging in electronic warfare to harass the Russian navy on Crimea, or instigate a false reading to measure Russian response to a perceived provocation? Was Russia engaged in some form of electronic warfare to let NATO navies know that it can take over or override the AIS? Or was it the work of a non-governmental hacking enterprise? It is notable that Russia did not appear to scramble jets or its own naval vessels to shadow the supposed incursion of the Dutch and British warships as it did with the HMS Defender a few days later on 23 June. Nor has there been any Russian reporting on the 19 June false reading incident.

Regardless, the Black Sea is becoming a naval flashpoint between Russia and the West as Russia seeks to establish naval dominance, while Western navies emphasize freedom of navigation and support regional allies on the Black Sea like Ukraine and Georgia. Future incidents regarding the AIS, beyond planned military actions, could lead to misperception, distrust, and even possible naval confrontation.

“The ship identification system, AIS, showed a voyage of Hr.Ms. Evertsen and HMS Defender from Odessa to Sevastopol, the largest port in Crimea and in the hands of Russia. However, there was talk of a fake signal, as both ships stayed all night in Odessa.”

Source: “‘Nachtelijke freedom of navigation exercise’ Evertsen en Defender bij Sevastopol blijkt nep (‘Nightly freedom of navigation exercise’ Evertsen and Defender at Sevastopol turns out to be fake),” *Marineschepen.nl* (independent Dutch website devoted to naval ships and international naval news), 19 June, 2021. <https://marineschepen.nl/nieuws/Nachtelijk-bezoek-Evertsen-Defender-Sevastopol-blijkt-vals-190621.html>

The ship identification system, AIS, showed a voyage of Hr.Ms. Evertsen and HMS Defender from Odessa to Sevastopol, the largest port in Crimea and in the hands of Russia. However, there was talk of a fake signal, as both ships stayed all night in Odessa.

It thus briefly appeared that the Evertsen and Defender had sailed into the 12-mile zone of Crimea to make it clear to Russia that the Netherlands and Great Britain do not recognize the territorial claim. That story soon turned out to be false. A Navy spokesman reported that the Evertsen and Defender were still in Odessa and had not left the port that night. The AIS signal did not suggest a port visit to the Russian-annexed port city in Crimea.

The fake AIS signal showed Hr.Ms. Evertsen about 1 nautical mile before the Sevastopol harbor heads turn around, as if it were a freedom of navigation operation. (Image: Marinetraffic.com) Sr.Ms. Evertsen had turned off AIS since the run-up to Istanbul. However, websites such as Marinetraffic.com showed two ‘ships’ leaving Odessa last night: the Evertsen and Defender. ‘Netherlands warship’ had the same MMSI registration as the original account. Now that doesn’t always mean something, naval ships regularly change accounts and data. For example, HMS Richmond and HMS Defender recently changed names.

As far as is known, AIS has never been misused before to report a false location of a Dutch naval vessel. The AIS of the Tromp seemed to be out of order earlier this year, but that was due to poor GPS reception in the dock in Den Helder.

Russia Deploying Anti-NATO Air Assets in Belarus Under Guise of Training



Sukhoi Su-30SM.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sukhoi_Su-30SM_in_flight_2014.jpg Attribution: CCA-SA Unported

By Ray Finch

OE Watch Commentary

The brief excerpt from the mostly pro-Kremlin source *Svobodnaya Pressa* describes the decade-long attempt by the Kremlin to convince Belarusian President Lukashenka to establish a Russian military airbase in Belarus. In the past, the leadership in Belarus always found

a pretext to avoid stationing Russian military aircraft on its territory. The article asserts that the impetus to finally allow Russian aircraft on Belarusian soil stems less from Lukashenka's domestic problems than from NATO's "largest build-up of multinational aviation contingents near the borders of Belarus and our Kaliningrad region over the past two years."

However, as the article points out, Russia will not establish a new airbase in Belarus, but will instead station forces under "the guise of a combat training center," at an airbase in the city of Lida. The article stresses that "Russian Su-30SM fighters and pilots" will be there only as instructors to "teach Belarusians to fly and fight on our Su-30SM." Lida's proximity to the European Union border will make it an ideal location to "meet the unwanted 'guests' from NATO." The article concludes by suggesting that Lukashenka had no choice but to allow Russian Air Force assets in Belarus, asserting that Belarus must relinquish its "sovereignty, when the enemy is on the doorstep!"

“...We need it... when the enemy is on the doorstep!”

Source: Sergey Ischenko, “‘Бацьку’ Путин все же сломал: Белорусский аэродром Лида ждет российские Су-30СМ, (Tough Father, but Putin still broke: the Belarusian airfield Lida is waiting for Russian Su-30SM),” *Svobodnaya Pressa* (mostly pro-Kremlin news source), 2 June 2021. <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/300090/>

The dispute between Moscow and Minsk about our airbase in the union republic is over. She will appear, but in the guise of a combat training center.

...Thus, the largest build-up of multinational aviation contingents near the borders of Belarus and our Kaliningrad region over the past two years is becoming a fact....

...It would seem that the simplest and most obvious of the possible countermeasures of the Union State is a return to the long-discussed issue at all levels of the deployment of Russian fighters on the territory of Belarus. That would make it possible, in the event of the outbreak of hostilities, to meet the attacking enemy with dignity and in a timely manner several hundred kilometers to the west than is possible for us today....

...All this is so obvious even for a person who is infinitely far from military affairs that it would be strange if Moscow and Minsk did not discuss such a possibility. They have been conducting a similar dialogue for ten years now. Let me briefly recall some of his milestones that have become known to the public.

...The final compromise, it seems, was found by the Russian and Belarusian defense ministries only by the beginning of this spring. The essence of the new idea: there really will be no Russian airbase in Belarus. But Russian Su-30SM fighters and pilots are likely to appear just now. Where exactly? In the city of Lida, at the airfield of which only attack aircraft of the Belarusian Air Force are based.

...The main thing is that in Lida we will teach Belarusians to fly and fight on our Su-30SM.... Let us, Alexander Grigorievich, let us fly together! Who would argue? The main thing is that there should be someone to meet the unwanted 'guests' from NATO. And the Lida airfield is suitable for this like no other. Since it is located at the very border with the European Union. 35 kilometers from the border with Lithuania (100 kilometers from Vilnius) and 120 kilometers from the border with Poland.

...We need it, your sovereignty, when the enemy is on the doorstep!

Russian Ice-Class Ship Gets Stuck in the Ice

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Even with the best Arctic equipment, things can go wrong. According to the *Independent Barents Observer*, an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English, which is now blocked in Russia, the skipper of a Russian ice-class ship, the *Sparta III*, failed to file his route and coordinate with the icebreakers while operating in Yenisei Bay in the Arctic. The *Sparta III* has been used in hauling construction materials necessary for the buildup of northern Russian

military bases. The north-flowing Yenisi River bisects Russia and is a major water transport route carrying ore, smelted metals, coal, and oil. The Yenisei Bay opening into the Arctic Ocean is normally frozen nine months of the year and icebreakers keep the essential shipping route open. The incident is a reminder that the Arctic remains a challenging environment even for purpose-built equipment.

“For weeks, the ship was trapped in thick sea-ice in the Yenisei Bay and it was unable to break free until a nuclear-powered icebreaker came to the rescue. It soon turned out that the ship did not have the necessary permissions for sailing in the area.”

Source: Atle Staalesen, “The military cargo ship that was ice-trapped for weeks delivers goods to Franz Josef base”, *The Independent Barents Observer* (an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English, which is now blocked in Russia), 13 April 2021. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/04/military-cargo-ship-was-ice-trapped-weeks-delivers-shipment-franz-josef-base>

It has been a troublesome winter for the 9,490 ton deadweight ship and its owner Oboronlogistika [Defense Logistics]. For weeks, the ship was trapped in thick sea-ice in the Yenisei Bay and it was unable to break free until a nuclear-powered icebreaker came to the rescue. It soon turned out that the ship did not have the necessary permissions for sailing in the area.

This week, the Sparta III arrived in the far northern archipelago of Franz Josef Land. Accompanied by icebreaker Vladivostok, the cargo ship made its way through the sea-ice surrounding the Arctic islands. The Arctic sea-ice has passed its seasonal peak and there is now a 10-30 centimeter thick ice layer along the archipelago's northern and western coasts that are depicted on ice maps from the Russian Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute. A thicker belt of sea-ice is still separating the southern parts of the archipelago with the rest of the Barents Sea.

It is not known what kind of cargo that the Sparta III is carrying, but the ship has over the past years been extensively used for shipments of construction materials to remote northern military bases. The ship can also carry military hardware. The Naguskoye base is located on the island of Alexandra Land and houses a new major military complex and upgraded airfield.

Shipowner of the Sparta III is Oboronlogistika, a company that is 100 percent owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense. Following its exhausting ice-captivity in the Yenisei Bay, the steering system of the vessel was destroyed, and it had to be towed all the way to Murmansk. According to Oboronlogistika, it has now gotten an extraordinary certification for further operations in the north. The steering and propeller complex has been repaired and a modernized navigation system was installed.

The ship will now follow up on its military and commercial contract obligations and deliver goods to destinations located along the Northern Sea Route. The Sparta III has two cranes that each can lift up to 350 tons.

Russia's Arctic Population Falling

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

The civilian population in Russia's Arctic regions has been declining. A recent article in the *Independent Barents Observer*, an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English, now blocked in Russia, reports that small outlying towns in the Kola Peninsula municipalities apparently experienced losses with civilian migration to the cities. According to five-year-old figures published by Rosstat, five of the six largest Russian cities north of the Arctic Circle are: Arkhangelsk (350,000), , Murmansk (304,000), Norilsk (175,000), Vorotka (71,000), and Salekhard (42,000). For comparison, Tromsø,

Norway had 62,000 inhabitants at the time the data was collected. Of the Russian cities mentioned, Arkhangelsk and Murmansk contain significant military infrastructure. The article also suggests that COVID-19 has evidently been one factor in the drop in civilian population in Russian towns in the Arctic. Despite this, the intentions and trends for expanding mineral and energy extraction along the Northern Sea Route and military buildup suggest that the population decrease may be reversed in the coming years.

“While the total population of the Murmansk region during 2020 dropped by more than 1.1 percent from 741,511 on 1st of January 2020 to 732,864 a year later, the military towns experienced solid growth.”

Source: Atle Staalesen, “Russian North sees sharp decline in population. Only military towns grow”, *The Independent Barents Observer* (an independent Norwegian internet news service in Russian and English now blocked in Russia), 3 May 2021.
<https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2021/05/russian-north-sees-sharp-decline-population-only-military-towns-grow>

Over the past decade, the forces that protect the Kola Peninsula and the wide-stretched Russian Arctic coast have become a top priority of country's armed forces, and big investments are being made in regional towns, bases and military infrastructure. That is reflected in the demographic situation in the Kola Peninsula. New data from the Russian statistics service Rosstat shows that the military towns are the clear population winners in the region.

While the total population of the Murmansk region during 2020 dropped by more than 1.1 percent from 741,511 on 1st of January 2020 to 732,864 a year later, the military towns experienced solid growth. The demographic increase was biggest in Severomorsk, the headquarters city of the Northern Fleet. In the course of the year, the local population increased by more than 1,250 people. A total of 65,080 people now live in the closed military municipality of Severomorsk, ...

The towns of Snezhnegorsk and Pechenga had increasing populations. Other military towns like Gadzhievo and Polyarny ... had a minor drop in the number of people. The situation follows a trend evident over several years, including in 2018 and 2016.

Meanwhile, practically all other parts of the Kola Peninsula in 2020 experienced a significant demographic shrink. The city of Murmansk in 2020 dropped from about 288 thousand to less than 283 thousand.

The larger municipality of Pechenga, located along the borders with Finland and Norway ... dropped by 800 people to a total of 36,090. That includes the town of Nikel that in 2020 was abandoned by mining and metallurgy company Nor Nickel. The population of Nikel shrunk by more than 260 people to a total of 10,763.

The Russian North has experienced a drop in population over many years. And the extraordinary strong decline in 2020 can partly be explained by the coronavirus. Officially, the virus killed about 75,200 Russians across the country in 2020. But population figures from Rosstat indicate that the number of deaths might actually have been far higher. According to Russian national data, the country's population on the 1st of January 2021 totaled 146,238 million on 1 January 2021. That is a decline of more than 510,000 people from 1 January 2020.

Fresh Insights into Iran's New Military Base in Syria

By Karen Kaya
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying passages from Kurdish, Turkish, and independent sources provide insight into a new military base that Iran is building in Syria. The base, reportedly located in Syria's Aleppo province, is near the territories controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Pro-Iranian militia groups are apparently transferring arms and ammunition to the base, "located on a hill in the village of Haboubah between al-Khafsah and Meskanah." Tehran's ability to expand its influence throughout the region through its proxy forces and militias poses a threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

In early June, a report from *YeniAkit.com*, a Turkish pro-government newspaper noted that a high number of artillery batteries, military ammunition, and vehicles had been brought to the region. The weapons and equipment reportedly entered Syria via Iraq, through the El Bukemal region on the Syrian border. Later, the military vehicles carrying the equipment entered the rural part of Homs via Palmira. In mid-June, the independent human rights organization *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported a second batch of weapons brought to the area by Iranian-backed militias.

The new reinforcement included weapons, ammunition, and medium-range surface-to-surface missiles from the west Euphrates region. The report also sheds light on the recruiting efforts of Iranian-backed militias, particularly Afghani Liwaa Fatemiyoun—an Afghan Shia militia formed in 2014 to fight in Syria on the side of the Syrian government. The group, also known as Fatemiyoun Division, Fatemiyoun Brigade, or Hezbollah Afghanistan, is apparently recruiting in the villages of eastern Aleppo through Iran's spiritual proxies and bureaus that offer financial incentives.



Map of Syria showing major towns.

Source: CIA via Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syria-CIA_WFB_Map.png, Attribution: Public domain

“The Iranian Revolutionary Guard [Corps] are preparing to establish Iran's largest military base in Syria to date.”

Source: “Iran Establishing Military Base in Aleppo: Monitor,” *BasNews.com* (independent and multilingual news agency based in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), 24 May 2021. <https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/690729>

Iran is reportedly establishing a military base in Syria's Aleppo province, a monitor revealed on Monday [24 May]. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that a new Iranian military base is under construction near the territories of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Pro-Iran militia groups have also begun transferring arms and ammunition to the base located on a hill in the village of Haboubah between al-Khafsah and Meskanah near the areas under the control of the SDF and US-led Coalition forces. According to the Britain-based monitoring group, the weapons came from an area to the west of Euphrates and Homs...

Source: “İran'dan Türkiye'nin güneyine dev askeri üs! Bölgeye silah yığıyor (Iran [establishing] giant military base in [area] south of Turkey! Weapons are flowing into the region),” *YeniAkit.com* (Islamic-conservative, pro-government Turkish daily newspaper), 2 June 2021. <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/irandan-turkiyenin-guneyine-dev-askeri-us-bolgeye-silah-yigiyor-1545268.html>

Iranian Revolutionary Guards are preparing to establish Iran's largest military base in Syria to date. Iranian military forces have moved a huge number of additional forces to establish the military base in the rural part of Homs, in central Syria.... A high number of artillery batteries, military ammunition and vehicles have been brought to the region, according to local source Levant 24. The weapons and equipment entered Syria via Iraq, through the El Bukemal region on the Syrian border. Later, the military vehicles carrying the equipment entered the rural part of Homs via Palmira. It is expected that the military base will be established near the T-4 (Tayfur) military air base in the region. Iran has been increasing its presence in Syria lately.

Continued: Fresh Insights into Iran's New Military Base in Syria

Source: "New reinforcement | Iranian-backed militias bring in surface-to-surface missiles and ammunition to their base opposite Coalition and SDF-held areas in eastern Aleppo," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* (an independent and impartial UK-based human rights organization), 14 June 2021. <https://www.syriahr.com/en/218005/>

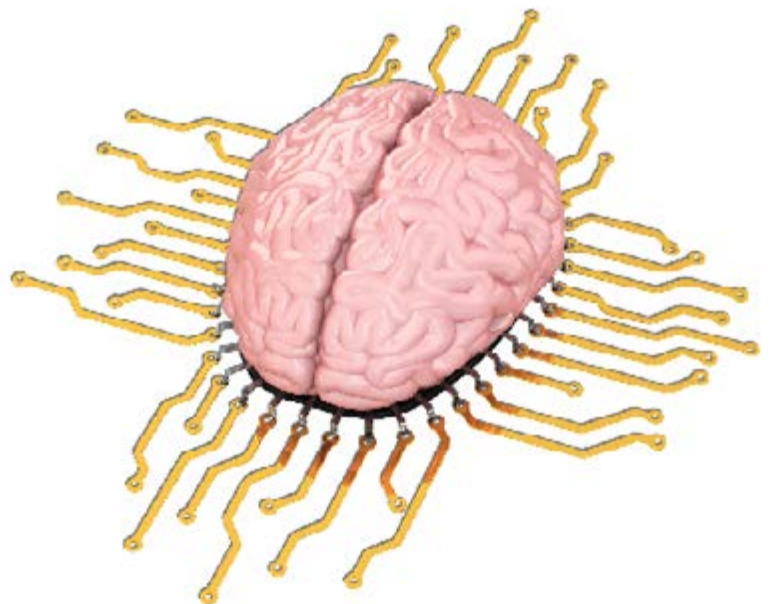
Reliable sources in the eastern countryside of Aleppo have told the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) that the Iranian-backed militias have brought in new military reinforcement in the past few hours to their recently-established base on a hill in Habboubah village between al-Khafsah and Maskanah, near the bank of the Euphrates river and opposite areas under the control of the International Coalition and Syria Democratic Forces...

According to SOHR sources, the new reinforcement included weapons, ammunition and medium-range surface-to-surface missiles from west Euphrates region. It is worth noting that this is the second batch of reinforcement to be brought to the area in 20 days, while no confirmed information has been reported so far about the goals or objectives.... In the meantime, Iranian-backed militias, led by the Afghani Liwaa Fatemiyoun continued recruitment operations east Aleppo countryside through offering financial incentives. According to SOHR sources, the number of people recruited by Iranian-backed militias since early February has risen to nearly 985. The recruitment operations are concentrated in the areas of Maskanah, al-Sfirah, Deir Hafer, and other areas in towns and villages of eastern Aleppo through Iran's spiritual proxies and bureaus that offer financial incentives.

THE MAD SCIENTIST LABORATORY BLOG

<https://madsciblog.tradoc.army.mil/>

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.



Iran's New Dam Probably Supplementing IRGC Funding

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

The Iranian press regularly covers announcements and inaugurations of new government projects, often organized around regional development. As such, the excerpted article from the *Fars News Agency*, an outlet close to the Iranian military and the hardline political spectrum, may appear at first ordinary. Mohammad Haj Rasouli, Deputy Director of the Ilam Water Resources Company and the former Managing Director of Iran's Water Management Company, announced a new dam alongside the inauguration of two gas combined-cycle power plants and new agricultural projects in the Ilam province in western Iran. However, for defense analysts, the significance of the new Kanjam Cham Dam is not in its potential to generate power but rather in the machinations behind its construction.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) rose to prominence in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. At its conclusion, the IRGC did not want to lose its privileges and simply return to the barracks. Accordingly, its engineering division entered the civilian sector and began competing for contracts, often using its military influence to win contracts or force competitors to withdrawal bids. Over subsequent decades, Iran has become, after China, one of the largest dam-building nations on earth, constructing dams not only inside its own territory but also across Central Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

While the excerpted article did not specify the company behind the Kanjam Cham Dam's construction, there are no civilian companies left in the field. This means that the \$96 million grant from the National Development Fund plus any additional money kicked in by the Ministries of Energy and/or Agriculture likely transferred directly into



The Kanjam Cham Dam Begins Operation in Mehran, Ilam Province, Iran.

Source: Mehr News, <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2019/06/24/3/3161992.jpg>

IRGC coffers.

Iranian newspapers often report government contracts for infrastructure projects awarded on a no-bid, single-source basis to companies owned or operated by the IRGC. The total amount per year received by IRGC companies regularly exceeds the Corps' official budgetary line item by several multiples. As such, dams such as Kanjam Cham represent a mechanism by which the Iranian government shifts hundreds of millions of dollars from the civilian to military budget. The IRGC can expand profits from such schemes further by taking advantage of the discrepancy between official and black market exchange rates. At the very least, such projects and the IRGC's role in them underscore the importance of not accepting at face value the official military budget announced each year for the Ministry of Defense or IRGC.

“The supreme leader consented to an investment of \$96 million from the National Development Fund.”

Source: “Kanjam Cham Ifitah Shod (Kanjam Cham Inaugurated),” *Fars News Agency*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.farsnews.ir/ilam/news/14000320000272>

Mohammad Haj Rasouli, deputy director of the Ilam Water Resources Company, said at the opening ceremony of Kanjan Cham Dam, “This morning, June 10, the Kanjan Cham Dam in Mehran was flooded during a video conference featuring Dr. Hassan Rouhani. Kanjan Cham Dam is an earthen dam with a clay core and a height of 282 feet and a length of 8.500 feet.” He added, “The supreme leader consented to an investment of 405 billion tomans [\$96 million] from the National Development Fund....” It should be noted that this dam has a capacity of 75 million cubic meters and is part of a large tropical system plan to regulate water outflow from the system.

Iran Protests Existing Space Conventions



Iranian scientists assembling a satellite.

Source: Mehr News Agency, <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2021/04/08/3/3736911.jpg>

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

Iran increasingly has an ambitious space program and has successfully launched a number of satellites into space, and many diplomats and analysts worry that Iran's satellite launch platforms could double as intercontinental ballistic missiles. The excerpted article from the *Mehr News Agency*, an outlet close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), discusses the Iranian diplomatic agenda with regard to space.

The Iranian Space Agency is questioning whether countries it deems hostile should be allowed to put geosynchronous satellites—many of which are spy satellites—above Iran. While it is unlikely that Iran alone will be able to change international legal interpretations and policies, Iranian space policy experts and lawyers could find increasing support as more countries launch their own satellites or seek allies to prevent the operation of spy satellites keeping a permanent eye on their territories.

The Iranian Space Agency also opposes NASA's Artemis program. Launched in 2017, Artemis seeks to return people to the moon. However, the Iranian Space Agency may oppose the program because rival United Arab Emirates is a participating nation, Iran's exclusion undercuts its pretensions of being among the world's elite space programs, and Iranian officials may genuinely not believe the program's aim is peaceful. Finally, Iranian complaints that its space scientists are unfairly targeted by Western sanctions suggest that such sanctions are having some impact. These complaints also serve to highlight cooperation between the IRGC, Iranian universities, and other civilian elements—including employees of IRGC front companies—working within the broader Iranian space program.

“The Iranian Space Agency... called for amending the rules and regulations relating to geosynchronous orbits.”

Source: “Iran beh Tahrim-e Nahadhaye Ghayrnazami Fa'al dar Arseh Fazaye Eteraz Kard (Iran Protests Sanctions on Civilian Entities Operating in Space),” *Mehr News Agency* (news outlet close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), 9 June 2021. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5230986>

According to the Mehr News Agency, quoting the Iranian Space Agency, on the third day of the 60th meeting of the legal subcommittee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) [in Vienna], the Iranian Space Agency, read out a statement. The statement in the form of a working paper called for amending the rules and regulations relating to geosynchronous orbits and criticized the “first come, first serve” and “use it or lose it” precedents. The statement of the Islamic Republic criticized the British proposal regarding responsible behavior in space, and stressed the need for decision-making and legal documents based on multilateralism and within the framework of international organizations.

Protesting the process leading to the creation of the [NASA] Artemis system, and emphasizing the importance of preventing an arms race in space and the need for countries to pursue only peaceful activities in space, the working paper called on international bodies to ease restrictions on activities in space.

The statement also criticized sanctions against civilian entities that are operating in the space field and called for its legitimate rights to operate peacefully in space.



Seuxis Pausias Hernández Solarte, alias Jesús Santrich, a wanted fugitive who rejected the 2016 peace deal and took up arms against the Colombian state.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jes%C3%BA%BA_Santrich, Attribution: Generación Paz

Key Colombian Guerrilla Killed During Border Clash in Venezuela

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

For several months, the Venezuelan Army has conducted a counterinsurgency campaign against Colombian guerrillas in the border state of Apure—a situation that has the potential to spill over into Colombia. During one recent clash, Colombian guerrilla Seuxis Pausias Hernández Solarte, alias Jesús Santrich, a wanted fugitive of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) who had rejected the landmark 2016 peace deal, was killed in the fighting.

The circumstances of his death remain considerably murky, notes the Spanish-language version of the well-known US media outlet *CNN Español*. The author notes that several versions of Santrich's death have emerged. While the Colombian authorities, such as Defense Minister Diego Molano, maintain that Santrich died in fighting between rival groups contesting territory, the dissidents claimed on their website that Colombian commandos crossed the Venezuelan border and assassinated him. Meanwhile *El Nacional*, a Venezuelan daily known for its criticism of the Chávez and Maduro regimes, reports on an anonymous source that intimates a Colombian special command may have received assistance from former guerrillas in locating and assassinating Santrich.

If Colombian commandos did play a role in Santrich's death, it would demonstrate not only an increase in their capabilities but also a greater willingness to conduct cross-border operations when core national interests are at stake.

Source: “¿Cómo murió Jesús Santrich? Lo que sabemos hasta el momento (How did Jesús Santrich die? What we know so far),” *CNN Español* (Spanish-language version of the well-known US media outlet), 20 May 2021. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/05/20/analisis-muerte-jesus-santrich-colombia-orix/>

The circumstances in which...Jesús Santrich died are not clear, but there are versions of the Colombian government, analysts, and the FARC's own dissidents that can give some clues...In a statement on the dissidents' website, which was online for a few hours and was later removed, they stated that the death occurred on the Venezuelan side of the Serranía del Perijá and occurred 'in an ambush executed by commandos of the Colombian Army on May 17.' Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano told CNN... that the guerrilla's death occurred in confrontations between criminal groups in Venezuelan territory.

Source: “Las FARC de Iván Márquez aseguran que exguerrilleros participaron en plan para asesinar a Jesús Santrich (Iván Márquez's FARC assures that ex-guerrillas participated in a plan to assassinate Jesús Santrich),” *El Nacional* (the Venezuelan daily known for its criticism of the Chávez and Maduro regimes), 27 May 2021. <https://www.elnacional.com/mundo/las-farc-de-ivan-marquez-aseguran-que-exguerrilleros-participaron-en-plan-para-asesinar-a-jesus-santrich/>

The FARC dissidents led by ex-guerrilla Iván Márquez insisted on their version of the events that would have surrounded the death of Jesús Santrich in Venezuelan territory...[they] pointed out that...it was an operation of a special command 'made up of five Army commandos and three ex-combatants familiar with the area,' with whom they drew up the plan and the trap to assassinate Santrich. According to their version, the ex-guerrillas would have served as informants to reach the site where the former head of the disappeared FARC was, who deserted the peace process and rearmed himself.

“The circumstances in which...Jesús Santrich died are not clear, but there are versions of the Colombian government, analysts, and the FARC's own dissidents that can give some clues.”

TERRORISM, TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

The Shadow of ISIS: Challenges to Iraqi Families from Syria's al-Hawl Refugee Camp

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

In late May, nearly one hundred Iraqi families, over 300 people, were repatriated from Syria's al-Hawl refugee camp, under UN auspices and heavily armed Iraqi government escort. Iraqi repatriations from al-Hawl have been delayed repeatedly due to concerns regarding COVID-19 and objections from residents and politicians in Nineveh Governorate, where the refugees are to be resettled. The accompanying excerpts from Iraqi and regional Arabic-language media outlets highlight key reactions to the first of what are expected to be several rounds of repatriation of Iraqis from al-Hawl, the sprawling refugee camp near the northern Syria-Iraq border in which slightly less than half of the nearly 70,000 residents are Iraqi citizens.

Opposition to the repatriation of Iraqis from al-Hawl has been strongest among non-Sunni Arab Iraqis, many of whom claim that most if not all residents of al-Hawl are either affiliated with or sympathetic toward ISIS. The accompanying excerpt from the Iraqi Kurdish media outlet *PUK Media*, for instance, cites Kurdish and Yazidi politicians from Nineveh who consider the repatriation to nearby areas as a security threat, particularly given ISIS's past targeting of Yazidis. Iraq's Shiite militias, parties, and organizations, particularly those linked with Iran, have also objected to the repatriations. The accompanying excerpt from the Iraqi news website *IQ News* reports on an official statement from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a key Shiite paramilitary group, which characterizes the repatriations as a purported U.S.-linked plot to revitalize ISIS and destabilize Iraq. In fact, as the excerpt from the Qatari daily *al-Araby al-Jadid* notes, a key obstacle to the repatriation of Iraqis has been the fact that Iranian-backed militias, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, have prevented many of the refugees from returning to their home communities.

Local politicians in Nineveh have sought to distance themselves from the repatriations. The accompanying excerpt from the influential



Some residents at al-Hol Camp arrived before Islamic State militants lost their last stronghold in Syria in March (2019).

Source: Y. Boechat, VOA, <https://im-media.voltron.voanews.com/Drupal/01live-166/styles/sourced/s3/2019-10/al-hol-18.jpg?itok=fHTX29IV> Attribution: Public Domain

Qatari news outlet *al-Jazeera* cites the mayor of Mosul and the governor of Nineveh, both of whom claim the decision was made by Iraq's central government, without consulting local authorities. Concerns over the repatriations appear to be partially based on misinformation regarding the families involved, whether regarding their connections to ISIS or their region of origin. As noted in the article from the Qatari daily *al-Araby al-Jadid*, the Iraqi government has stated that the first wave of repatriated families has no links to ISIS and are from Nineveh. Whether due to mistrust, misunderstandings, or deliberate deceit, the prevailing attitude expressed in media reactions does not adhere to this narrative and suggests the potential for violence and other instability as the repatriations progress.

“...other batches will arrive later who are from the rest of Iraq's governorates. They will settle in Nineveh due to the refusal of their local governments to receive them and open camps for them...”



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>

Continued: The Shadow of ISIS: Challenges to Iraqi Families from Syria's al-Hawl Refugee Camp

Source:

“تنديدات واسعة بإعادة عوائل داعش الى مناطق اليزيديين

(Broad condemnations of returning ISIS families to Yazidi areas),” *PUK Media* (Iraqi Kurdish media outlet), 26 May 2021.

https://www.pukmedia.com/AR_Direje.aspx?Jimare=158849

Ghiath Surji, head of the media and relations department at the Nineveh Organizations Center of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, told PUKmedia... “Jada’a camp will turn into a haven for terrorists. The first batch of 100 families arrived on Tuesday, which will lead to more tension, anger and protests. He stressed that the Nineveh Organizations Center of the National Union rejected this central government decision and supported the demands of the people of the region”... For her part, Rana al-Qaski, mayor of Khansur district in Shingal, told PUKmedia: “The Yazidis reject the return of ISIS families to their areas.” She noted that large demonstrations and protests by Yazidi citizens had accompanied the Iraqi government’s decision, made with international organizations, to return ISIS families to Nineveh regions.

Source:

“المكتب السياسي للعصائب يعلق على نقل عوائل داعش إلى مخيم في الموصل

(Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq political office comments on the transfer of ISIS families to a camp in Mosul,” *IQ News*, 26 May 2021.

<https://www.iqiraq.news/political/20377--.html>

The spokesman for the Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq movement, Mahmoud al-Rubaie... said in a statement received by IQ News, “The US administration’s support for and welcoming of the announcement of the deportation of ISIS families from the Syrian al-Hawl camp to Iraq, reveals a suspicious scheme to increase the presence and movements of ISIS in Iraq in order to carry out terrorist crimes and attack Iraqi security units.” He added that this “provides the Americans an excuse to continue their military presence and circumvent the demands of the Iraqi people and the parliament’s decision to expel all foreign forces.”

Source:

“لمعوقات رئيسية تمنع عودة النازحين العراقيين إلى مناطقهم

(Four main obstacles keeping Iraqi refugees from returning home),” *al-Araby al-Jadid* (influential Qatari-funded independent daily), 1 June 2021.

<https://tinyurl.com/5cn3hmce>

Iraqi rights activists assert that the main reason for the continued displacement crisis is the armed militias’ control of a large number of cities, towns and villages, from which they are preventing the return of people for various reasons and pretexts.... Human rights activist Ali Fadel told al-Araby al-Jadid that “militias are preventing residents from returning to at least 11 areas, for sectarian reasons. The militia of Hezbollah Brigades, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Al-Tafouf, Al-Nujaba, Sayed Al-Shuhada and others continue to control the cities.” The total population of these areas is no less than 400,000 Iraqis, most of whom reside in camps that lack the most basic human rights.

Source:

“جدل بالعراق حول إعادة عوائل مرتبطة بتنظيم الدولة من مخيم الهول السوري

(Controversy in Iraq over the return of ISIS-linked families from the Syrian al-Hawl camp),” *al-Jazeera* (influential Qatari news outlet),

3 June 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/wf9m4zk>

The Iraqi government’s decision, made a few days ago, to return nearly 100 Iraqi families from al-Hawl camp in Syria to Iraq, sparked mixed reactions and popular rejection, amid conflicting statements from the Iraqi state institutions... The mayor of Mosul, Zuhair al-Araji, stressed that the Nineveh local government had no prior knowledge of these families returning to the governorate. He added that the federal government should have returned these families to their original areas of residence. Speaking to aljazeera.net, al-Araji added that there are strict security measures in al-Jadaa camp, which includes families returning from al-Hawl camp, and noted that there is strong popular opposition in Mosul to their return. Confirming al-Araji’s statements, Nineveh Governor Najm al-Jubouri told aljazeera.net that the decision to return these people to Nineveh Governorate was made by the central government in Baghdad, and the Nineveh government had nothing to do with it.

Source:

“عشرات العائلات العراقية تصل الى الموصل قادمة من مخيم الهول السوري

(Tens of Iraqi families arrive to Mosul from the Syrian al-Hawl Camp),” *al-Araby al-Jadid* (influential Qatari-funded independent daily), 26 May

2021. <https://tinyurl.com/rr66xp4b>

A senior officer in the Iraqi Joint Operations Command said that... “the families that were transferred are not linked to ISIS, and they are far from it. Their files have been audited and reviewed by security, and they do not constitute a danger”... Nineveh Governorate representative Sherwan Al-Dobardani confirmed that “this is the first batch, and that all the families that arrived are exclusively from Nineveh Governorate.” In a press statement, he stressed that “other batches will arrive later who are from the rest of Iraq’s governorates. They will settle in Nineveh due to the refusal of their local governments to receive them and open camps for them.”

TERRORISM, TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

Syria and Yemen: Summer Camps and Youth Groups in Pro-Iranian Groups' Recruitment, Training and Indoctrination

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

The Houthi Movement in Yemen and Iranian-linked organizations in Syria are increasingly using summer camps and youth programs for the recruitment, training, and indoctrination of future cadres. Recent Arabic-language media reports provide greater detail into how the Houthis are seeking to expand their summer programs this year, as well as documenting the growing reach of a youth organization known as the “al-Mahdi Scouts” in Syria.

The Houthi Movement emerged from an early 1990s network of summer camps and vocational programs, whose students were known as the “Believing Youth.” The accompanying excerpt from the influential Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat* looks at how Houthi youth activities are picking up as summer begins. The general outline of what is taught includes endless repetition of the Houthi slogan “Allahu Akbar/Death to America/Death to Israel/Curse on the Jews/Victory to Islam,” Quranic and other religious lessons, and intensive study of the thought and lectures of Hussein al-Houthi, the elder half-brother of the movement’s current leader who was killed by Yemeni forces in 2004. The article notes that 24,000 teachers had been trained to teach 650,000 students in around 6,000 centers this summer, throughout Houthi-controlled territory.

In Syria, renewed attention is being given to the recruitment activities of the “al-Mahdi Scouts,” a youth group originally tied to Lebanese Hezbollah in the mid-1980s and active across Syria since at least 2012. The accompanying article from the Beirut-based independent news website *Daraj* examines the activities of the Mahdi Scouts in the Syrian province of Deir Ezzor. Meanwhile, the article from the Aleppo-focused independent news website *North Press Agency* examines Mahdi Scout activities in the Shiite towns of Nubl and Zahra’,



UNICEF says roughly half a million Yemeni children are in danger of starving to death, in a country where child malnutrition was widespread, even in peacetime (2016).

Source: VOA, https://im-media.voltron.voanews.com/Drupal/01live-166/styles/sourced_737px_wide/s3/2019-04/1A807FA5-C891-4FE1-8C02-439C541C49B5.jpg?itok=8943JLLK, Attribution: Public Domain

located on the outskirts of Aleppo.

Operating in war zones with decimated economies, Houthi and Mahdi Scout camps and activities may be attractive even for Yemeni and Syrian parents who reject the “Axis of Resistance” ideology taught there; after all, children enrolled in these programs are afforded a degree of protection, sometimes provided a salary and generally kept out of harm’s way. As such, these activities are a fundamental source of strength for both the Houthis in Yemen and pro-Iranian groups in Syria, helping expand their recruitment pool and providing them with a young cadre of ideologically committed fighters.

“...The scouting in Nubul and Zahra’ is not different from that in the churches of Aleppo, that is, it is sponsored by clerics with the aim of preparing a committed moral generation...”



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>

Continued: Syria and Yemen: Summer Camps and Youth Groups in Pro-Iranian Groups' Recruitment, Training and Indoctrination

Source:

(Six thousand Houthi centers to brainwash Yemeni children)," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (influential Saudi daily), 26 May 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/7sfm2n>

“آلاف مركز حوثي لغسل أدمغة أطفال اليمن”
6

Well-informed sources in Sana'a told Asharq Al-Awsat that the Houthis allocated more than 600 million riyals (about one million dollars) for the printing of more than 40,000 brochures containing speeches and lectures by the founder of the militia, Hussein al-Houthi, as well as its leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. They are to be distributed and used to teach students enrolled in these centers.... According to Houthi media, the group aims to indoctrinate more than 650,000 students (most of whom are young) in the culture of death, hatred, and sectarianism in 6,000 summer centers. They will be taught by 24,000 teachers, whom the group subjected to intensive courses in the capital Sana'a and its countryside...

Source:

(Iranian culture dominates club scouts in the cities of Nubl and Zahra)," *North Press Agency* (Opposition news agency from northern Syria), 2 June 2021. <https://npasyria.com/69238/> (English version available at: <https://npasyria.com/en/60297/>)

“الثقافة الإيرانية تغطي على العمل الكشفى لأطفال في مدينتي نبل والزهراء”

Ali al-Taqqi does not mind sending his nine-year-old child to join the cultural and sporting activities that scout groups organize in the town of Nubul, in the northern countryside of Aleppo. However, what al-Taqqi has reservations about, is the “religious ideology and jihadist ideas on the Iranian style” that the supervisors of the scouting work are instructing in the Shiite towns of Nubul and Zahra’ in the northern countryside of Aleppo... In early 2013, a children’s educational organization was formed in Nubul and Zahra’ bearing the title of “Scouts of Imam Mahdi,” sponsored by clerics close to Iran... Muhammad Abdulsattar, supervisor of one of the scouting groups in Zahra’ denied “the exaggeration that the parents are talking about, of the role of the Mahdi Scouts as brainwashing the children and preparing them to later engage in military activities. These accusations are exaggerated. The scouting in Nubul and Zahra’ is not different from that in the churches of Aleppo, that is, it is sponsored by clerics with the aim of preparing a committed moral generation.”

Source:

(Mahdi Scouts: Facts regarding Iranian militia child recruitment in Syria and Lebanon)," *Daraj* (independent Lebanese news website), 6 May 2021. <https://daraj.com/71559/> (English version available at: <https://daraj.com/en/71879/>)

“كشافة المهدي: وقائع تجنيد ميليشيات إيرانية الأطفال في سوريا ولبنان”

In cooperation with the Iranian Cultural Center and the Revolutionary Youth Union, which is the Syrian Baath Party’s youth branch, the Mahdi Scouts began targeting public schools in Deir Ezzor. The scouts would send representatives to promote their activities. “When the schools returned to normal at the beginning of 2019, the Iranian Cultural Center started its activities in cooperation with the Baath Vanguard Organization,” said Ali, a 34-year-old teacher in a public school in Al-Mayadin, a town some 45 kilometer east of Deir Ezzor. “They provided money, stationery and food, and organized school trips and festivals.” In April 2019, the first Iranian personalities appeared as part of the Mahdi Scouts school visits, which paved the way for affiliations with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard... In June and July of 2019, the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts organized closed camps in the Al-Mayadin desert, in which a first group of some 50 boys were trained in the use of weapons. After being accepted as in the ranks of the Revolutionary Guard as fighters, each former scout was given a special card and a monthly salary of 50,000 Syrian pounds. The camps were repeated in Ain Ali, the Al-Mayadin farms and the Husseinia in Al-Mayadin. According to Ali, a teacher, dozens of children between the ages of 12 and 14 were enrolled in physical training, while those over the age of 15 were trained in the use of weapons to join the ranks of Iranian-backed militias... The average stay in such a camp was 20 days, during which the youngsters were given religious lessons, in addition to theoretical and practical military training, including firing weapons in the desert surrounding Abu Kamal, under the supervision of the Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade. After completing the camp, the graduates were able join a brigade under a six-month renewable contract.

Chadian Rebel Leader Explains Movement's Mission



Idriss Déby Itno votes during the 2016 Presidential Election Bagassi Koura (VOA).

Source: Venâncio Miguel, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mocimboa_da_Praia,_VOA_Portugu%C3%AAs.jpg, CC x 2.0

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 9 May, an interview of the leader of the Front for Change and Unity in Chad (FACT) rebels was published in German-language in *taz.de*, which is a left-leaning German publication. According to the article, FACT's leader, Mohamed Mahdi Ali, denies his fighters are mercenaries serving the interests of any foreign power, including Libyan forces under General Khalifa Haftar, Russia's Wagner Group, or any Islamists. Rather, Mahdi Ali claims such allegations reflect attempts to discredit his 3,000 fighters, who invaded Chad in April from their bases in Libya. According to Mahdi Ali, FACT sought dialogue with the Chadian government about an alternative to the government that had been led by Idriss Déby for three decades.

Déby himself was killed in a FACT rebel attack, but his son has since taken over Chad's new transitional military council.

Mahdi Ali stated that his fighters entered Chadian territory from their Libyan bases after Chad held a presidential election in April in which Déby won another term in office, a result which Mahdi Ali alleged was rigged. Because there was no chance for dialogue on power-sharing with Déby, Mahdi Ali asserted he had no choice but to fight. Mahdi Ali claimed his fighters avoided small military outposts on the Libya-Chad border and instead drove in a convoy directly towards Chad's capital, N'djamena. However, he attributed the convoy's disruption to French aerial reconnaissance support to Chad's army. Mahdi Ali stated his fighters were secular and only collaborated with the Libyan autocrat, Khalifa Haftar, to combat Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-loyal fighters in Libya during ISIS's heyday in Libya in 2015.

Mahdi Ali also attributes his appreciation for secularism to his time living in France and states that he took exile in Libya in 2015 after realizing a democratic path forward was not possible in Chad. However, he is dismayed by France's perceived support of the Chadian government, including providing information on FACT rebel movements to Chadian forces. Although he respects some members of the transitional military council in N'djamena, he does not expect it to be willing to discuss democratization. At the same time, he also notes that the Chadian army won a key battle against FACT rebels in Mao, which he alleges was the result of French support to the Chadian army. Thus, the FACT rebels are on the defensive, but Mahdi Ali still believes in the long run his ideas will gain traction among Chadians.

“As a secular movement that believes in freedom of expression, we [FACT] are far different from the Islamists.”

Source: “Wir sind keine Söldner (We are not mercenaries),” *taz.de* (left-leaning German publication), 9 May 2021. <https://taz.de/Rebellenfuehrer-ueber-Ziele-fuer-Tschad/!5766410/>

FACT (Front for Change and Unity in Chad) was founded in 2016 in southern Libya. It wants to offer an alternative to the autocratic rule in Chad that has lasted for 30 years. We call for an inclusive dialogue with all parties to solve Chad's problems. After the election fraud in recent years, we decided to return to Chad. We deliberately avoided the small army posts on the Libyan-Chadian border; fighting with the army only broke out due to French aerial reconnaissance.

For five years we have been saying that the conflict can only be resolved through political and peaceful means. But the regime has systematically rejected our proposals and negotiations with opposition groups. They accused us of being mercenaries, and then we were allegedly allied with Islamists, and then with the Libyan general Khalifa Haftar and now allegedly with the Russian Wagner group. Our mission in Libya was to fight ISIS. It was not for money because we are not mercenaries.

As a secular movement that believes in freedom of expression, we [FACT] are far different from Islamists. Fortunately, I am a Muslim. But also I am a supporter of the republican idea and secularism. I came to know the culture of political discourse in Europe. With the support of French aircraft, Mahamat Déby won the battle for Mao. But not the war.

Source: “Le président Idriss Déby est mort de blessures reçues au front (President Idriss Déby dies of injuries received at the front),” *france24.com*, 20 April 2021. <https://www.france24.com/fr/info-en-continu/20210420-tchad-le-pr%C3%A9sident-idriss-d%C3%A9by-est-mort-de-blessures-re%C3%A7ues-au-front-arm%C3%A9e-%C3%A0-la-t%C3%A9l%C3%A9vision-d-%C3%A9tat>

The Chadian president is dead. Idriss Déby Itno, who was in power for thirty years, died on Tuesday, April 20, from injuries received while commanding his army in fighting against rebels in the north, the spokesperson on television announced.

A military council has been set up headed by his son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, said army spokesman General Azem Bermandoa Agouna in a statement read on the air.

Death of Boko Haram Leader Reflects Growing Strength of Islamic State West Africa Province

By Robert Feldman
OE Watch Commentary

If unlike previous reports, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau is truly dead, his death could reflect a stronger Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). According to the excerpted article from *The Daily Trust*, a Nigerian newspaper, approximately 300 ISWAP fighters who trained in Libya, Somalia, and Syria returned to Nigeria to take part in the final battle against Shekau's forces. A brief review of Shekau's history is important to place his death in context. As the leader of Boko Haram, he came under pressure to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and did so in 2015. When ISIL appointed a leader of its Africa contingent that Shekau did not like, existing tensions within the group amplified, and in 2016 it split in two, with Shekau leading Boko Haram once again. The other, larger faction, known as ISWAP was headed by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Often,

mistakenly, both groups even after the split are called Boko Haram, though they are distinct and fight each other.

Shekau's death, purportedly at his own hands as he was about to be captured by ISWAP, is being celebrated by the government and the innumerable families of his victims. However, the relief that the terrorist who was responsible for the death of so many is now dead is being tempered by the news that ISWAP, in gaining the upper hand in its fight against Boko Haram, is now one step closer to forming a caliphate in the Lake Chad Basin. This shift from two terrorist groups at war with each other to one very strong entity with international ties could be an obstacle to government forces trying to regain control of the territory.

“If they (ISWAP) are allowed to have that type of freedom they have had, to the extent of going to Sambisa and killed Shekau, it means they want to start actualising that objective of establishing an enclave and that will foretell the significant consequences for Nigerian people.”

Source: Misbahu Bashir, Olatunji Omirin, and Idowu Isamotu, “How 300 Libya-Trained ISWAP Fighters ‘Conquered’ Shekau,” *The Daily Trust* (Nigerian newspaper) 21 May 2021. <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/how-300-libya-trained-iswap-fighters-conquered-shekau>

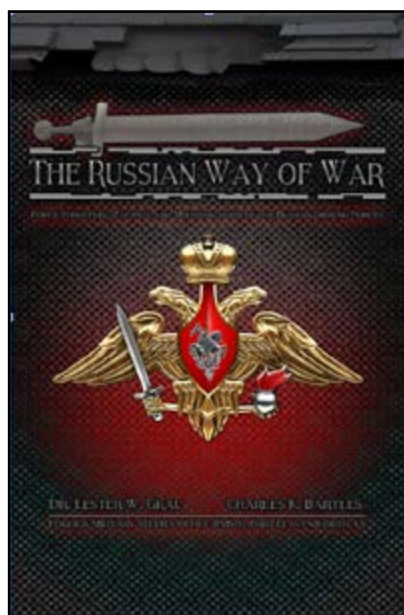
“If they are allowed to have that type of freedom they have had, to the extent of going to Sambisa and killed Shekau, it means they want to start actualising that objective of establishing an enclave and that will foretell the significant consequences for Nigerian people.”

A security expert, Kabiru Adamu, in an interview with Daily Trust, said irrespective of whether Shekau was killed or not, what is obvious is that the faction was growing in strength in terms of their operations and activities.

“What it means for the military is that they are allowing ISWAP to increase their strength in terms of their operations and their activities and therefore sending a wrong message to the groups that are active in terrorism.

“If it turns out that he has been killed truly, we should expect a couple of things. Firstly, his top commanders that are still alive will have a choice of either joining the group that killed him – ISWAP or to break out and form their own group. If that happens, it is likely we see the proliferation of smaller groups as against the former single one.

“Secondly, irrespective of whether he was killed or not, what is obvious as a group is growing in strength, and we all know that ISWAP is affiliated to the global jihadist terror group called Islamic State (IS) and we have seen what IS had done in Syria and Iraq.”



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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Mexico's Election and the Significant Level of Violence against Candidates

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Mexico's latest elections were also its largest in the country's history, as measured by the number of seats at stake. However, the highly anticipated midterm elections were marred by violence against political candidates. More than 80 candidates have been assassinated during Mexico's midterm election cycle beginning last September, with many of those taking place in the closing phase of the campaign, according to the Spanish-language version of the well-known US media outlet *CNN Español*.

The outlet reports that many of these deaths have a link to turf wars between Mexican cartels and have occurred against candidates that express hardline security policies. Beyond assassinations, *El Tiempo*, a Colombian daily described as politically centrist, reports that Mexican candidates have reported hundreds of threats, intimidation, and kidnappings. However, a mere 65 of the candidates have been assigned state protection while campaigning. The assassination of dozens of political candidates in Mexico demonstrates the growing clout of the country's criminal organizations and an increased assertiveness. Further, selective assassination of candidates based



A protest in Mexico against violence, kidnappings, and assassinations.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Veladoras_por_la_libertad_de_prensa_-_3.JPG

Attribution: ProtoplasmaKid

on their stated security policies could herald a greater political role for Mexico's cartels, which previously focused mostly on profit-maximizing behavior. Such violence could presage major political instability given Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's failure to make good on his security promises.

“In many cases smaller criminal groups or larger drug cartels are targeting candidates they do not like to boost the promotion of their preferred candidate for office. And for these groups and cartels, territorial control is key...These groups are funding or promoting candidates, or threatening, intimidating, and killing those they want out of the game.”

Source: “Al menos 88 políticos han sido asesinados en México desde septiembre rumbo a las elecciones del 6 de junio (At least 88 politicians have been assassinated in Mexico since September on the way to the June 6 elections),” *CNN Español* (Spanish-language version of the well-known US media outlet), 31 May 2021. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2021/05/31/mexico-88-politicos-asesinados-septiembre-elecciones-trax/>

The motives for the killings of so many candidates across the country are unclear, but the alleged factors are organized crime and the fight for territorial control...in many cases smaller criminal groups or larger drug cartels are targeting candidates they do not like to boost the promotion of their preferred candidate for office. And for these groups and cartels, territorial control is key...These groups are funding or promoting candidates, or threatening, intimidating, and killing those they want out of the game.

Source: “Decenas de políticos y servidores públicos han sido asesinados en los últimos seis meses en el país (Dozens of politicians and public servants have been assassinated in the last six months in the country),” *El Tiempo* (Colombian daily described as politically centrist), 25 May 2021. <https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/mexico/elecciones-en-mexico-candidatos-politicos-han-sido-asesinados-590688> <https://www.elnacional.com/mundo/las-farc-de-ivan-marquez-aseguran-que-exguerrilleros-participaron-en-plan-para-asesinar-a-jesus-santrich/>

Threats have become the main instrument of violence. Social networks and SMS messages or phone calls from prepaid lines have been the preferred channels of the attackers...The latest report from the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection shows that as of April 30, 2020, at least 234 candidates had reported threats. However, only 65 received protection.

Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega Eliminates Political Opposition Before Reelection Campaign



Daniel Ortega with regional presidents.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tvbrasil/4586570875/> Attribution: TV Brasil—EBC

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

As a precursor to Nicaragua's presidential campaign, President Daniel Ortega has been arresting opposition candidates and prominent Nicaraguans at a fast clip. Within a span of just over two weeks, Ortega oversaw the arrest of four leading opposition candidates, members of the business elite, ex-government officials, and erstwhile allies. The

swift nature of the arrests and the wide-ranging nature of the targets has surprised many analysts, notes *Infobae*, an Argentine news outlet described as politically center left with excellent regional reporting. The outlet reports that the Ortega regime has justified most of the arrests based on recent legislation, passed at the end of 2020, which prohibits the encouragement of "foreign interference" in Nicaragua's elections.

Faced with intense international pressure, the Ortega government has asserted Nicaragua's absolute sovereignty and demanded non-interference, reports Spanish language wire service *EFE*. Ortega's crackdown makes him more likely to seek the assistance of Great-Power competitors for his survival, such as Russia, which already plays an outsized role in the country.

“Nicaragua... defended the arrests of opposition leaders, including four presidential candidates and two former guerrillas, and demanded ‘non-interference by any foreign government’ in its internal affairs.”

Source: “Nicaragua: el régimen de Daniel Ortega detuvo al ex vicecanciller Víctor Hugo Tinoco y ya son 13 los opositores arrestados en dos semanas (Nicaragua: Daniel Ortega's regime detained former Vice Foreign Minister Víctor Hugo Tinoco and there are already 13 opponents arrested in two weeks),” *Infobae* (Argentine news outlet described as politically center left with excellent regional reporting), 14 June 2021. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2021/06/14/nicaragua-el-regimen-de-daniel-ortega-detuvo-al-ex-vicecanciller-victor-hugo-tinoco-y-ya-son-13-los-opositores-arrestados-en-dos-semanas/>

There are 13 opposition leaders detained since June 2, among which there are four candidates for the presidency in the November 7 elections. The weekend saw the largest wave of arrests, when the police detained six leaders of the opposition movement Unamos...The opposition accuses the regime of trying to eliminate possible rivals to Ortega, who at almost 76 years old aspires to a third reelection for a fourth consecutive term starting in January 2022.

Source: “Nicaragua defiende los arrestos de líderes opositores y exige la ‘no injerencia’ (Nicaragua defends the arrests of opposition leaders and demands ‘non-interference’),” *EFE* (Spain based Spanish language wire service that is one of the largest in the world), 14 June 2021. <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/politica/nicaragua-defiende-los-arrestos-de-lideres-opositores-y-exige-la-no-injerencia/20000035-4562252> <https://www.elnacional.com/mundo/las-farc-de-ivan-marquez-aseguran-que-exguerrilleros-participaron-en-plan-para-asesinar-a-jesus-santrich/>

Nicaragua...defended the arrests of opposition leaders, including four presidential candidates and two former guerrillas, and demanded ‘non-interference by any foreign government’ in its internal affairs. The government headed by Sandinista Daniel Ortega warned that it will see ‘as a frontal attack’ on its sovereignty any attempt ‘to undermine an investigation’ against opposition leaders detained in recent days.

Why Peacekeeping Missions in Africa Often Fail to Stop Conflicts

By Robert Feldman
OE Watch Commentary

Peacekeeping missions in Africa, often under the UN banner, frequently fail to stop conflicts. According to the accompanying excerpted article from the German based international media group *Deutsche Welle*, this occurs despite the UN supported forces having superior weaponry compared to the armed groups they are confronting. To be sure, not all peacekeeping missions are total failures, with some having varying degrees of success. However, as the German analysts observe, there are enough that have clearly not made sufficient progress in achieving their main objectives as to raise questions as to what factors are holding them back.

The article attempts to identify these limiting factors, noting that peacekeepers are often placed in difficult political and cultural situations. For example, the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) which, while struggling to keep good relations with the DRC government, aligned itself with the country's military. This has created bad blood between the civilian population and UN peacekeepers as the Congolese military has been responsible for numerous atrocities. Additionally, peacekeepers have been blamed by civilians for failing to stop the armed groups terrorizing the country. Further hampering the peacekeeping mission are the close ties some political elites have to rebel groups based on their shared interest in exploiting the DRC's valuable mineral resources.

There are other barriers to the success of peacekeeping missions, including foreign business ties in countries where the peacekeepers are serving; the presence of Russian paramilitaries, notably the Wagner group, serving its clients' interests; and a past history of sexual exploitation and abuse by some peacekeepers that can make the local populace wary of their presence. Further complicating the matter is that these operations were often intended to be



A South African peacekeeper during training.

Source: MONUSCO Photos/Flickr/Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FIB-training-01.jpg>
Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0

peacekeeping missions where the various factions were already at peace, not peacemaking missions in the midst of armed conflicts. As the article notes, despite over two decades of African peacekeeping missions, not enough lessons have been learned and/or implemented to make them more effective. As a result, many will struggle to keep, or create, the peace and may even further destabilize the countries in which they operate.

“In Africa, foreign military interventions are in the spotlight for failing to end conflicts at the continent's hotspots. Both internal and external political interests are contributing factors.”

Source: “Why UN peacekeeping missions have failed to pacify Africa's hotspots,” *Deutsche Welle* (German based international media organization), 3 June 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/why-un-peacekeeping-missions-have-failed-to-pacify-africas-hotspots/a-57767805>

In Africa, foreign military interventions are in the spotlight for failing to end conflicts at the continent's hotspots. Both internal and external political interests are contributing factors.

But to date, South and North Kivu regions remain lawless with dozens of marauding militias who continue to kill, rape young women and girls, maim, and terrorize innocent civilians.

Whenever there's a conflict brewing in Congo, MONUSCO is always the last to know about it – and its interventions have tended to be very slow and often relatively ineffective. With an arsenal of modern weapons, the UN mission has also failed to engage the most notorious militia group in North Kivu province, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

“MONUSCO may have been able to minimize some of the violence against everyday civilians but has been slow to react when there have been massacres and attacks to particular communities like the Banyamulenge [a name that describes a Tutsi community in the southern part of Kivu].”

That view is echoed by David Zounmenou, a senior researcher at the Institute of Security Studies in Pretoria, South Africa. “The UN mission is there to work with the Congolese people and the authorities to bring about security in the country,” he told DW. “However, the challenge is that most of the political elite in the DRC were produced by the rebel groups, and to an extent, they still maintain close relations with their former groups to use them for political pressure,” Zounmenou added.

Turkey's Military Partnerships with Poland and Ukraine Strain Relations with Russia



Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Source: www.kremlin.ru, via Wikimedia, [https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_and_Recep_Tayyip_Erdogan_\(2020-03-05\)_03.jpg](https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_and_Recep_Tayyip_Erdogan_(2020-03-05)_03.jpg), the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license

By Ihsan Gündüz
OE Watch Commentary

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hosted Polish President Andrzej Duda in May 2021. According to the first accompanying article from *al-Monitor*, a Washington, DC-based independent regional news network with analysts from the Middle East, besides signing an agreement with Poland to sell 24 Bayraktar TB2 armed drones, the meeting agenda included other important matters such as Russia's annexation of Crimea, Black Sea security, and conflict in eastern Ukraine. The author claims that the Turkish President has two objectives in Turkey's rapprochement with Poland. The first is to strengthen its strained position within NATO.

The Turkish President hopes that Turkish support for Ukraine and military partnership with Poland would be perceived as Turkey's deterrent efforts against Russia. By creating this perception, Turkey hopes to appeal to the United States that it remains a valuable member of NATO against Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. The author notes that the Polish President envisions Turkey as a critical ally against Russia in the Black Sea region. The author assumes that while Turkey's market share increase in selling drones may not be as welcomed as the Turkish-Polish military partnership, Washington will likely see this partnership as a positive development against

Russia. Erdoğan's second objective is to have an EU member advocate within the bloc as the deficit in Turkey's relations with European countries continues to grow. As Turkey's confrontational approach toward some EU countries escalates and sanctions loom over Turkey due to the purchase of the S-400 air defense system, Poland will likely be forced to take a position in the intra-EU debate. The author suggests that adding a military dimension to Turkish-Polish relations will strain Turkish-Russian relations further.

The second article from *EDAM*, an Istanbul-based independent think-tank, discusses the building tension between Turkey and Russia. The military partnership with Poland coupled with a Turkish-made drone sale to Ukraine and Turkish officials' statements against the Russian occupation of Crimea will continue to increase tension between both countries. In late May, both the Russian Foreign Minister and his spokesperson separately accused Turkey of interfering in Russia's domestic affairs and warned against it. Russian officials pointed out that they could reciprocate if Turkey's actions continue. The article states Russia could take harsher measures if Turkey crosses Russia's redline even though it's unclear what that redline might be.

“From Turkey's perspective, meanwhile, adding a military dimension to its ties with Poland could further strain its relationship with Russia, which is already irked by Ankara's military cooperation with Ukraine.”

Continued: Turkey's Military Partnerships with Poland and Ukraine Strain Relations with Russia

Source: Fehim Taştekin, “With ties with West strained, Turkey gets lifeline from Poland,” *al-Monitor* (news site with analysts from the Middle East), 28 May 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/hard-pressed-ties-west-turkey-gets-lifeline-poland>

...Russia's annexation of the Black Sea peninsula from Ukraine was high on the agenda of Duda's talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on May 24, along with other topics concerning Russia such as security in the Black Sea and the conflict between Kiev and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Duda emphasized that Crimea was under occupation, echoing Erdogan's repeated rejections of Russia's annexation.

Atop their common stance against Russia on this issue, the two sides took a crucial step on bilateral military collaboration beyond their NATO partnership — a contract for Poland's purchase of 24 Bayraktar TB2 armed drones... The first delivery is scheduled for 2022. The package includes also smart micro munition manufactured by Turkish company Roketsan, along with ground control stations and ground data terminals for the drones.

As Erdogan stressed, the deal makes Poland the first NATO and European Union member to purchase Turkish drones...

...Erdogan's calculus is not hard to discern. Drawing on his rapport with Duda, he seems to be aiming at two goals —strengthening his standing in NATO and having a sort of “Trojan horse” in the EU. For Erdogan, military partnership with Poland is a proof that Turkey contributes to NATO efforts to deter Russia. And with the added premium of Turkey's close relationship with Ukraine, he hopes to appeal to US President Joe Biden as a valuable NATO partner against Russia...

...At the joint press conference in Ankara, Erdogan welcomed Duda's proposal to establish a trilateral dialogue that would include their Romanian counterpart. “Turkey is our strongest ally in this part of the world,” Duda said, suggesting that he envisions Turkey as a bulwark against Russian dominance in the Black Sea region.

...

From Turkey's perspective, meanwhile, adding a military dimension to its ties with Poland could further strain its relationship with Russia, which is already irked by Ankara's military cooperation with Ukraine. In a fresh warning that coincided with Duda's visit to Turkey, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov urged Ankara to “carefully analyze the situation and stop fueling Kyiv's militaristic sentiment.” Encouraging “aggressive” Ukrainian actions on Crimea amounts to an encroachment on Russia's territorial integrity, he added.

That said, many other aspects in Ankara's attitudes keep doubts alive that Erdogan's efforts to pivot back to the Western fold are tactical moves to break free from diplomatic besiegement and that he has not given up on playing a double game between the United States and Russia.

Source: Oğul Tuna, “Rusya'dan Türkiye'ye Yönelik Son Sert Açıklamalar ve Sebepleri (Recent Strong Statements from Russia to Turkey and their Reasons),” *EDAM* (independent think-tank based in Istanbul, Turkey), 27 May 2021. <https://edam.org.tr/rusyadan-turkiyeye-yonelik-son-sert-aciklamalar/>

Relations between Russia and Turkey have been affected by the severe accusations and warnings coming from Moscow since last week... the Crimean issue and Turkey's support for the Crimean Platform have become the agenda that determined relations since Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine met with President Erdoğan in Istanbul on April 10. The statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Tanju Bilgiç, in response to a question regarding the anniversary of the Crimean Tatar Exile on May 18th, caused an unprecedented reaction in the Kremlin. Severe warnings of high-level figures, from Russian Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova to President Vladimir Putin, were followed by the threat of interfering in Cyprus issue and “the internal affairs of Turkey.

...

What distinguishes today's reactions from past ones, is that the Kremlin bureaucrats and diplomats reacted harshly at an unprecedented scale, and warned Ankara that they would accuse Turkey of interfering in Russian internal affairs, and would react on the basis of reciprocity. ...the subsequent statements by Mrs. Zakharova and Mr. Lavrov, on May 21 and May 24, respectively, indicate that the warnings from the Russian President cannot be excluded from the context.

...relations between Russia and Turkey have been through one of the most dangerous turning points of the recent period. It is possible that Moscow may take actions, as pointed out by Russian diplomats, if Turkey's actual stance continues. Although the warning of intervention in Turkey's internal affairs, or... the Cyprus issues is unusual, it is estimated that Moscow could take more steps against Turkish national interests if their red lines are crossed.

Greece and Saudi Arabia Tighten Military Cooperation



Royal Saudi Air Forces F-15C.

Source: Saudi88hawk via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Royal_Saudi_Air_Forces_F-15C.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

By Karen Kaya
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying passages from Greek and Saudi Arabian sources point to increasing military cooperation between the two countries, including Greece lending a US-made Patriot air defense missile system to Saudi Arabia. The Patriot anti-missile battery, and about 40 Greek military officers, as per the Status of Forces agreement that allows the Greek personnel to be stationed in Saudi Arabia for the duration of the battery’s deployment, aims to boost the Kingdom’s

air defenses against missile attacks on critical infrastructure, either from Iran or Iranian-backed Houthi militias in Yemen. The deployment reflects heightened Saudi concerns about the Iranian threat to critical infrastructure in the Kingdom, particularly in light of the recent tension between Iran and the US. This comes about a year after the US removed some military capabilities from Saudi Arabia, including Patriot missiles, and when Houthi attacks on Saudi oil facilities and military sites are becoming more frequent.

The agreement to lend the Patriots was finalized in April 2021, one month after the two countries conducted joint military exercises, named the “Eye of the Falcon 1.” As the final passage notes, the Royal Saudi Air Forces’ F-15C fighter jets traveled to the Greek island of Crete for the exercises, aimed to enhance the combat readiness of the Saudi air forces as well as facilitate the planning and implementation of air operations in the Mediterranean. The tightening Greek-Saudi Arabian military relationship is part of a broader trend of new multistate alignments emerging in the Eastern Mediterranean, which entails a set of economic and security alliances tying the Gulf States to Europe and Africa. (See: “A Perspective on Egypt-Greece Relations,” *OE Watch*, May 2021).

“The Saudi and Greek air forces will carry out joint sorties and exercises in the skies over the Mediterranean Sea.”

Source: “Greece Edging Closer to Saudi Arabia Militarily as Turkish Buffer,” *The National Herald* (English-language Greek daily newspaper), 5 June 2021. https://www.thenationalherald.com/greece_politics/arthro/greece_edging_closer_to_saudi_arabia_militarily_as_turkish_buffer-2376390/

... Greece is tightening military ties with Saudi Arabia, including lending a US-made Patriot air defense missile system as protection against Houthi attacks from Yemen.

“We signed an agreement to move a Patriot battery here in Saudi Arabia,” Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said on April 20. “This is a big step forward for our country regarding the cooperation with the Gulf countries and also a contribution to the wider security of the energy sources for the West,” the site said.

...

That came a month after Greece and Saudi Arabia held joint drills to develop the skills of air and technical crews, with Saudi F-15s and Greece’s F-16, Mirage 2000 and F-4 Phantom fighter jets taking part.

Source: “Greek FM to discuss military ties with Saudi Arabia,” *Arab News* (an English-language daily newspaper published in Saudi Arabia), 20 February 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1812761/saudi-arabia>

Greece is eyeing the possibility of stationing a Patriot anti-missile battery on Saudi soil to help the Kingdom boost its air defenses against missile attacks on its critical infrastructure, mainly from Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen. ...Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said the two countries may be close to signing a Status of Forces Agreement that will allow Greek military personnel to be stationed in Saudi Arabia for as long as the Patriot battery remains in the Kingdom.

...

The plan is for the Patriot to be accompanied by around 40 Greek officers. Riyadh will cover the cost of transport and of upgrading the battery.

Continued: Greece and Saudi Arabia Tighten Military Cooperation

Source: “Royal Saudi Air Forces personnel arrive in Greece for military exercise,” *Arab News* (an English-language daily newspaper published in Saudi Arabia), 13 March 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1824901/saudi-arabia>

Royal Saudi Air Forces fighter jets arrived in Greece on Saturday ahead of their participation in military exercise Eye of the Falcon 1, which will take place in March.

The F-15C fighter jets touched down with their air, technical and support crews in Crete.

The Saudi and Greek air forces will carry out joint sorties and exercises in the skies over the Mediterranean Sea.

...

The exercise aims to refine and develop the skills of the air and technical crews and raise the combat readiness of Saudi air forces.

It also aims to facilitate the exchange of military experiences in planning and implementing air operations.

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The Impact of Territorial Changes in Nagorno Karabakh

By Matt Stein
OE Watch Commentary

The 2020 Nagorno Karabakh cease-fire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended several weeks of the worst fighting since the 1988-1994 war, but analysts from the region believed it left various territorial issues unresolved and created a few new ones. The accompanying excerpted articles report on recent incidents stemming from the territorial changes in the Nagorno Karabakh region and show how this is playing out.

The article from independent Russian-language news website *Eurasia Daily* reports that “an Armenian soldier was killed on May 25 after a shootout on the border in the Gegharkunik region” and how “on May 27, 6 Armenian soldiers were captured by Azerbaijani forces after an incident on the border.” The article also notes how the two sides approved “the creation of a trilateral commission (Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) on the delimitation and demarcation of the border” in response to these incidents.

Kavkazskiy Uzel, an independent news website reporting on the Caucasus, reports that “on 12 May, Armenian officials reported that Azerbaijani forces had advanced into the Syunik region of Armenia and tried to gain territory in the Black Lake region.” The article notes

how “as a result of the conflict in Karabakh in 2020, Azerbaijani border posts appeared on the eastern border of the Syunik region of Armenia.” Azerbaijan’s new border posts are in the Lachin District, which borders the Syunik Province, and is one of the territories Azerbaijan regained control of as part of the cease-fire agreement.

The article also includes comments from a couple of experts, including Pavel Felgenhauer, who said that “in the USSR, the lines of demarcation of administrative units were marked, they were not real borders.” Another analyst pointed to an example in the region, specifically how “the process of delimitation and demarcation of the Armenian-Georgian border has been going on for almost 30 years” and that “two thirds of this border is demarcated, but Armenia and Georgia have good relations to continue the process.” Lastly, the article brings up how “on June 2, trilateral consultations with representatives of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were held in Moscow, during which the parties discussed de-escalation in sections of the border.” It remains to be seen what results the trilateral commission will have, but the incidents show the impact that the territorial changes of the cease-fire agreement are having.

“On June 2, trilateral consultations with representatives of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were held in Moscow, during which the parties discussed de-escalation in sections of the border.”

Source: “Ереван и Баку обсудили в Москве пути деэскалации на границе (Yerevan and Baku discussed the path of de-escalation on the border in Moscow),” *Eurasia Daily* (an independent Russian-language news website) 3 June 2021. <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2021/06/03/erevan-i-baku-obsudili-v-moskve-puti-deeskalacii-na-granice-smi>

...An Armenian soldier was killed on May 25 after a shootout on the border in the Gegharkunik region. On May 27, 6 Armenian soldiers were captured by Azerbaijani forces after an incident on the border. Yerevan proposed, and Baku largely approved, the creation of a trilateral commission (Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) on the delimitation and demarcation of the border...

Source: Tigran Petrosyan, “Аналитики в Ереване назвали карты Генштаба СССР негодными для делимитации границы (Analysts in Yerevan have called the maps of USSR General Staff unfit for border demarcation),” *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (independent news website reporting on the Caucasus), 3 June 2021. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/364561/>

...on 12 May, Armenian officials reported that Azerbaijani forces had advanced into the Syunik region of Armenia and tried to gain territory in the Black Lake region...The maps drawn up during the Soviet period do not unambiguously establish the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Black Lake area, according to experts on the Caucasus...

As a result of the conflict in Karabakh in 2020, Azerbaijani border posts appeared on the eastern border of the Syunik region of Armenia... Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer also expressed the opinion that maps from the Soviet era are not suitable for demarcating borders between former Soviet republics. “In the USSR, the lines of demarcation of administrative units were marked, they were not real borders,” he stated...

“After the collapse of the USSR, the UN recognized the independence of states, not interstate borders,” said political scientist Alexander Iskandaryan...“the process of delimitation and demarcation of the Armenian-Georgian border has been going on for almost 30 years. Two thirds of this border is demarcated, but Armenia and Georgia have good relations to continue the process.”...

On June 2, trilateral consultations with representatives of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were held in Moscow, during which the parties discussed de-escalation in sections of the border...

Continued: The Impact of Territorial Changes in Nagorno Karabakh



A map of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2020_Nagorno-Karabakh_ceasefire_map.svg, Attribution: CC BY YA 4.0

India Expanding Domestic Defense Industry’s Negative Import List

By Matt Stein
OE Watch Commentary

One of the main issues the Indian armed forces have had with the country’s defense industry has been how long the procurement process takes to obtain various systems to meet operational requirements. This was evident when the Indian armed forces utilized the fast-track procedure to acquire weapons and equipment in the wake of the 2020 border dispute with China. The Indian Army made the majority of its fast track purchases from vendors outside of India, including high-altitude clothing, assault rifles, armor-piercing fin-stabilized discarding sabot ammunition for tanks, and reconnaissance unmanned aerial systems, among other things (See: “The Indian Army’s Shopping List,” *OE Watch*, September 2020). The accompanying excerpted article reports on one step the Indian government is taking to bolster its defense industry following these purchases of imported systems.

The article from *India Today*, an Indian English-language independent weekly news magazine, reports how India’s “Ministry of Defence has released a list of 108 more items to be added to the negative import list to give further impetus to self-reliant defence manufacturing.” The article includes an official statement noting that this means “all the 108 items will now be procured from indigenous sources as per provisions given in Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020.” The article mentions a few of the items on the list as well as how “out of the 108 items, 49 will be implemented from December 2021 and the rest will be scattered over the next four years” and that

“Out of the 108 items, 49 will be implemented from December 2021 and the rest will be scattered over the next four years.”



The Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh addressing an Atmanirbhar Bharat Defence Industry Outreach Webinar.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atmanirbhar_Bharat_Defence_Industry_Outreach_27_August_2020.jpg
Attribution: Government Open Data License - India (GODL)

“in August 2020, the first import ban list comprising 101 items was notified.”

According to the accompanying excerpt from the chapter on fast-track procedure in India’s Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020, acquisitions of weapons or equipment from outside India can take place, but it “must be related to an operational situation foreseen as imminent or for a situation where a crisis has emerged without prior warning” or that “it may also be applied for cases where timelines of the normal prescribed procedure in procuring of operationally critical equipment is seen to be adversely impacting the capability and operational preparedness of the Armed Forces.” Overall, the second negative import list will likely have an impact on acquisitions for the Indian armed forces over the next few years, but it appears that this will not restrict fast-track purchases for Indian forces dealing with situations like what took place on the border with China.

Source: Abhishek Bhalla and Manjeet Negi, “Mini UAVs, mine-protected vehicles among new list of 108 defence items banned for import,” *India Today* (Indian English-language independent weekly news magazine), 31 May 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mini-uavs-mine-protected-vehicles-among-new-list-of-108-defence-items-banned-for-import-full-list-1809194-2021-05-31>

...the Ministry of Defence has released a list of 108 more items to be added to the negative import list to give further impetus to self-reliant defence manufacturing...

All the 108 items will now be procured from indigenous sources as per provisions given in Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020, the defence ministry said.

...Out of the 108 items, 49 will be implemented from December 2021 and the rest will be scattered over the next four years.

Helicopter with weight up to 3.5 ton, wheeled armoured platforms, next generation corvette, mini UAVs, mine-protected vehicles, border surveillance system, helicopter launched anti-tank guided missile up to 7 km are among the new items that will be banned from December this year.

The Defence Ministry said the second list lays special focus on weapons/systems which are currently under development/trials and are likely to translate into firm orders in the future...In August 2020, the first import ban list comprising 101 items was notified, in pursuance of Government’s endeavor of ‘AtmaNirbhar Bharat Abhiyan’ and to boost indigenisation in the defence sector...

Source: “Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020,” *Government of India, Ministry of Defence*, 30 September 2020. https://www.mod.gov.in/dod/sites/default/files/DAP2030new_0.pdf

...CHAPTER V

FAST TRACK PROCEDURE (FTP)

...The projected requirement must be related to an operational situation foreseen as imminent or for a situation where a crisis has emerged without prior warning. It may also be applied for cases where timelines of the normal prescribed procedure in procuring of operationally critical equipment is seen to be adversely impacting the capability and operational preparedness of the Armed Forces...