



OEWATCH

FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



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ON THE COVER:

Chinese soldiers on parade in 2015.
Source: <https://tcatmon.com/wiki/멀티캠>; Attribution: Creative Commons Int

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China and Philippines Spar Over Grounded Ship in Spratly Islands

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

China is stepping up enforcement of its claims in the South China Sea due, in part, to its expanding chain of naval bases. There were a pair of confrontations between Chinese and Philippine navies in the South China Sea in August.¹ The dispute centered on the resupply of the *BRP Sierra Madre*, a WWII-era Philippine ship purposely run aground in 1999, on the Second Thomas Shoal, part of the Spratly Island group. The aging and decrepit vessel has served as a Philippine military base, tethered to the shoal that both the Philippines and China each declare their own.

On 5 August, the Chinese Coast Guard blocked Philippine Coast Guard ships from escorting chartered supply boats sent to resupply the *Sierra Madre*, according to the excerpted article from the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*. Philippine officials protested the Chinese actions, noting that the operation was a normal resupply mission. China claimed the Philippine operation also sought to deliver construction materials to repair the aging *Sierra Madre*—extending the life of the floating Philippine base—in defiance of Chinese demands that the *Sierra Madre* be towed off the shoal on which it is grounded.

The situation escalated three days later when, on 8 August, China criticized the Philippines for failing to “keep its commitment to tow away the warship that was ‘illegally stranded’ on China’s Ren’ai Reef and attempting to reinforce it for permanent occupation of the reef” as reported by the government-run media outlet *China Daily*. Philippine officials deny there was ever any commitment to remove the *Sierra Madre* and vowed to maintain the stranded vessel.² Finally, on 22 August, Philippine supply boats ran the Chinese blockade to resupply the Philippine marines stationed on the *Sierra Madre*, according to the *China Daily* article.

The two-week saga highlights the fact that the operational environment in the South China Sea has tipped in China’s favor.³ Many Chinese naval bases in the South China Sea are now operational negating the need for People’s Liberation Army-Navy vessels and maritime militia to sail from Hainan Island or other mainland naval bases. The chain of Chinese naval bases in the South China Sea allows China faster response times and more loiter time in contested waters, an advantage previously held by the other claimants’ navies that reside much closer to the contested region.⁴

China deploys hundreds of vessels to patrol the South China Sea and swarm reefs. Its Coast Guard and Navy ships routinely block or shadow Philippine boats in the contested waters, Manila has said.



Map of South China Sea featuring the Spratly Island group

Source: Dodge Billingsley, Combat Films and Research, Inc.; Attribution: By permission of Combat Films and Research, Inc.

Source: “South China Sea: Philippines says resupply mission reaches remote outpost, China firmly opposed,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong-based Chinese media outlet), 22 August 2023. https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3231910/south-china-sea-philippines-says-resupply-mission-reaches-remote-outpost-china-firmly-opposed?utm_medium=email&utm_source=cm&utm_campaign=enlz-today_international&utm_content=20230822&tpcc=enlz-today_international&UUID=200d3857-7b09-402a-bc24-cdd797d79a18&next_article_id=3231923&article

The Philippines said a resupply mission had reached a remote outpost in the disputed South China Sea on Tuesday, despite attempts by Chinese vessels to “block” the boats carrying provisions for Filipino marines.

Two Philippine Coastguard boats escorted two supply vessels to Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands, where a handful of troops are stationed on a crumbling navy ship.

They arrived just over two weeks after China Coastguard ships blocked and fired water cannon at a resupply mission to the tiny garrison that prevented one of the boats from delivering its cargo.

“The routine follow-on Rotation and Resupply mission to the BRP Sierra Madre was successfully conducted today,” the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea said in a statement....

Second Thomas Shoal is about 200km from the Western Philippine island of Palawan, and more than 1,000 kilometres from China’s nearest major land mass, Hainan island.

The water cannoning on August 5 fanned tensions between the countries, which have a long history of maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

China claims almost the entire waterway, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually, and has ignored an international ruling that its assertion has no legal basis.

It deploys hundreds of vessels to patrol the South China Sea and swarm reefs. Its coastguard and navy ships routinely block or shadow Philippine boats in the contested waters, Manila has said.

Source: “China warns Philippine ships for illegally entering waters in S. China Sea,” *China Daily* (Chinese government-owned news organization), 22 August 2023. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/22/WS64e47c43a31035260b81d962.html>

Liu Dejun, spokesman for the China Coast Guard, said in a statement that the four Philippine vessels were warned by the China Coast Guard, which effectively regulated them in accordance with law.

At the same time, regarding the fact that the Philippine ships did not carry illegal building materials for large-scale reinforcement, the Chinese side made “temporary special arrangements” for the Philippine side to transport food and other necessary daily supplies to the “stranded” warship in Ren’ai Reef in a humanitarian spirit, he said.

“China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters, including the Ren’ai Reef,” said Liu in his statement.

“We firmly oppose the Philippines using the opportunity of transporting supplies to ship illegal building materials to the warship that ‘illegally stranded’ in the Ren’ai Reef,” said Liu.

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Liu added that Chinese Coast Guard will continue to carry out rights protection and law enforcement activities in waters under China's jurisdiction in accordance with law.

Notes:

- [1] For more on Chinese diplomatic strategy regarding disputes in the South China Sea, see: Dodge Billingsley, "Chinese Foreign Minister Calls on Resolved Land Border Disputes with Vietnam to Influence Pending Chinese-Vietnamese Maritime Disputes," *OE Watch*, October 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/376080>
- [2] The relationship between the Philippines and China is complicated as they are neighbors and have shared interests despite friction between the two countries regarding territorial claims in the South China Sea. Chinese officials and media frequently blame the United States for its points of conflict with the Philippines. For an example of this perspective, see the following opinion piece by the editorial board of the *China Daily*: "Manila should be part of solution not problem: *China Daily*, 17 August 2023. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/17/WS64de058da31035260b81cc04.html>
- [3] Coincidentally, the Philippines participated in a multinational training exercise the same week focused on possible threat scenarios it could face in the South China Sea featuring an air assault with Australian forces and an "amphibious landing" exercise with both Australian and U.S. Marines, see: "Marcos pushes joint drills with neighbors," *The Manila Times*, 28 August 2023. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2023/08/26/news/marcos-pushes-joint-drills-with-neighbors/1906954>; Western press coverage on the joint training exercise with the U.S. Marines refer to the training differently, see: "120 Marines Back Drill Retaking an Island Along the South China Sea," *Marine Corps Times*, 25 August 2023. https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/flashpoints/2023/08/25/120-marines-back-drill-retaking-an-island-along-the-south-china-sea/?utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=mil-ebb&SToverlay=342f5a58-c37b-4142-b049-1f737335b507
- [4] On 28 August, China's Ministry of Natural Resources released a new version of its national map, which it has regularly done since at least 2006 in an effort to "eliminate 'problem maps.'" The map drew swift rebuke from many countries, including the Philippines. See: "China's New Map Draws Outrage From Neighbors," *The China Project*, 31 August 2023. https://thechinaproject.com/2023/08/31/chinas-new-map-draws-outrage-from-its-neighbors/?utm_campaign=Thu, Aug 31, 2023 5%3A18 PM - The neighbors hate China's new map&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Mailjet; For the notice of map release see: "2023年版标准地图正式发布 (The 2023 Version of the Standard Map is Officially Released)," Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China, https://www.mnr.gov.cn/dt/ywbb/202308/t20230829_2798404.html

People's Liberation Army Advancing Expertise in Combat Medical Support

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

Beijing's ability to successfully treat wounded soldiers and sailors would likely be a factor when deciding to enter into most conflicts. A People's Liberation Army (PLA) source has stated that China could expect 120,000 casualties in an amphibious invasion of Taiwan. Even such a large projected number of casualties is unlikely to deter the PLA from entering into a conflict when it involves the core issue of Taiwan. As such, the PLA is showing a focus on care for the wounded. Authoritative PLA publications provide detailed information on planned battlefield medical support and evacuation of wounded from the company level back to field hospitals and fixed PLA hospitals.¹

Recently, a practical medical service drill organized by the 961st Hospital of the Joint Logistics Support Force was launched at a field comprehensive training ground.

The 961st Hospital of the Shenyang Joint Logistic Support Center in the Northern Theater Command recently held a battlefield medical drill, according to the first excerpted article from the official PRC military newspaper PLA Daily. Casualties were reported at a frontline unit and a field medical team sent a triage team forward. The triage team used a drone to locate three soldiers with minor injuries and a seriously wounded soldier. Three nurses were sent to the slightly wounded troops, and a doctor, nurse, health worker, and driver were sent to evacuate the seriously injured soldier. The seriously wounded soldier was transported to a field medical aid post, likely at battalion or bri-

gade level, where a serious injury treatment team provided a blood transfusion. The team matched and drew blood for transfusion to the injured at the site when the on-hand supply was depleted.

The second excerpted PLA article, published on the Ministry of Defense website, described the Naval Medical University providing training for maritime medical support. The university sent a medical team to a naval unit in the Eastern Theater Command to research maritime medical support requirements and explore new support methods. The team submitted a report to the university proposing solutions. The university report recommended to regularize sending teams to fleets, increase training, and more timely medical support and delivery of medicines. The university strengthened its links with surface ships, submarines, and naval aviation units to track medical requirements and improve military medical education.

The PLA is serious about treating and evacuating sick and wounded personnel from the battlefield as well as providing maritime medical support.² The PLA is also incorporating unmanned aerial vehicles into medical units to locate wounded on the battlefield. PLA medical universities are working with Naval and tactical units to determine requirements and problem areas in medical support to find solutions. Naval medical support is a key area where the PLA publication cited above notes weaknesses in medical treatment at sea.



The hospital ship USNS Mercy (T-AH 19), top, and the People's Liberation Army Navy hospital ship Peace Ark (T-AH 866) transit the Pacific Ocean July 22, 2014, during Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) in 2014.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:140722-N-VY375-775_\(14718333126\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:140722-N-VY375-775_(14718333126).jpg); Attribution: Public Domain, U.S. Department of Defense

Source: “联勤保障部队第961医院组织实战化卫勤演练 (The 961st Hospital of the Joint Logistics Support Force Organizes a Practical Medical Service Drill),” *PLA Daily* (Official PRC Military Newspaper), 22 May 2023. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-22&paperNumber=02&articleid=906347

“Saving lives is the core task of the field medical team,” Zhu Siqiang told reporters. During the peacekeeping mission, he encountered multiple times when a blood bank was in urgent need. In such a crisis, on-site blood sampling and emergency treatment were used to save the lives of his comrades. In this drill, they set up a training program for difficult and dangerous situations, which is to strengthen the battlefield awareness and emergency response ability of officers and soldiers and ensure that medical personnel can go, be saved, and be cured at critical moments.

Source: “海军军医大学：学用结合，锤炼海上卫勤保障精兵 (Naval Medical University: Combining Learning with Practice, Training Elite Soldiers in Maritime Medical Support),” Ministry of Defense website, 22 May 2023. http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfjy_index/jsyxgfs/16225710.html

“In recent days, a group of members from the Party Committee of the Naval Medical University led a medical team to research medical support needs at the grassroots level in conjunction with the 'Delivery of Health to Sea' activity, such as going to high mountains and islands, boarding ship positions, and visiting hospital departments...

We need to closely monitor the new challenges and requirements posed by the transformation and development of the Navy for medical support, ensuring that wherever ships navigate, our medical support follows suit; wherever Navy forces are deployed, our medical support follows suit. In the theme of education, the leadership of the school's party committee and government officials read the original text to understand the principles, follow up on the spirit of Chairman Xi Jinping's latest important speech, and guide officers and soldiers to love the navy's construction and dedicating oneself to the navy, promoting the high-quality development of naval medical support work in the new era, and ensuring solid results in theme education.”

Notes:

- [1] 全军后勤学术研究中心 (All Army Logistics Academic Research Center), 作战后勤保障 (*Operational Logistics Support*), (no publishing data), February 2017, this is an internal publication to inform the leadership.
- [2] For more on planned battlefield medical support, see: Kevin McCauley, China Maritime Report No. 22: Logistics Support for a Cross-Strait Invasion: The View from Beijing, US Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, July 2022. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/22/>

People's Liberation Army Focusing on Treating Internal Psychological Issues

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

There has been an increase in attention to psychological issues within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in recent years. It is not clear if this is an indication of increased psychological problems among the troops or simply increased reporting. Some issues involve recruits born as late as 1995 having trouble adjusting to the regimentation of the military, difficult training conditions, and isolated garrison locations.

The military's approach to psychological problems within its ranks is discussed in a recent *PLA Daily* article. A brigade in the 74th Group Army in the Southern Theater has an embedded Psychological Service Team, which is a recent development. The counselors, apparently also found at the battalion and company level, seek to identify and help personnel with possible psychological problems.

The chief of the brigade's combat service planning section reported that all personnel in the unit were psychologically screened. The brigade's party committee conducted investigations at the battalion and company level to ensure that the psychological counseling was achieving results. The investigation concluded that there was a general lack of attention to mental health, and that problems remained. In response to the investigation, the brigade created a psychological work supervisory mechanism office led by a



Chinese soldiers on parade in 2015.

Source: <https://tcatmon.com/wiki/멀티캠>; Attribution: Creative Commons Int

psychologist and military doctor to provide professional support for the psychological services for the brigade.

Psychological issues within the PLA are not isolated to the one brigade. The article recounts similar stories in other units, and psychological stations established in new medical buildings. These efforts have reportedly significantly reduced the rate of mental illness among officers and soldiers. The PLA is concerned that psychological issues in the force during a future high-intensity conflict will adversely affect combat capabilities and contribute to noncombat attrition of the units.

Psychological service work is a regular basic task in the military, and the psychological health of officers and soldiers directly affects the combat effectiveness of the troops.

Source: “一个心理服务队的“心力量 (The ‘Heart Power’ of a Psychological Service Team),” *PLA Daily* (Official PRC Military Newspaper), 31 May 2023. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-31&paperNumber=05&articleid=907041

“Under the new situation and new tasks, we must raise awareness, improve work guidance, change “passive defense” into “active force”, and effectively improve the psychological immunity of officers and soldiers against negative emotions and mental illness....

The psychological response to wartime stress has a significant impact on non-combat attrition. According to the annual education plan, it is necessary to strengthen the popularization of psychological health knowledge among

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all officers and soldiers, educate and guide them to face psychological problems, overcome the “disease shame” of turning pale when talking about psychological issues, be good at discovering their psychological problems, actively seek external help, and effectively build a strong psychological defense line; By combining major combat readiness, training, exercises, stationed training, and other tasks, we aim to build a dedicated combat environment, promote advanced models of military training and preparation, strengthen the cultivation of officers and soldiers’ combat spirit, and forge a solid spiritual core....

The future war will be a high-end war with high force, high intensity, high confrontation, and high intelligence. The strength of the psychological qualities of officers and soldiers directly affects the success or failure of combat operations. At all levels, it is necessary to actively carry out psychological adjustment and motivation training for personnel at different levels, task situations, and regional environments, under the guidance of a professional psychological backbone, using real-life construction, VR simulation, and other technical means. It is also necessary to rely on facilities and equipment such as psychological behavior training fields to regularly organize military physical fitness and skills coherent training and assessment. At the same time, it is also necessary to combine the execution of major tasks, strictly temper officers and soldiers under similar actual combat conditions, and cultivate their strong psychological endurance.”

People's Liberation Army Discusses Low-Altitude Air Control

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

A recent *PLA Daily* article discusses the importance of low-altitude air control for ground operations and its difference from traditional concepts of air dominance.¹ The article appears to be influenced by recent conflicts such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Seizing low-altitude air control requires an integrated air defense and distributed, networked, system of systems integrating ground and low-altitude air systems with modular, mobile, multi-domain capabilities. The importance of seizing low-altitude air control² is based on the large-scale use of small and medium unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), helicopters, and cruise missiles. Traditional air dominance³ cannot guarantee low-altitude air control due to the sundry of small arms and short-range systems that threaten low flying airframes. The author argues that traditional air dominance operations are generally more centralized, while low-altitude air control is an ongoing, independent, and decentralized tactical operation that seizes control in a certain location for a limited time. Decentralized low-altitude air defense operations to seize control require accurate intelligence with the capability to distinguish between friend and foe, coordinated communications, and timely warning of air threats.

Achieving the capability to control the low-altitude air space even for short periods will threaten an adversary's ability to employ UAVs and fixed and rotary winged aviation. The author urges the PLA to accelerate the development of intelligent air control UAVs with swarming capabilities, loitering munitions, detection systems to identify low, slow, micro-targets, and innovative tactics to seize low-altitude air control in the critical place and time to influence ground combat. The capability to control the low-altitude air space would give the PLA a significant advantage protecting its forces and critical infrastructure.

Low altitude is the “junction” connecting airspace and land. With the rapid development and large-scale application of low-altitude combat equipment such as helicopters, small and medium-sized unmanned aerial vehicles, and cruise missiles, the low-altitude battlefield has become increasingly important, and low-altitude control has become one of the comprehensive dominances that must be seized in future land warfare.



Soldier from Ukrainian 25th Air Assault Brigade employing Small bomb carrying UAV.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UA_25th_DShV_Bde_Mavic_3_bomber_01.jpg; Attribution: CC By 4.0

Source: 夺取未来陆战低空制权 (Seize the low-altitude dominance of future land warfare),” *PLA Daily* (official PRC military newspaper), 23 May 2023. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-23&paperNumber=07&articleid=906414

“Low-altitude control is a relatively independent and decentralized tactical-level space control. Low altitude control cannot be achieved and controlled through a single operation or a stage of centralized air control operations. Seizing low altitude control power will run through the entire process of combat, displaying a “distributed, discrete” form with strong tactical, regional, mobile, and full process characteristics. Even without the guarantee of traditional air supremacy, through active actions, it is possible to seize low-altitude supremacy in a certain area and within a certain time limit, forming a low-altitude combat advantage.

To seize low altitude dominance, we should focus on the characteristics of the struggle for low altitude control, establish the concept of “relying on ground control, dynamic control, precise control, and flexible use of air”, and follow the basic principle of “whoever uses it seizes it, seizes it as needed, and manages it as needed”. By seizing it in combat, maneuvering, and using it, we can respectively seize low-altitude control power in the task area through relatively independent and dispersed low-altitude combat and low-altitude air defense operations. At the same time, it is necessary to dynamically implement low altitude airspace monitoring and management, establish a low altitude multi-means and multi-mode monitoring system, fully grasp low altitude situations, strengthen collaborative communication, accurately distinguish between enemy and friendly platforms, timely warning, quickly strike and destroy enemy air combat equipment and air control equipment, accurately handle our air conflicts, and ensure effective control of low altitude and ultra-low altitude airspace.

The low-altitude power struggle in future intelligent warfare will become more intense. The Army’s field air defense system should continuously improve the comprehensive combat effectiveness of the low-altitude airspace, attach great importance to the construction of a distributed low-altitude operational system of systems based on the network, and rely on the network to build air-ground integration, the combination of detection, attack and defense, and mobility, modular low-altitude operational system of systems. Focus on strengthening the research and development of low-altitude detection and monitoring platforms to achieve rapid network deployment and low-altitude ultra-low-altitude high-sensitivity dynamic monitoring, and improve the ability to detect “low, slow and small” aircraft; accelerate the development of intelligent air-controlling UAVs, loitering missiles, and “swarms” to enrich the air-to-ground and multi-mode guidance, multi-mechanism killing, and multi-domain attack capabilities; Continue to improve the ability to detect and attack low-altitude small and micro targets, accelerate the development of new mechanism combat equipment, and form a low-altitude combat capability that covers multiple levels of campaigns, tactics, and operational units.

Notes:

- [1] For additional information and perspective, see: Thomas Shrimpton, “Chinese Perspective on Manned-Unmanned Coordinated Operations on the Modern Battlefield,” *OE Watch*, 06-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/chinese-perspective-on-manned-unmanned-coordinated-operations-on-the-modern-battlefield/>
- [2] The PLA defines air dominance or “command of the air” as the Air Force and other services controlling the battlespace for a period of time. Presumably this encompasses offensive and defensive operations, including electronic and information warfare, to neutralize the enemy’s air defense capabilities. The reference to “a period of time” likely indicates the difficulty of sustaining command of the air.
- [3] The ability to neutralize enemy air defenses and other weapons systems that could attack low flying aircraft, helicopters, UAVs, and cruise missiles would appear difficult to achieve since these weapons would include small arms and short-range gun and missiles systems.

Former Commander Comments on Future of Russian Airborne Troops

By Charles Bartles
OE Watch Commentary



Colonel-General (Ret.) Vladimir Shamanov

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Shamanov#/media/File:Vladimir_Shamanov_Cabinet_photo.jpg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0

Almost since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine,¹ there has been much speculation in Russia about the future of its mechanized Airborne Troops (VDV). By most accounts, the VDV has performed the best of all of Russia's Armed Forces, although the VDV has taken heavy casualties.² In Ukraine the VDV has filled a more conventional role than intended and rarely conducted the missions it was designed for, namely, attacks and raids behind enemy lines. The VDV is now being equipped with heavy weaponry that has traditionally not been provided to it, such as T-90 tanks

and reconnaissance groups or assault groups.

The excerpted article from the quarterly Russian military periodical *Defense and Security* provides a third suggestion: stay the current course. The article's primary author is Colonel-General (Ret.) Vladimir Shamanov, former Commander of the VDV, and current Head of the State Duma Defense Committee. Shamanov states that the VDV should be maintained in its current state as a unique light mechanized combined arms force capable of air-mobile oper-

In our opinion, one should not experiment with one of the most combat-ready branches of the Armed Forces, destroying what at one time was saved with great difficulty.

and heavy thermobaric rocket launchers to facilitate this shift in mission. This has created a debate about the future force structure of the VDV. Some commentators proffer that the VDV should become permanently "heavier," while others suggest an even lighter structure so the VDV can function as true sabotage

operations. Although Shamanov does not delve into deeper reasoning, this opinion could be based on his belief that although the VDV is not currently fighting as designed, this may not always be the case, and at some point the VDV might again start executing attacks and raids behind enemy lines.

Source: Vladimir Shamanov, Vladimir Kulakov and Olga Kashirina, "Операция Промежуточный Этап (The Operational Intermittent Phase)," *Defense and Security* (Quarterly Russian Military Periodical), No. 2 (105), 2023, 15. http://ormvd-zib.ru/n2_2023/morskoe_sodruzhestvo_v_aziatsko-tihookeanskom__regione_str_17-19/

The experience of the SMO [special military operation] shows that lightly armed mobile groups are acquiring great importance. They are able to move quickly, provide cover, move to the rear, and act on the flanks. At the same time, light armored vehicles with modular weapons (machine gun, ATGM, automatic gun) will become their basis. They can become the basis of airmobile forces and form sabotage and reconnaissance and groups. Their tasks are reconnaissance and defeat of the enemy, assisting advancing troops, conducting surprise attacks on

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important targets, and executing organized withdrawals to [attack] in another direction.

On territory controlled by friendly forces, the use of airborne units as airmobile forces will ensure the strengthening of the strike force on the main axis of attack. This makes it possible to quickly concentrate troops as needed along the front line...

The ‘winged infantry’ is quite capable of acting not only as a combined armed force, but also form the basis of airmobile units and form sabotage and reconnaissance groups. Airmobile units, can inflict sudden blows, that will force the enemy to react, concentrate troops and expose them to attack. If successful, airmobile units can carry out raids throughout the entire tactical depth of the enemy’s defenses.

In addition, the Airborne Troops are able to significantly strengthen the Ground Forces on specified axis — in the event of enemy counterattacks, repels the attack and creates conditions for an attack of the main force.

There is an opinion that the priority way for the development of the Airborne Troops may be their transformation into just sabotage and reconnaissance groups, a “swarm”, capable of striking in several places at the same time, with subsequent evasion of a retaliatory strikes and withdrawal...

In our opinion, one should not experiment with one of the most combat-ready branches of the Armed Forces, destroying what at one time was saved with great difficulty. Only in the Airborne Troops after the well-known “reforms”, was the divisional structure of the troops preserved. On its basis, it is possible to quickly create various airmobile formations...

Notes:

- [1] Moscow insists on using the term *spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya* (“special military operation”) or *spetsoperatsiya* (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.
- [2] The lightly armored Airborne Combat Vehicle (BMD) series of combat vehicles has not fared well against Western antitank guided missiles and heavier mechanized Ukrainian forces.

Russia Seeks To Expand Military Force Creation to Its Republics

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Russia is looking for additional military forces and private military groups for use in the event of a national emergency. Draft Russian legislation may allow the formation of republic/regional armed forces that could be used to defend Russia in a time of crisis. According to the Norway-based *The Barents Sea Independent Observer*, the new Russian units would have the mission to “protect the state border,

fight illegal armed groups, and combat foreign sabotage and intelligence formations.” Details are sparse on important details, including whether these regional armies would belong to the republics or to the seven federal regions, and how they would interact with the traditional instruments of state power, including the Armed Forces, the Federal Security Service, and the National Guard (Rosgvardia).

New legislation opens up the establishment of regional military companies that will be in charge of “guarding the state border in times of war.” The amendments that were announced by Member of the State Duma Andrei Kartapolov on the 25th of July will allow Russian governors to build their own private military companies.

Source: Atle Staalesen, “Russian governors could soon start building Regional Armies,” *The Barents Observer* (online Norwegian newspaper in English and Russian) 27 July 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2023/07/russian-governors-could-soon-start-building-regional-armies>

New legislation opens up the establishment of regional military companies that will be in charge of “guarding the state border in times of war.” The amendments that were announced by Member of the State Duma Andrei Kartapolov on the 25th of July will allow Russian governors to build their own private military companies.

According to Karapolov, the military formations will be “specialised state unitary companies that on the decision of the Russian President can be established to protect public order.” They will also be used to “protect state borders in times of mobilisation, as well as in times of martial law and war,” Kartapolov explained. Andrei Kartapolov chairs the State Duma Committee on Defense. He is also General in the Russian Armed Forces and was in charge of the Army’s so-called Military-Political Department ahead of his election to parliament in 2021.

The new legislation comes as part of controversial amendments in the Russian Law on Draft Age. It is not clear how the new military formations will interact with Russia’s existing forces, among them the Armed Forces, the FSB and the National Guard (Rosgvardia). But the new regional units will be armed and allowed to use force. And they will “interact with the Interior Ministry, the FSB and Ministry of Defense to protect the state border, fight illegal armed groups and combat foreign sabotage and intelligence formations,” the Russian version of the Barents Observer reported.

In addition, they will reportedly be commissioned to take action in issues of public law and order, which could mean that they can be applied to repress protest actions. They will also engage in fighting drones, in the air, under water, as well as unmanned surface vehicles.

The formations will have extensive authorities and face little consequences for their actions. Reportedly, members of the new forces will bear no responsibility for inflicted damage of moral, physical and material character, and citizens will have no right to oppose their demands.

According to Kartapolov, the law is “made for a big war, and the smell of such a big war can already be scented.” The new legislation comes into force on the 1st of January 2024.

Russia Announces New Combined Arms Army in Arctic To Offset NATO Expansion

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Russia will form a new Combined Arms Army (CAA) in the Arctic North as a response to Finland and Sweden joining NATO, according to a recently published article from the pro-government daily *Izvestia*. The Russian military expert featured in the article claims the Northern Fleet's 14th Army Corps will likely be the nucleus of this new CAA, while the Arctic 200th and/or 80th brigades will likely be upsized to divisions. The new divisions will likely see the incorporation of a new Iskander missile brigade and air defense brigade to somewhat standardize the structure with other CAAs. Russian ground forces in the Baltic region facing Sweden and Finland, recently renamed the Leningrad Military District, will probably also expand to meet

the new threat. The Northern Fleet Strategic Command covers the bulk of the Northern Sea route, but the Eastern Strategic Command controls the Chukotka Peninsula. There is currently a motorized rifle regiment stationed there, and plans exist to expand this to a division. Due to the distance involved, it is unlikely that the new CAA will expand to incorporate this other Russian Arctic ground force. The focus of the new CAA will be the defense of the Kola Peninsula.

While Sweden and Finland were conditionally neutral countries, there was no need to keep any large forces in the region. However, now that Finland has joined NATO, and Sweden is on this path, it is necessary to strengthen the northwestern direction.



Map of Russian Federation with the Kola Peninsula highlighted, a strategically important space for Russian defense in the Arctic.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Murmansk_in_Russia.svg; Attribution: CCA-Share Alike 3.0

Source: Roman Kretcul and Aleksei Ramm, “Полярный округ: в составе Северного флота создадут общевойсковую армию (Arctic circle: A new combined arms army will form as part of the Northern Fleet),” *Izvestia* (large pro-government Russian daily), 1 July 2023. <https://iz.ru/1538203/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/poliarnyi-okrug-v-sostave-severnogo-flota-sozdadut-obshchevoiskovuiu-armiiu>

A new combined-arms army will be formed as part of the Northern Fleet.

This decision was made by the Russian Defense Ministry. It will cover the Russian border in the north, including the border with Finland and Norway. The defense of the Kola Peninsula is a vital task for Russia since strategic missile submarines are based there. The creation of a new army is especially important due to the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO. The new formation will be based on the current army corps. The army will include motorized rifle brigades, regiments and divisions. Their personnel will be trained in Arctic combat.

*“While Sweden and Finland were conditionally neutral countries, there was no need to keep any large forces in the region,” military historian Dmitry Boltenkov explained to *Izvestia*. “However, now that Finland has joined NATO, and Sweden is on this path, it is necessary to strengthen the northwestern direction.” The expert noted that the 200th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade, the 80th Arctic Brigade, and the 61st Separate Marine Brigade are now stationed there. He did not rule out that the 200th and 80th brigades would be reorganized into divisions, and the 14th Army Corps, of which they are now a member, into an army. The most important thing is that with the creation of this army, powerful separate formations will also appear – a missile brigade, an air defense brigade and others. This will significantly increase the group’s capabilities in the region. According to Dmitry Boltenkov, the protection of the Kola Peninsula is vital, if only because strategic missile submarines are based there.*

In recent years, Allies have shown an increased interest in the Arctic region. Norway hosts large-scale exercises of the Cold Response Alliance every two years. In the spring of 2022, over 30 thousand military personnel, more than 200 aircraft and 50 ships took part in them. The Russian Armed Forces regularly conduct exercises in polar latitudes. In particular, the annual maneuvers “Umka”, during which both personnel training and polar research are performed. On July 1, the press service of the Northern Fleet reported that the Arctic grouping, which includes warships of the Kola flotilla, will conduct a traditional Arctic campaign with a set of tactical exercises on the continental coast, islands and in the waters of the seas of the Arctic Ocean.

Abkhazia Pushes Back Against Russia's Suggestion of Incorporation

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

In an interview published on 22 August in the pro-Russian media outlet *Arguments and Facts*, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, suggested that for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the “idea of joining Russia is still popular and it may well be implemented if there are good reasons.” Medvedev’s comment was not well received by Abkhazian officials, regardless of whether it was an off-the-cuff remark or a more calculated statement. As per the excerpted article on pro-Abkhaz media source *Abkhaz World*, the Secretary of the Security Council of Abkhazia, Sergey Shamba, responded to Medvedev’s statement by declaring that he was unaware of any political parties or groups that preferred incorporation into Russia, insisting that Abkhazia “tread” its own path. Shamba also noted that Abkhazia “is keen on fostering close and allied relations with Russia,” but that the tiny republic remains committed to independence. A statement from the Foreign Ministry of Abkhazia published in a second excerpted article from *Abkhaz World* declared that “The millennia-old statehood of Abkhazia is not a subject for debate.”¹ The

same article also included comments by other Abkhaz officials, including Aslan Kabakhia, who declared that it was “very unpleasant to hear of talks of a potential change in Abkhazia’s status from the very individual who [previously] endorsed our independence,” and another official, Akhra Bzhaniya, who noted that “our sovereignty is not a toy.” Abkhazia remains defiant regarding independence, suggesting that a miscalculation by Russian or other regional leaders could reignite conflict in the breakaway republic. For example, some Ukrainian officials continue to call on Georgia to open a second front in the Caucasus by militarily invading Abkhazia, assuming Russia will be forced to divert military forces in defense of Abkhazia.

We tread a distinct path. We haven’t received any formal requests to join the Russian Federation, and I’m yet to identify any political faction within Abkhazia that envisions such a relationship dynamic with Russia.



Map of Republic of Georgia featuring the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Source: Ssolbergj, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Abkhazia_and_South_Ossetia_-_media/File:Georgia,_Ossetia,_Russia_and_Abkhazia_\(en\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Abkhazia_and_South_Ossetia_-_media/File:Georgia,_Ossetia,_Russia_and_Abkhazia_(en).svg);
Attribution: CC BY SA-3.0

Source: “Abkhazia: Seeking Alliance but Standing Apart from Russian Federation,” *Abkhaz World* (pro-Abkhaz media outlet based in London and Istanbul), 24 August 2023. <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2484-abkhazia-seeking-alliance-but-standing-apart-from-russian-federation>

The Secretary of the Security Council of Abkhazia, Sergey Shamba, emphasised that while Abkhazia is in favour of forming an alliance with Russia, the nation is open to various forms of bilateral relations.

Abkhazia is keen on fostering close and allied relations with Russia. However, Sergey Shamba highlighted that there currently aren't any political entities within the republic expressing a desire to become part of the Russian Federation.

Shamba's remarks were in response to the statements made by Dmitry Medvedev, the Deputy Head of the Russian Federation's Security Council. In a previous article on the <http://aif.ru> website, Medvedev pointed out that both Abkhazia and South Ossetia still harbour sentiments of aligning with Russia, suggesting that this aspiration “might very well materialize given compelling reasons.”

Medvedev further elaborated, “South Ossetia has, on multiple occasions, held referendums on the prospect of joining Russia. This aligns naturally with the trajectory of uniting North and South Ossetia — a single people. I believe this resonates with Dmitry Medvedev's statements. I'm optimistic that in due course, the right conditions will emerge, culminating in the unification of the North and South.”

Shamba, speaking of Abkhazia, added, “We tread a distinct path. We haven't received any formal requests to join the Russian Federation, and I'm yet to identify any political faction within Abkhazia that envisions such a relationship dynamic with Russia.” He reiterated that while Abkhazia is eager to bolster allied relations with Russia, they remain flexible in exploring different relational frameworks.

Source: “Невыученные уроки. Дмитрий Медведев проанализировал события 2008 года (Unlearned lessons. Dmitry Medvedev analyzed the events of 2008),” *Arguments and Facts* (pro-Moscow media outlet) 23 August 2023. https://aif.ru/politics/world/nevyuchennye_uroki_dmitriy_medvedev_proanaliziroval_sobytiya_2008_goda

At one time, Saakashvili became the first US proxy leader in the Caucasus with a single mission - to incite the hatred of the inhabitants of Georgia towards Russia, shake its position in the Transcaucasus, overshadow the centuries-old friendship of the two peoples. This strange creature brought the war closer with all its might. She pretended to be an “Old Testament shepherd David” - and at the same time did everything so that the Georgians would forget their common history, break ties with Russia, hate their closest neighbors - Russians, Ossetians, Abkhazians - and wish them death. The latest performances of Russophobes in Georgia show that this public is still counting on revenge. Although he constantly runs into rebuff from his fellow citizens, who do not intend to elevate hatred of Russia to the rank of a national idea and are quite warm towards our citizens. This is also obvious: the majority of Georgians are much more comfortable living with our state in peace. Russia is nearby, America is overseas. For Georgia, a country of the richest culture, connected with Russia by thousands of threads, Russophobia is nonsense, ugliness, a serious illness. Luckily, it's completely curable.

We do not need a repetition of history-2008. We remain ready to tackle problems at the negotiating table in the spirit of the UN Charter. But if our concern has real outlines, we will not hesitate. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the idea of joining Russia is still popular. And it may well be implemented if there are good reasons for that.

continue on 19

Source: “Abkhazia’s Foreign Ministry Issues Statement on Medvedev’s Remarks,” *Abkhaz World*, 24 August 2023. <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2486-abkhazia-s-foreign-ministry-issues-statement-on-medvedev-s-remarks>

“In today’s environment, the international security system is under significant strain. We note a substantial escalation in tensions between the Russian Federation and the collective West. Many statements made in the media are viewed as outcomes of the intensifying geopolitical contest.

The millennia-old statehood of Abkhazia is not a subject for debate. Our legislation provides clear insight into this. The Republic of Abkhazia stands as a steadfast ally of the Russian Federation.

Our relations are governed by an extensive legal framework, comprising over 200 agreements. In the Republic of Abkhazia, repeated statements by senior Russian officials regarding the impossibility of revising the fundamental principles of bilateral relations are highly valued.

The irrevocable path towards development as a sovereign, independent legal state has been chosen by the people and is protected by the paramount law - the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia.”

Notes:

- [1] The statement by Medvedev set off a firestorm of media responses, but to put it in perspective, his comment was said at the end of a very lengthy diatribe in which he insulted, criticized, and lambasted the U.S. and the West in general, declaring western influence and intrigue as the roots of all problems Russia faces in Georgia and Ukraine. Despite the context *Ukraine Pravda* and *Reuters* for example led with the headline that Russia might “annex” Abkhazia and South Ossetia although that is not the word that Medvedev used. see: “Russia May Annex Georgian Breakaway Regions-Medvedev,” *Reuters*, 22 August 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-may-annex-georgian-breakaway-regions-medvedev-2023-08-22/>

Iran Claims Development of Cruise Missiles Guided by Artificial Intelligence

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

The excerpted article from Iran's *Fars News Agency* claims that Iran is developing a cruise missile guided by artificial intelligence (AI). While Iran has a long history of claims that never materialize, these announcements do reflect the emphases of Iranian military thinking and the trajectory of Iranian military investment. Frequent announcements about drones and precision missiles, for example, reflect the growing arsenal of both, even though capabilities fall short of Tehran's claims.

Iran's desire to expand the capabilities of its cruise missile arsenal poses a real and growing threat to shipping in the Persian Gulf and northern Indian Ocean. Still, when Iranian military leaders first announced that they would field the Abu Mahdi cruise missile on naval vessels three years ago, they made no mention of AI.¹ Likewise, a claim by the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Navy that the Abu Mahdi cruise missile can turn "American aircraft carriers into metal scrap" is almost certainly bluster. Nevertheless, the announcement of AI-guided cruise missiles and the targeting of American shipping reflect both

the hostility and ambition of the Iranian military industry. The name "Abu Mahdi" also reflects anti-American sentiment, given the United States was responsible for the death of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Unit commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in the same 3 January 2020 strike that killed Iranian Qods Force Chief Qassem Soleimani.

This system is strategic and, in fact, we can say it has no equal.

As AI technologies become more accessible, it is inevitable that the Iranian military will try to incorporate elements of autonomous decision-making into targeting. Iranian military industries will likely be able to incorporate AI rapidly because so much AI remains open source and Iran has a large diaspora studying computer science and engineering in India, Russia, and Europe. The greatest impact on the operational environment may be in allowing Iran's missile arsenal to more broadly evade anti-aircraft defenses or strike targets of opportunity in dense maritime or urban settings.



Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Alireza Tangsiri, commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps-Navy, and regular Navy Commander Shahram Irani at a ceremony unveiling the Abu Mahdi cruise missile.

Source: https://media.farsnews.ir/Uploaded/Files/Images/1402/05/03/14020503000088_Test_PhotoN.JPG; Attribution: FarsNews.ir

Source: “Behregiri Mushak-e Kruz Abu Mahdi a Hush-e Mosnava’i” (Abu Mahdi Cruise Missile Uses Artificial Intelligence), Fars News Agency (news agency closely affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), 25 July 2023. <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14020503000068>

Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, participated this morning transferring the Abu Mahdi cruise missile to both the regular Navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Navy. He said, “By the grace of God, and in line with the defense doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Iran to improve missile power for defense, today we are witnessing the ceremony for the Abu Mahdi long-range cruise missile joining the arsenal. This system is strategic and, in fact, we can say it has no equal. He added, “This system has special features, including a range of 1,000 kilometers [621 miles] which will increase the range of our naval defense several times. It is a very important point.”

Referring to other aspects of the Abu Mahdi missile, the Minister of Defense said, “Other features include pinpoint accuracy, high destructive power, the ability to maneuver around geographic obstacles, and cruising at a very low altitude.” He added, “The Abu Mahdi cruise missile can confront electronic warfare, evades radar systems and has utilized artificial intelligence to chart its optimal flight path.

Ashtiani said, “We will be able to produce Abu Mahdi missiles.”

Notes:

- [1] For previous mention of the Abu Mahdi cruise missile, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran Navy Soon to Field Abu Mahdi Cruise Missile” *OE Watch*, November 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/356999/download>

Requirements for Desirable Iranian Oil Ministry Jobs Revealed

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

While oil accounts for approximately 20 percent of Iran's GDP, it funds 30 percent of the government's official budget, and accounts for far more if oil smuggling by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is included. In Iran, the Ministry of Petroleum is considered more prestigious than the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of Industry. The Petroleum Ministry's staffing requirements have been long been opaque. The current Petroleum Minister Javad Owji has a background in oil engineering and subsequently led the National Iranian Gas Company, but he is the exception: many previous petroleum ministers have been IRGC officers.¹

The children of martyred veteran's quota will be 25 percent.

The excerpted article from a semi-official *Iranian Students' News Agency* sheds light on the ministry's hiring process, to include necessary exam scores and required documents for the interview phase. A quota system illustrates the segments of society the government seeks to favor, promote, or reward. The importance of the military in Iranian society is clear: candidates should demonstrate military service, be it through conscription or in more elite units like the Revolutionary Guards. There are also specific set-asides—almost one-third of the available positions—for those who are children of Iranian soldiers or paramilitary

“volunteers” who died in the Iran-Iraq War or other military operations. This reflects the promotion of the culture of martyrdom and sacrifice that continues to permeate Iranian ideology.² While the Iranian government is notoriously poor at veterans' services, the high quota for children of those killed in service signals the government's desire to take care of their posterity.

The need to photocopy both sides of the national identity card likely is part of a loyalty test. The Iranian regime uses periodic elections to prove its legitimacy through popular participation at the ballot box. Outside of the major cities and especially in regions with large ethnic or sectarian minorities, access to civil service jobs and various social services requires demonstrating proof of participation in such elections. Accordingly, Iranians in these areas often ask election workers to stamp their identity cards. (Those who do not wish to endorse the regime then spoil their ballots).³

Finally, the requirement to prove residence for a decade reflects a distrust of the Iranian diaspora whose departure is seen as evidence of an unwillingness to sacrifice, or insufficient loyalty, to the Islamic Revolution's principles. This distrust also explains in part the purpose for the more subjective psychological interviews.



Perspective employees take an exam to qualify for jobs in Iran's Ministry of Petroleum.

Source: <https://cdn.isna.ir/d/2023/06/02/3/62627499.jpg?ts=1685702176414>; Attribution: Iranian Students' News Agency

Source: “Karnameh va Barnameh-e Da’vat beh Mosahebeh Estikhodami Azmun Viarat-e Naft ‘Alam Shod” (Exam Scores and the Invitation to Interview for Oil Ministry Employment Announced),” *Iranian Students’ News Agency* (an ostensibly private news agency close to Iran’s security and intelligence apparatus), 23 July 2023. <https://www.isna.ir/news/1402050100565>

The country’s education testing organization announced the schedule for the invitation to job interviews with the Ministry of Petroleum in 2022. Candidates can access their records via the <https://result2.sanjesh.org/RSEmp/NOETEmpOilResultKrn140204> / address. The first candidates of the recruitment test for the subsidiaries of the Ministry of Oil for 2022 must carry out the interview process with the following documents....

1. *Original and legible image of all birth certificate pages.*
2. *Original and scanned image of national ID card (front and back)*
3. *The original and legible copy of both sides of the conscription card or permanent legal exemption or valid certificate showing elite service.*
4. *Principle and legible image of the required valid educational degree (with mention of grade, major, grade point average and date of graduation)*
5. *An original and legible copy of self-sacrifice [martyrdom] documents for those seeking qualification to the [children of] martyred veteran’s quota of 25 percent or the martyred volunteer [Basij] quota of five percent.*
6. *Original and legible image of valid disability certificate with the type of disability (only for candidates participating in the quota of three percent for disabled people)*
7. *The original and legible copy of all pages of the birth certificate of the child or children for those seeking to benefit from the youth law.*
8. *The original completed and verified residence declaration form stamped with the seal of the post office or local police station (for candidates who have resided for 10 years at their residence in Iran)*
9. *The original certificate of education from elementary, middle and high school or the first or second year of high school with the approval of the education department of the relevant province or city with regard to the ten-year history of residence, on the condition of providing a local certificate of the person’s current residence in the province or city where the application is made.*
10. *Dissertation (only for participants with a master’s degree)*

The schedule cannot be changed/extended and failure to attend in the assigned time will be considered as a definite withdrawal. A valid invitation is necessary when attending the interview. The supplemental assessment consists of two sections of technical-specialized and psychological interviews, and the participation of volunteers in both sections is mandatory....

Notes:

- [1] The Petroleum Ministry’s vital role makes it an important partner for the IRGC whose economic wing, *Khatam al-Anbiya*, regularly receives no-bid, single-source contracts from the Petroleum Ministry. The United States has sanctioned the government-owned National Iranian Oil Company used by the Ministry of Petroleum to distribute Iranian oil for its IRGC links.
- [2] See: Michael Rubin, “Khamenei Warns Veterans of Declining Revolutionary Fervor” *OE Watch*, February 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/310925/download>
- [3] For example, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Explains Spoilt Ballots” *OE Watch*, August 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/387127/download>

Iran's Supreme Leader Warns of Declining Fervor of New Generation

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

Within the discourse of Iran's top religious leadership, two interlinked themes regularly surface. First is concern about decreased fertility and second is unease with the younger generation's declining fervor. In the excerpted speech published on his official website *Khamenei.ir*, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warns assembled Islamic seminary students and missionaries about declining fervor among the youth and the sources to which they turn for religious education.¹ While Khamenei has previously lamented the decline of the "culture of martyrdom" among Iran's youth, the excerpted speech goes much further into his thinking about its cause.² Khamenei recognizes that young Iranians learn more about religion from their parents than from the state. This is an acknowledgment that Iran's earlier educational revolution as well as such organs as the Islamic Propagation Organization have failed. It also suggests that the problem is not only the youngest generation but their parents as well. While Khamenei continues to embrace the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and paramilitary Basij, his broader frustration at the youth signals a growing divergence between those with elite military service and the broader population whose experience might only be as conscripts fulfilling mandatory military service.

One front is the Islamic system... The other front is the deceptive front that calls itself liberal democracy.

Khamenei further blames social media and apps for providing unvetted information. Ironically, he calls out Twitter (now 'X'), a platform he himself uses. At issue for Khamenei is not just the fact that they might provide faulty information, but that they do so purposely. He suggests social media is not simply a platform upon which individuals might communicate organically, but rather that they are the tip of a vast conspiracy designed to wage ideological war on Iran. Such a belief conforms broadly with an intellectual trend that predates the Islamic Revolution. This is best encapsulated by the late Iranian novelist Jalal Al-e Ahmed who, in 1962, published *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* that critiqued Western technology and its impact



Seminary students listen to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on 12 July 2023.

Source: https://idc0-cdn0.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/53328/B/14020421_5753328.jpg
Attribution: Khamenei.ir

on Iran. Revolutionary Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini himself seemed to build on *Occidentosis* (sometimes translated from *Gharbzadegi* as 'Westoxification') by suggesting that the antidote must be his vision of Shia Islam.

Khamenei's speech provides further insight into the intellectual and cultural battle in which he believes Iran now finds itself. He defines two fronts: Western liberalism and the Islamic system, and argues liberalism is both hypocritical and corrupt. Given his position at the helm of the Iranian regime and above that of any elected official, his castigation of liberalism signals very limited tolerance for those seeking to reform or democratize the Iranian regime.

Source: “Biyanat dar Didar Mobleghin va Talab-e Hawzehha-ye ‘Ilmeah Saresar Keshvar” (Statement to a gathering of seminary students and missionaries from across the country),” *Khamenei.ir* (official website of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei), 12 July 2023. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=53333>

Parents teach many things to their children. Many of our people, perhaps even the majority, have gained their information and knowledge about religion from the words and behavior of their parents. Their voices have become weak today. In the commotion caused by the media pluralism, this voice has been drowned out....

In the past, we would counsel the youth and warn them to stay away from bad friends and companions. Now such bad companions are there right inside their pockets! They have a screen of bad companions right before their eyes and everything is in it. If our Islamic propagation material and methods do not suit our audience’s situation, we will not succeed....

If this proactive approach is to be truly realized, it is necessary to know the situation. You must know who you are up against when you are confronted with a large number of doubts in the minds of young people. Who are we up against? Now suppose that a certain editorial writer, a certain columnist for some newspaper, or a certain Tweeter posts something on a social network. Who are we up against? Who is this? Is the person doing this him or herself? It is highly likely that this is not the case. It is highly probable that something is going on behind the scenes. Who is behind the scenes? We should know who they are....

Today, another confrontation exists, a confrontation between two fronts. If we know these two fronts, then we can determine if the phenomenon that has arisen against us is independent or dependent on the opposing front. What are these two fronts? One front is the front of the Islamic system, which I will speak about briefly. The other front is the deceptive face that calls itself “liberal democracy.” But, actually, it is neither liberal nor democratic! They are lying when they say they are a liberal democracy.

If you are liberal, why did you colonize others whether through traditional colonialism, modern colonialism, or neocolonialism? What kind of liberals are you? What kind of freedom-seekers are you? And what kind of free-thinkers are you that you colonized a country such as India that had a population in the millions and took control of it for over a century? You siphoned off their assets and turned them into a poor nation.

Notes:

- [1] For previous discussion of demography and fertility, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: We Have Five Years to Grow the Population” *OE Watch*, December 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/359394/download>; and Michael Rubin, “Khamenei Speaks on Demography” *OE Watch*, December 2013. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195479>
- [2] For previous discussion of revolutionary fervor, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Speaks on Martyrdom” *OE Watch*, December 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/399678/download>; and Michael Rubin, “Khamenei Warns Veterans of Declining Revolutionary Fervor” *OE Watch*, February 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/310925/download>

UN Assesses Core of Islamic State Stagnating, While Some Global Affiliates Thrive

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary



Flag of the Islamic State.

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

The United Nations Monitoring Team has released a new report on the status of the Islamic State (IS) around the world. The report details member states' efforts to combat the group's core presence as well as the activities of IS affiliate branches around the world.

The report notes that despite the international cooperation against the Islamic State, its core group, based in Iraq and Syria, still has an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 fighters. The report notes IS attacks have slowed from the previous reporting period (the second half of 2022), though the group maintains a low-level insurgency, particularly taking advantage of the security vacuums along the Kurdistan border in Iraq. The report also underscores that IS core's reserves of \$25 to \$50 million have dwindled significantly, though it continues to raise funds, most commonly via kidnapping for ransom. Notably, the report relays that continued counterterrorism pressure from states around the world has led IS to adopt an increasingly decentralized model of governance extending to IS's global provinces. While no evidence exists to demonstrate these provinces are being commanded and controlled by IS central, "reporting shows that financial, propaganda and other connections remain."

The satellite provinces of the Islamic State remain a concern. The report assesses the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) to be "the most serious terrorist threat in Afghanistan and the wider region."

With fighters and their family members estimated at between 4,000 and 6,000 individuals, the report notes that IS-K has adopted increasingly sophisticated tactics aimed at demonstrating the Taliban's inability to ensure security.¹ The IS continued to demonstrate its staying power in Africa,² the world region most beset by jihadist terror.³ In the Sahel,⁴ the report notes that the IS-Sahel province, "had become increasingly autonomous and had played a significant role in the escalation of violence in the region," though curiously, the report makes no mention of the largest IS branch in Africa, the Islamic State's West African Province (ISWAP). The report notes that an estimated 300 to 500 fighters still exist in southern Libya, and that UN member states have grown concerned about the presence of a strengthening IS presence in Sudan considering the country's recent political turmoil.

Despite significant attrition of the Da'esh leadership and a reduction in activity in the core conflict zone, the risk of resurgence remain[s].

Source: United Nations Security Council, “Seventeenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat,” United Nations Security Council, 31 July 2023. <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2023%2F568&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

During the first half of 2023, the threat posed to international peace and security by Da’esh and its affiliates remained mostly high in conflict zones and low in non-conflict areas. However, the overall situation is dynamic, with notable subregional variation in activity. Leadership attrition, as well as counter-terrorism efforts by Member States in certain regions, continue to have an impact on Da’esh activities. Multilateral cooperation has remained essential to effectively responding to the threat, including through an integrated and balanced implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy...

Despite significant attrition of the Da’esh leadership and a reduction in activity in the core conflict zone, the risk of resurgence remained. The group has adapted its strategy, embedding itself with local populations, and has exercised caution in choosing battles that are likely to result in limited losses, while rebuilding and recruiting from camps in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic and from vulnerable communities, including in neighbouring countries...

The trend of counter-terrorist pressure prompting Da’esh to adopt less hierarchical and more networked, decentralized structures has continued, with operational autonomy in the affiliated groups. Member States have little evidence that the core leadership is exercising command and control of regional affiliates, although reporting shows that financial, propaganda and other connections remain...

The group’s media apparatus leverages the operations of Da’esh affiliates in conflict zones in its propaganda efforts, reaching a wide audience, with the aim of radicalizing potential recruits, gaining support and inspiring attacks beyond conflict zones. While its previously well-developed external operations capability remained diminished and largely constrained, the ambition to reconstitute is clear. The situation in Afghanistan has become more complex, with increasing Member State concerns about the ability of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) (QDe.161) to project a threat both in the region and further afield...

Notes:

- [1] For more on the UN’s critiques of the Taliban, see: Jason Warner, “Taliban Responds to UN Reports Claiming Taliban Rule Aids Terrorist Expansion,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/taliban-responds-to-un-reports-claiming-taliban-rule-aids-terrorist-expansion/>
- [2] For more on the status of the Islamic State in Africa, see: Jason Warner, “UN Warns About Islamic State Surging in Africa and Afghanistan,” *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/un-warns-about-islamic-state-surging-in-africa-and-afghanistan/>
- [3] For more on Africa as the new epicenter of global terrorism, see: Jason Warner, “Global Terrorism Declined Slightly in 2022, With the Sahel as the New Epicenter,” *OE Watch*, 05-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/global-terrorism-declined-slightly-in-2022-with-the-sahel-as-the-new-epicenter/>; Jason Warner, “African Leaders, UN See Terrorism in the Sahel as Dire,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/african-leaders-and-un-see-terrorism-in-the-sahel-as-dire/>
- [4] For more on the status of Al-Qaeda in the Sahel and Sahara, see: Jason Warner, “Leader of Al-Qaeda’s Sahelian Branch, JNIM, Explains His Group’s Goals,” *OE Watch*, 05-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/leader-of-al-qaedas-sahelian-branch-explains-his-groups-goals/>; Jason Warner, “Al-Qaeda Leader in Maghreb Celebrates French Departure, Claims No Plans To Attack French Homeland,” *OE Watch*, 04-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/al-qaeda-leader-in-maghreb-celebrates-french-departure-claims-no-plans-to-attack-french-homeland/>

Cameroon Requests Nigeria and Chad Prevent Boko Haram Border Attacks



Military vehicles of the BIR in Far Northern Cameroon 2019

Source: Moki Edwin Kindzeka (VOA), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Military_vehicles_of_the_BIR_in_Far_Northern_Cameroon_2019.jpg; Attribution: (CCx2.0)

By Jacob Zenn

OE Watch Commentary

On 1 June, the French-language Cameroonian publication *actu cameroun.com* reported on Cameroon's call for its neighbors, Chad and Nigeria, to bolster troop deployments to their mutual border with Cameroon to stop attacks from Boko Haram. This came after Cameroon's Far North region governor claimed hundreds of Boko Haram members infiltrated the Cameroonian border. According to the article, Cameroonian President Paul Biya responded to the escalating Boko Haram attacks along Cameroon's Lake Chad shoreline by ordering an emergency meeting of military and government officials in the country's north to develop strategies to prevent further Boko Haram incursions.

The article claims that Boko Haram attacks in northern Cameroon are increasing. The group abducted six civilians in Amchidé and shot and wounded another civilian. The attack resembled those of the late Abubakar Shekau's faction, which is notorious for harassing civilians even more

than the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-affiliated faction.¹ History suggests attacks around Lake Chad will escalate without sufficient regional coordination to counter both factions.^{2,3}

The second excerpted article in Nigeria's *premiumtimes.ng* reported on 18 August a promise from Public Information Officer of the Multinational Joint Task Force. This force includes Nigerian, Cameroonian, Chadian, and Nigerien troops and is based in N'djamena, Chad. The officer asserted that the force's resolve to combat Boko Haram would be enduring.

Officials in northern Cameroon have called on neighboring Chad and Nigeria to deploy additional troops to their border to counter attacks by the Islamist group."

Source: “Des responsables du nord du Cameroun auraient demandé à leur gouvernement et au Nigeria et au Tchad de déployer des troupes supplémentaires à leur frontière (Officials in northern Cameroon reportedly asked their government and Nigeria and Chad to deploy additional troops to their border),” *actucameroun.com* (French-language publication covering Cameroonian affairs from a neutral perspective), 1 June 2023. https://actucameroun.com/2023/06/01/des-responsables-du-nord-du-cameroun-auraient-demande-a-leur-gouvernement-et-au-nigeria-et-au-tchad-de-deployer-des-troupes-supplementaires-a-leur-frontiere/?_unique_id=64785f3f48c1b

As Boko Haram attacks intensify, we have learned that officials in northern Cameroon have called on neighboring Chad and Nigeria to deploy additional troops to their border to counter attacks by the Islamist group. The governor of the Far North region of Cameroon, which shares a border with Chad and Nigeria, revealed that hundreds of heavily armed radical Islamists infiltrated the dangerous Lake Chad Basin region and attacked, looted, and spread fear.

President Paul Biya ordered officials and troops in Cameroon’s Far North region to hold an emergency crisis meeting and to ensure that the armed Islamist extremists infiltrating the troubled Lake Chad region are thwarted.

In context of this security threat, we learn that the leaders of northern Cameroon do not intend to remain only at their border but have asked the neighboring countries, Nigeria and Chad, to also deploy men at their border in order to capture the terrorists.

Source: “MNJTF Eliminates Boko Haram Fighters in Cameroon Axis,” 18 August 2023, *premuntimes.ng* (Abuja-based publication noted for investigative journalism that is critical of the government) <https://prnigeria.com/2023/08/18/mnjtf-eliminates-boko/>

On August 17, 2023, the troops of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) Sector 1 in Cameroon successfully intercepted remnants of the Boko Haram terrorists who were scavenging for logistics in Hile Halifa on the fringes of Lake Chad, Far North Cameroon. This successful effort signifies another major setback for the terrorist group, which continues to threaten peace and stability in the region

The MNJTF Sector 1 continues to strengthen its resolve in dismantling Boko Haram and restoring stability in the affected areas.

Notes:

- [1] Perhaps no one spoke in more detail about Shekau’s harming civilians than his own rival subcommanders. They accused him of, among other brutalities, killing displaced persons who had no other way of finding food or shelter but to seek the support of “Christian” aid organizations and the government in refugee shelters and camps. However, Shekau considered this to be “apostasy.” In addition, Shekau ordered the killing of anyone who opposed him or even disagreed with him, which earned him—and Boko Haram more generally—a notorious reputation among the civilians of northeastern Nigeria. This caused the group to lose support to the consternation of Shekau’s less radical subcommanders. See Nur, Mamman, ‘Exposé: An Open Letter to Abubakar Shekau’, in Abdulbasit Kassim, and Michael Nwankpa (eds), *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2018.
- [2] For more on regional cooperation to counter Boko Haram, see: Jacob Zenn, “Multinational Joint Task Force Lauds Counterterrorism Success Against Boko Haram,” *OE Watch*, 05-2023. <https://fmsso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/multinational-joint-task-force-lauds-counterterrorism-success-against-boko-haram/>
- [3] The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is the entity through which Lake Chad states, including Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, have intended to boost their “capacity by better sharing plans and intelligence, committing troops for longer operations and improving troops’ human rights compliance.” However, these states have resisted fully integrating their forces into the MNJTF, which may have contributed to the MNJTF’s lack of capacity to eliminate or significantly reduce Boko Haram attacks or border incursions around Lake Chad. See International Crisis Group, “What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?,” Report #291, July 7, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/291-what-role-multinational-joint-task-force-fighting-boko-haram>

Anti-French Sentiment Undergirds Overthrow of Nigerien Government

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

France, and the West more generally, appear to have lost one of their last, and most consistent, West African counterterrorism allies with the ouster of Nigerien President Mohammad Bazoum on 26 July by Abdourahamane Tiani, the former leader of Niger's presidential guard. Like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, all of which have been taken over by military juntas over the past several years,¹ Niger's new military government has thus far painted France, and its lackluster counterterrorism and development efforts, as to blame for Niger's woes.

As per the accompanying article from the pan-African news aggregator *Africanews.fr*, the military junta spokesman, COL Amadou Abdramane, has claimed France was orchestrating a concerted effort to undermine the new leadership by releasing 16 terrorists and violating Nigerien airspace. According to junta statements, "Events of an extreme gravity are unfolding in Niger as a result of the behavior of the French forces and their accomplices," and "we are witnessing a real plan of destabilization of our country, orchestrated by French forces." France has denied the claims. These sentiments echo previous assertions by senior officials in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, all claiming that France was funding or supporting terrorists.^{2,3}

These more specific claims are in line with a broader

ethos of anti-French sentiment that marked the overthrow in Niger. In the immediate aftermath of the takeover, thousands of protestors attacked the French Embassy in Niamey. As in Mali and Burkina Faso, protestors displayed signs depicting anti-French ("France kills in Niger") and pro-Russian ("Down with France, vive Russia!") sentiments. Translating this French antipathy into policy, on 4 August, the junta declared that it had formally annulled its security cooperation activities with France that were foundational to fighting Islamist insurgencies tied to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Simultaneously, it ceased the dissemination of French-funded broadcasters France 24 and RFI, following similar moves by Burkina Faso and Mali.

Unless former president Bazoum is reinstated, the takeover in Niger portends a loss of not only French but U.S. influence, especially in the counterterrorism space. If Mali and Burkina Faso provide any guide, it is reasonable to expect Niger's new government to pursue a similarly populist, anti-French, pro-Russian—and likely pro-Wagner⁴—path in coordination with other African military regimes.

Events of an extreme gravity are unfolding in Niger as a result of the behavior of the French forces and their accomplices.

Source: "Niger: la junte accuse la France d'avoir libéré des terroristes (Niger: junta accuses France of having liberated terrorists)," *Africanews.fr* (pan-African news aggregator), 8 August 2023. <https://fr.africanews.com/2023/08/09/niger-la-junte-accuse-la-france-davoir-libere-des-terroristes/>

Niger's new military rulers on Wednesday accused France, the country's traditional ally, of having "unilaterally freed captured terrorists," a term used for jihadists, and of breaching a ban on the country's air space.

They claimed that France released a number of jihadists, who then gathered to plan an attack on "military positions in the tri-border area," a hotspot region where the frontiers of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali converge.

"Events of an extreme gravity are unfolding in Niger as a result of the behaviour of the French forces and their accomplices," according to the statement issued by the new regime, called the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP).

continue on 31

The statement reported that a unit of the armed forces had come under attack on Wednesday, although it did not directly link this with France's alleged release of the jihadists.

A position held by the National Guard in a locality called Bourkou Bourkou, 30 kilometres (18 miles) from a gold mine at Samira in western Niger, came under attack at 6:30 am (0530 GMT), it said.

"At present, the toll is not yet known."

The statement called on the security forces to "raise their alert level across the country" and on the public "to remain mobilised and vigilant."

The regime also accused France of having allowed a "military plane" to take off Wednesday from neighbouring Chad, which then crossed into Niger, defying a ban imposed on Sunday.

The aircraft "deliberately cut off all contact with air traffic control on entering our air space," from 6:39-11:15 am (0539-1015 GMT), it said in a statement read on national TV.

France has around 1,500 troops in Niger, supporting the country in its fight against jihadists who swept in from Mali in 2015.

But relations broke down after French ally President Mohamed Bazoum was toppled by members of his guard on July 26.

The regime's accusations come on the eve of a summit by the West African regional bloc ECOWAS on how to tackle the Niger crisis.

ECOWAS — the Economic Community of West African States — had given the coup leaders until Sunday to reinstate Bazoum or face the risk of military intervention.

Notes:

- [1] For more on the relationship between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, see: Jason Warner, "Russia-Supported Military Rulers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea Continue To Deepen Ties," *OE Watch*, 04-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-supported-military-rulers-in-mali-burkina-faso-and-guinea-continue-to-deepen-ties/>; Jason Warner, "West African States Ruled By Military Leaders Seek To Circumvent Future Sanctions" *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/west-african-states-ruled-by-military-leaders-seek-to-circumvent-future-sanctions/>
- [2] For more information on claims that France is funding African terrorists, see: Jason Warner, "Mali Claims France Funded Terrorists; France Denies," *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/428171>; Jason Warner, "CAR Joins Mali in Accusing France of Funding Terrorists," *OE Watch*, 04-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/car-joins-mali-in-accusing-france-of-funding-terrorists/>
- [3] For more information on the anti-French sentiments in the security sphere in Africa, see: Jason Warner, "French Researchers Respond to Wave of Anti-French Sentiment in Africa," *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/french-researchers-respond-to-wave-of-anti-french-sentiment-in-africa/>; Jason Warner, Lassane Ouedraogo, and Matthew Kirwin, "The Fake News Phenomenon in the Sahel: 'Afrancaux News' and the Postcolonial Logics of Polemical Information," *African Studies Review*, 65 (4): December 2022, 911 - 938.
- [4] For more on how post-coup African states have begun to cooperate with the Wagner Group, see: Jason Warner, "Vast Majority of Malians Express Confidence in Russian Ability To Address Jihadist Violence," *OE Watch*, 06-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/vast-majority-of-malians-express-confidence-in-russias-ability-to-address-jihadist-violence/>; Jason Warner, "Mali Defends Reliance on Russian Counterterrorism Assistance," *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/437332>; Jason Warner, "Burkina Faso Fights Terrorism With Recruits and Russia," *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/436264>

West African States Split on Potential Intervention in Niger

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

The overthrow of the civilian government in Niger has prompted talk of military intervention by the standby force of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to restore deposed president Mohamed Bazoum to power. Those threats by the leader of ECOWAS, Nigerian President Bola, have led to ruptures in the African international order.

On one side are those West African states that showed some support for the proposed intervention. These tended to be the region's more democratic and pro-Western states. Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin have all said at one time or another that they would commit troops, according to the first article from *AfricaNews*. The article also notes that Niger recalled its ambassador from Abidjan in protest in the aftermath of Côte d'Ivoire's announcement of its intent to contribute forces.

On the other side are those West African states which, because of their own domestic makeup, have sided with the military junta in Niger and refused to participate in any ECOWAS intervention. As per the second article from *AllAfrica.com*, the most prominent among these are Burkina Faso and Mali, both of which are ruled by military juntas that came into power undergirded by anti-French, pro-Russian¹ discourse. Flatly rejecting

intervention, they expressed that they would instead send a joint delegation to Niger "in solidarity" with the Nigerien junta. The article also underscores that non-ECOWAS members Chad and Algeria, both of which share borders with Niger, assured Niger that they would not participate. Thus, of the seven countries that border Niger, four have said that they would not support intervention (Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Algeria), two stated that they would (Nigeria and Benin), with the seventh, Libya, not having made a clear statement so far of its stance on intervention.

Despite the different positions on possible ECOWAS intervention, some broad threads do run through the region.



Mohamed Bazoum, the former president of Niger, was deposed by a military junta in July 2023.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Bazoum_mhamed.jpg; Attribution: BY-SA 4.0

All current, non-suspended ECOWAS members (which excludes Mali and Burkina Faso) have condemned the overthrow and encouraged mediation, even if they do not support military intervention. Broad agreement exists outside of ECOWAS too: such a military intervention poses great risks to the security of the broader West African region, with a significant risk of leading to a region-wide war.

Senegal, Benin, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire have said they are ready to send troops, but face internal criticism and hesitation from other West African countries.

Source: “Les militaires rappellent l’ambassadeur du Niger en Côte d’Ivoire, (Military junta recalls Nigerien Ambassador from Ivory Coast), *AfricaNews.com*. 15 August 2023. <https://fr.africanews.com/2023/08/15/les-militaires-rappellent-lambassadeur-du-niger-en-cote-divoire/>

The coup leaders recalled the Nigerien envoy in Abidjan on Monday (Aug. 14) after remarks by Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara.

On his return from a summit of the ECOWAS August 10, Ouattara said the heads of state had agreed a military operation should “start as soon as possible”...

“Far from being the expression of the will of the brotherly Ivorian people, whose friendship with the people of Niger is unequivocal, this unusual declaration by President Ouattara and his eagerness to carry out an aggression against Niger which is in every way illegal and senseless, reflects in reality an order addressed to him and certain of his peers in the ECOWAS by other external powers, with the aim of preserving interests that no longer match those of today’s Niger.”...

Senegal, Benin, Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire have said they are ready to send troops, but face internal criticism and hesitation from other West African countries.

Source: Mimi Mefo Takambou, “Burkina Faso: Mali and Burkina Faso Send Joint Delegation to Niamey ‘In Solidarity’ With Niger,” *AllAfrica.com*, 11 August 2023. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202308070483.html>

Mali and Burkina Faso will send a joint official delegation to coup-hit Niger on Monday in a show of “solidarity” between the nations - all of whom are ruled by juntas. Meanwhile a source close to regional bloc Ecowas said an immediate military intervention to restore Niger’s toppled president was not on the cards.

The delegation, announced by the Malian army, is expected to arrive in Niger on Monday, according to Niger’s foreign ministry.

The country’s coup leaders defied a Sunday deadline from the West African bloc Ecowas to reinstate democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum or face possible military action.

Algeria and Chad, which are not part of Ecowas but share borders with Niger, have both stated they will not participate in any military operation.”

Notes:

- [1] For more on Burkina Faso’s relationship with Wagner and Russia, see: Jason Warner, “Russia-Supported Military Rulers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea Continue To Deepen Ties,” *OE Watch*, 04-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-supported-military-rulers-in-mali-burkina-faso-and-guinea-continue-to-deepen-ties/>; Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso Fights Terrorism With Recruits and Russia,” *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/436264>

Azerbaijan Protests India's Delivery of Weapons to Armenia

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary



Hikmat Hajiyev has been the Foreign Policy Advisor to the President of Azerbaijan since 2018.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hikmat_Hajiyev_via_VOA_\(cropped\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hikmat_Hajiyev_via_VOA_(cropped).png); Attribution: Public domain

For years, Armenia has watched its adversary, Azerbaijan, receive weapons from Turkey, Russia, and Israel. Armenia has a smaller defense budget than Azerbaijan's, and thus, has not been able to match the same level of acquisitions, notably, contracting for an export version of Russia's Iskander ballistic missile system in 2016.¹

However, despite these challenges, according to the first excerpted article from the Azerbaijani news agency *Trend*, Armenia received an unnamed weapon system from India in late July 2023. The article also mentions a \$400 million contract between India and Armenia signed this past year providing Armenia with the Pinaka multiple rocket launcher, 155 mm artillery systems, anti-tank rockets, and unknown quantities of ammunition.²

But the fact remains that today Armenia, even if it wants to, will not be able to transfer these weapons to the remnants of the so-called regime in Karabakh.

The second excerpted article from the Azerbaijani news website *Caliber* reports that the Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan – Head of the Foreign Policy Department of the Presidential Administration, Hikmet Hajiyev, met with India's ambassador to discuss his concerns about the increasing military cooperation between India and Armenia. Hajiyev noted that India's cooperation with Armenia comes as Azerbaijan and Armenia are negotiating a peace agreement and that the delivery of new weapons aggravates the situation. The article notes that India's ambassador would relay the message to Armenia, but that the meeting was unlikely to have a major impact. While Azerbaijan has fair relations with India, it has better relations with Pakistan, including an increasing level of security cooperation in recent years.³ Ultimately, the delivery of weapons to Armenia could lead Azerbaijan to deepen its relationship with Pakistan.

Source: Takhmaz Asadov, “Из Индии в Армению везут оружие - кто хочет накалить ситуацию в регионе? (Weapons are being delivered from India to Armenia – who wants to heat up the situation in the region?),” *Trend* (news agency in Azerbaijan), 26 July 2023. <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3777500.html>

The movement of a vehicle column from the border checkpoint Nurduz (Iran) to Armenia was recorded. According to the spread footage, it can be seen that the cargo being transported is covered with an awning so that the destination of the cargo remains unknown. However, it is clear that the cargo transported from Iran to Armenia is for military purposes and has already been delivered to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.

As for the consignor of the cargo, this is India, with which Armenia has recently been rapidly increasing military-technical cooperation. It is known only from open sources in the media that a military contract worth more than 400 million US dollars has been signed between Armenia and India...

Source: “Индия разжигает огонь на Южном Кавказе (India is stoking a fire in the South Caucasus),” *Caliber* (news website from Azerbaijan), 26 July 2023. <https://caliber.az/en/post/180998/>

On July 26, Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan - Head of the Foreign Policy Department of the Presidential Administration Hikmet Hajiyev met with the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of India to our country Sridharan Madhusudhanan.

At the meeting, Hikmet Hajiyev noted that the Azerbaijani side is concerned about the deepening of military cooperation between Armenia and India, in particular, the photos and videos circulated in the media in recent days about the transportation of Indian-made weapons systems through Iran to Armenia...

Hikmet Hajiyev stressed that the supply of weapons by India to Armenia, at a time when Azerbaijan is negotiating a peace agreement with this country, serves to militarize Armenia and aggravate the situation, hinder the establishment of lasting peace and security in the South Caucasus region...

The Indian Ambassador assured that he would inform official Delhi about the issue raised by Azerbaijan, noted the importance of dialogue between the two countries to discuss issues of concern in bilateral relations...

Notes:

- [1] The export version of Iskander missile system does not have as long of a range as the version Russia uses, but it has many of the same capabilities. For background on Armenia’s acquisition of it, see: Matthew Stein “Armenia’s Acquisition of the Iskander Ballistic Missile System,” *OE Watch*, November 2016. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>
- [2] For more information on Armenia’s acquisitions from India, see: Matthew Stein “Armenia Acquires Indian Multiple Rocket Launcher System Amid Delays in Russian Deliveries,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/armenia-acquires-indian-multiple-rocket-launcher-system-amid-delays-in-russian-deliveries/>
- [3] Security cooperation between Azerbaijan and Pakistan has been increasing for the past several years, see: Matthew Stein “Pakistan Providing Border Security Assistance to Azerbaijan,” *OE Watch*, October 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>

Kyrgyzstan Acquires Turkish UAS, Showing Less Reliance on Russia



A Turkish TAI Aksungur twin-engine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle on demonstration at Teknofest 2019.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_Aksungur_Teknofest2019_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_Aksungur_Teknofest2019_(1).jpg); Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Kyrgyzstan has relied on Russian security assistance to help upgrade weapon systems and equipment for its armed forces. When the government announced in late 2021 that it had purchased two Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 unmanned aerial systems (UAS) for the country's border guards, it marked a partial shift away from Russian systems that has continued with newer acquisitions.¹ The excerpted article from the independent news website *Fergana Agency* reports that Kyrgyzstan spent \$1.4 billion over the past two-and-a-half years on its armed forces. The article notes that Kyrgyzstan acquired Bayraktar, Aksungur, and Akinci UAS from Turkey, as well as Pechora surface-to-air missile systems and Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters from Russia. It is unclear if the TB-2s are additional systems, but the Aksungur and Akinci and Russian systems are new acquisitions.²

The article also discusses the numerous conflicts that have taken place on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border in recent years, suggesting one possible motivation for Kyrgyzstan's desire to upgrade its systems. According to the article, last September both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan brought up additional forces during one clash that killed dozens, demonstrating how clashes in recent years have increased in scale. Overall, Kyrgyzstan's military acquisitions are not a shift in the balance of power in the region, but it provides it an edge that Tajikistan does not have.

For 2.5 years, Kyrgyzstan has allocated 125 billion soms (\$1.422 billion) to upgrade equipment

Source: “За 2,5 года Кыргызстан потратил на обновление вооруженной техники почти \$1,5 млрд (For 2.5 years Kyrgyzstan has spent almost \$1.5 billion on upgrading military equipment),” *Fergana Agency* (independent Russian-language news website focusing on Central Asia), 21 July 2023. <https://fergana.agency/news/130812/>

For 2.5 years, Kyrgyzstan has allocated 125 billion soms (\$1.422 billion) to upgrade equipment. This was announced by the head of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) Kamchybek Tashiev at a government meeting...

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Tashiyev noted that in 2005-2020, Kyrgyzstan spent 3-5 billion soms (\$34-56.9 million) for the same purposes. For comparison, he listed that in 2021 alone, the country's authorities allocated 32 billion soms (\$364 million) to upgrade weapons, in 2022 - 53 billion soms (\$603 million), for six months of 2023 - more than 40 billion soms (\$455 million).

...According to Tashiev, Bayraktar, Aksungur, Akinci drones, the Pechora anti-aircraft missile system, Mi-8, Mi-17 helicopters were purchased.

"We didn't receive all this as a gift, all this was purchased with state budget funds," Tashiev stressed.

...in recent years there have been numerous border conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The biggest one happened in September last year. Artillery and heavy armored vehicles were involved in the battles on both sides.

Notes:

- [1] For background on Kyrgyzstan's acquisition of Bayraktars in 2021, see: Matthew Stein "Kyrgyzstan Conducts Exercise with Its New Bayraktars," *OE Watch*, 05-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/p/oe-watch-issues>
- [2] One of the deliveries of new Russian helicopters took place a few weeks before the announcement by Tashiev, see: Kseniya Timofeeva, "Кыргызстан получил новый вертолет Ми-17. От России, но за свои средства (Kyrgyzstan received a new Mi-17 helicopter. From Russia, but bought on its own)," *Kaktus*, 23 June 2023. https://kaktus.media/doc/482847_kyrgyzstan_polychil_novyy_vertolet_mi_17_ot_rossii_no_za_svoi_sredstva.html

Turkey Parlaying UAV Sales Into Prominent Position in Emerging Multipolar Gulf Security Architecture

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

There is a growing perception that Arab Gulf monarchies are intent on diversifying their defense and security partnerships beyond the United States’ security umbrella. A recent analysis in the prominent Saudi-owned monthly magazine *al-Majalla* argues that this new “multi-polar Gulf security” architecture is caused in part by the perceived decline in U.S. security commitments. Turkey, the article argues, is among the key countries ready to play a greater role in Gulf security.¹

A key element of Turkish global military influence has been the success of its UAV exports, especially the Bayraktar TB-2 drones, manufactured by the Turkish company Baykar.² In September 2022, the UAE placed an order for 120 TB-2 drones—at that time, the largest order ever.³ With reports of limited TB-2 inventory due to production constraints and high export demands, the deal was expected to have a localization component whereby some of the elements of manufacturing and production would occur on Emirati soil. Baykar delivered 20 units to the UAE shortly after the deal was announced. Since then, there has been no official follow-up or public reporting on the matter.

However, the 2022 Emirati deal has officially been eclipsed in value by a Saudi-Turkish deal for Akinci UAVs—the most advanced drone made by Baykar—signed during Turkish President Erdogan’s mid-July 2023 visit to Saudi Arabia. Baykar CEO Haluk Bayraktar explains that the deal not only helps align Turkey and Saudi defense sector priorities but is expected to have a positive windfall across Turkey’s defense industry, according to the second accompanying excerpt, from an interview published in the global defense-focused news website *Breaking Defense*. The deal has an explicit



Turkish Bayraktar Akinci UAV on display at Teknofest Aerospace and Technology Festival in 2019.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bayraktar_Akinci_SİHA_%28UAV%29.jpg;
Attribution: CC 4.0

localization component stipulating that up to 70 percent of each unit could be produced in Saudi Arabia.⁴ Involving Saudi military industry in the production process will not only ease the pressures on production in Turkey, but will also meet key Saudi “Vision 2030” goals for its domestic defense industry.⁵ It will also provide a major boost to Saudi capabilities, after its arsenal of Chinese import UAVs have underperformed in the Yemen conflict.⁶ Turkey, meanwhile, is receiving a much-needed influx of Gulf money in the hopes of stabilizing rampant inflation and persistent economic volatility.

Thanks to these agreements, hundreds of companies producing subsystems in the Turkish defense and aviation industry will expand their export portfolios...

Source:

(Turkey... the new entrant to Gulf security),” *al-Majalla* (Saudi-owned news magazine), 24 July 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/ktky387m>

"جیلخالی الی دیجیال ینم ال دفاوالا... ای کت

The repercussions of regional fluctuations and the obligations to compensate for the decline in the level of United States security commitments have prompted the Arab Gulf states to change their strategies on three levels: diversification in sources of arms supplies, diversification in partnerships, and diversification in alliances. Although the United States remains by far the most important security player in the Gulf, diversification strategies have opened the door for regional, external, traditional, and newcomer actors such as China, India, Russia, and Turkey to become involved in the Gulf region. This situation has led to what can be called “multi-polar Gulf security,” which raises many questions about the prospects for Gulf security and the potential role of newcomers in the region...

It is difficult to predict the future in a highly volatile and unstable region, especially with the countless variables involved in each situation. However, with the current trend of the United States continuing to detach from the region and in light of Turkey’s rising regional position and rapid leaps in the defense industry, Ankara may have an opportunity to strengthen its position in the Gulf and advance towards an enhanced security role. However, internal, regional, and international dynamics must always be taken into account, and Turkey should stabilize its domestic politics, enhance its economic strength, and significantly increase its trade interaction with the Gulf states to compete with actors from outside the region and facilitate a potentially enhanced security role in the future.

Source: “Baykar CEO hopes massive Saudi deal paves path for Turkish defense firms in KSA,” *Breaking Defense* (global defense-focused news website), 10 August 2023. <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/08/baykar-ceo-hopes-massive-saudi-deal-paves-path-for-turkish-defense-firms-in-ksa/>

“Our partners ASELSAN and ROKETSAN, with whom we collaborate, have also entered agreements with NCMS based on their technological capabilities. Thanks to these agreements, hundreds of companies producing subsystems in the Turkish defense and aviation industry will expand their export portfolios through new collaborations in this field,” Bayraktar said...

“...Joining forces with the Saudi defense industry will accelerate Baykar’s rate and capacity of production, which is crucial to meet the burgeoning demand for the Turkish unmanned aerial solutions,” Kasapoglu said...

Notes:

- [1] For background see: Ali Bakir, "Turkey’s defense industry is on the rise. The GCC is one of its top buyers," *The Atlantic Council*, 4 August 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>
- [2] For more on Baykar and Turkish drone exports, see: Karen Kaya, "Turkey as a Drone Superpower: A Case Study of a Mid-Size Power Driving the Operational Environment," *FMSO’s Foreign Perspective Brief*, 28 March 2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/2023-03-28-turkey-as-a-drone-superpower-a-case-study-of-a-mid-size-power-driving-the-operational-environment-karen-kaya-update/>
- [3] Over the past decade, Turkey’s military influence among Gulf countries was centered on its close defense and security relationship with Qatar. Turkish relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE were strained for much of the 2010s. They thawed in 2021 when the Qatar embargo ended and a broader regional rapprochement began.
- [4] Jeremy Binnie, "Local production agreements signed for Saudi Bayraktar Akinci UAVs," *Jane’s*, 8 August 2023. <https://www.janes.com/news/2023/08/08/Local-production-agreements-signed-for-Saudi-Bayraktar-Akinci-UAVs>

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com/defence-news/news-detail/local-production-agreements-signed-for-saudi-bayraktar-akinci-uavs

- [5] For more on the defense industry component of Saudi Vision 2030, see: Lucas Winter "Saudi Arabia and China in the Arabian Sea," *OE Watch*, October 2016. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195241>; Lucas Winter, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE Streamline Military Industry," *OE Watch*, January 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/307562>; and Lucas Winter, "Saudi Arabia's Domestic UAV Program Slow To Get Off the Ground," *OE Watch*, 01-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/403476>
- [6] See: Lucas Winter, "UAV Technologies Proliferating in Yemen and Saudi Arabia," *OE Watch*, 07-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/oe-watch-vol-12-iss-07/>

Syrian Regime Forces Increase UAV Use Along Jordanian Border



An Ababil-3 UAV at an Iranian arms expo on Kish Island in November 2016.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ababil_3_UAV.jpg; Attribution: CC 4.0

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Reported unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) use by Syrian regime forces and their allies along the border with Jordan has noticeably increased. Jordanian authorities claimed that they had intercepted at least five small drones smuggling weapons and/or illicit substances from Syria between June and mid-August 2023.¹ Two reports from Syrian opposition sources provide context to the recent uptick in UAV use by Syrian regime forces and their allies. The first accompanying excerpt, published by the Horan Free Gathering, an opposition group in southern Syria, stated that UAVs have been used to smuggle drugs since at least 2018, when the conflict was frozen in southern Syria. Recent clamp-downs along the land border have prompted smugglers to rely more heavily on UAVs. The article claims that Iran has transferred several combat UAVs to Syrian forces in Daraa,

Iran has transferred many dual-use drones, with surveillance and bombing capabilities, to Daraa Governorate.

making them “the regime’s new weapon in the province.” The second accompanying report, from the Syrian opposition media channel *Syria TV*, provides details on two recent Syrian regime UAV strikes against rebel leaders in Daraa Province. Per the report, both attacks were conducted at night using Iranian Ababil drones, and neither attack appears to have succeeded against its primary target, only causing damage to buildings. The reports note that the Ababil UAVs fly quietly at low altitudes and rely on human-planted targeting devices. While Iranian-backed regime forces have employed UAVs throughout the conflict, the uptick in their use in southern Syria is notable and likely to cause concern in neighboring Jordan and Israel.

Source:

ةديجلا ماطنلا ةلېسو ةرېسما تارئاطلا.. ةنمألا تاي لمعل او تارخ مالم بېرەت نېب (From Drug Smuggling to Security Operations... UAVs are the Regime’s New Method),” 19 July 2023, *Horan Free Gathering* (southern Syria opposition group), <https://www.horanfree.com/archives/13821>

The regime’s use of small drones to smuggle drugs is not new. Since the settlement process in southern Syria at the end of July 2018, it began to use to smuggle drugs to Jordan, mainly high-value cocaine and “crystal,” in addition to smuggling some light weapons and ammunition...

A source for the Free Horan Gathering confirmed that Iran has transferred many dual-use drones, with surveillance and bombing capabilities, to Daraa Governorate, and has trained officers and members of the Syrian regime forces on using them, making it the regime’s new weapon in the province.

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Source:

ايروس ي ف ناريا ذوفن عسوي ديج یركسع كيتكت .. اعرد ي ف ميسملا تارئاطلا

(UAVs in Daraa... New Military Tactic Expands Iranian Influence in Daraa)," *Syria TV* (Syrian opposition media network), 4 August 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/sxssrr6v>

From the beginning of last July until the second of August, 6 sorties were recorded by Ababil drones, west of Daraa, all of them flying after dark, according to what an informed source told Syria TV. On August 1, a drone targeted the house of the young man, Amjad Al-Mizal, in the town of Al-Yadoudah, west of Daraa, without recording any casualties. Abu Malik al-Zoubi, 35 years old, from the city of Tafas, west of Daraa, who witnessed the bombing of a house in the city on the 24th of last July, told Syria TV that an Ababil-2 drone targeted the house of journalist Muhannad al-Zoubi after midnight with a shell containing high explosives, causing substantial damage to the house...

He added that these planes do not make a sound while flying in the area, and sometimes they do not emit light, and they fly at low altitudes to accurately hit their target...

A leading source in the opposition factions told Syria TV that officers from the Fourth Division recently supervised training operations for regime members on the use of drones at the headquarters of the Fifth Division in the city of Izraa in rural Daraa. The training included dozens of members of the regime's army and its security services and aimed to improve their drone-handling capabilities, according to the commander. He added that the training focused on Iranian-made Ababil 2 and Ababil 3 drones, including those made locally, in addition to Quadcopters used by local militias to smuggle expensive crystal meth and cocaine to the Kingdom of Jordan and Arab countries.

Notes:

- [1] Jordanian authorities also reported other UAV interceptions earlier in 2023. In May, a Jordanian airstrike killed a prominent drug dealer in Syrian territory. For more on "Captagon," the key illicit substance smuggled from Syria, see: Lucas Winter, "Pharmaceutical Drugs and the Syrian War," *OE Watch*, December 2015.

Vietnam Taking Diplomatic Approach to Spratly Islands Territorial Disputes

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

In June, the Vietnamese Embassy in France hosted a conference in Paris to reaffirm Vietnamese sovereignty of the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. As reported in the Vietnamese-language publication *baotintuc.com*, the conference was attended by the Vietnamese Ambassador to France, European scholars on Vietnam, and Vietnamese citizens in Europe who had previously visited the Spratly Islands.¹ Vietnam, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei each lay claim to territory in the island chain.² Conference attendees examined the historical, cultural, political, and legal perspectives on the Spratly Islands, and concluded with a consensus for Vietnam to avoid using force to regain sovereignty over the islands. The scholars stated that historical evidence showed Vietnam had occupied the islands since at least 300 years ago. They urged Vietnam to use diplomacy and negotiations as well as displays of solidarity with allied nations to push forward their territorial claims.³ The conference attendees further emphasized the need not just for older Vietnamese to support the Vietnamese Navy and to donate money to the cause, but also for Vietnamese youth and the international Vietnamese community to stand beside Vietnam.

Consistent with this diplomatic approach to the Spratly Islands, Vietnam has also avoided direct naval confrontations in the South China Sea. For example, as the second excerpted Vietnamese-language article from *tienphong.com* notes, Taiwan conducted live-fire military training drills near the islands. Vietnam responded by announcing its opposition to the drills and demanded that they be canceled, stating that Taiwan was threatening peace in the South China Sea.⁴ Vietnam's Foreign Ministry also asserted it had legal and historical justification to claim sovereignty over the Spratly Islands.

The presentations examined many aspects of the East Sea and the issue of Vietnam's sovereignty over the sea and islands from historical, cultural, political, and legal perspectives.

Source: “Biển Đông và chủ quyền biển đảo Việt Nam dưới góc nhìn của các học giả châu Âu (East Sea and Vietnam's sovereignty over the sea and islands from the perspective of European scholars)” *baotintuc.vn* (Vietnamese publication covering topics in domestic and international affairs concerning Vietnam), 11 June 2023. <https://baotintuc.vn/thoi-su/bien-dong-va-chu-quyen-bien-dao-viet-nam-duoi-goc-nhin-cua-cac-hoc-gia-chau-au-20230611102242092.htm>

On June 10, in Paris, France, a scientific conference with the theme “East Sea and Vietnam's sovereignty issues” took place with the participation of a large number of Vietnamese scholars and admirers of the sea and islands. On this occasion, a meeting between overseas Vietnamese who had visited the Spratlys was held together with an exhibition of photos and artifacts about this archipelago. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Vietnamese Ambassador to France, Dinh Toan Thang, highly appreciated the efforts of individuals and associations contributing to organizing the workshop.

The situation in the East Sea, and solutions to handle disputes and options for marine economic development, were mentioned by the speakers. Mr. Patrice Jorland, professor of History and former president of the France-Vietnam Friendship Association, stated that, according to the law of the sea and international law, Vietnam has a large exclusive economic zone. Mr. Jorland claimed Vietnam has sovereignty in the East Sea. Regarding

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sovereignty over Truong Sa and Hoang Sa, he said that historical evidence shows that Vietnam has asserted sovereignty over these two archipelagoes, especially Hoang Sa, since the late 18th century, under the Nguyen Dynasty.

As for Ms. Malgorzata Pietrasiak, a professor at the University of Lodz in Poland, an expert on Vietnam, she highly respected Vietnam's method of handling issues at sea, which she calls "hedging." According to her, this is a wise, flexible, and peaceful strategy devoid of tension, but also is not giving in.... With 14 presentations, the workshop contributed to bringing to the public perspectives and initiatives for mutual building and developing on the basis of respecting each other's sovereignty and territory.

"Việt Nam phản đối Đài Loan tập trận ở Trường Sa (Vietnam opposes Taiwanese drills in Truong Sa)" *tienphong.vn* (Government-owned Vietnamese daily newspaper), 8 June 2023. <https://tienphong.vn/viet-nam-phan-doi-dai-loan-tap-tran-o-truong-sa-post1541256.tpo>

On June 7, Taiwan conducted a live-fire drill in the waters around Ba Binh in the Spratly archipelago of Vietnam. Vietnam strongly opposes this and demands that Taiwan cancel illegal activities. On June 8, in response to a reporter's question about Vietnam's response to this activity, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Pham Thu Hang stated "Vietnam has a full legal basis and historical evidence to assert its sovereignty over the Truong Sa archipelago.... Therefore, Taiwan holding a live-fire drill in the waters around Ba Binh in the Spratly archipelago of Vietnam is a serious violation of Vietnam's sovereignty over this archipelago and threatens peace, stability, safety, and maritime security, while creating tensions and complicating the situation in the East Sea."

Notes:

- [1] Although the South China Sea is the name most associated with the body of water shared by Vietnam, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, Vietnam refers to this body of water as the East Sea. A similar naming dispute occurs between South Korea, North Korea, and Japan. Japan refers to the body of water separating itself from the Korean Peninsula as the Sea of Japan, whereas North Korea refers to it as the Korea East Sea while South Korea refers to it simply as the East Sea. The naming of these bodies of water is entangled in the struggle for territory and sovereignty over the regions in question. Regarding Korea and Japan, U.S. officials have historically referred to the waterway as the Sea of Japan, at times raising the ire of South Korean leaders.
- [2] China, Taiwan, and Vietnam all claim sovereignty over the entirety of the Spratly Islands. The Philippines, in contrast, only claims sovereignty over several features in the Kalayaan Island Group, while Malaysia also claims only some features and Brunei claims one reef. In terms of control, Vietnam occupies 26 features in the Spratly Islands, while the Philippines occupies nine, China occupies seven, Malaysia occupies five, and Taiwan occupies one. The contesting parties have officially sought to settle the dispute through bilateral agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but all efforts have ended without a permanent solution. See Hasan, Monjur and Jian, He, "Spratly Islands Dispute in the South China Sea: Potential Solutions," *Journal of East Asia and International Law*, 2019, 12(1), pp. 145-168.
- [3] Vietnam claims its occupation of the Spratly Islands can be traced to the Nguyen lords, who from the 1600s annually sailed to the Bai Cat Vang island groups to retrieve shipwrecked goods and remained in the archipelago for up to six months. During the reign of the Nguyen emperors from the early 1800s, there is documentation that identified the Truong Sa archipelago from the Hoang Sa Islands in the Spratly Islands as Vietnamese possessions. It was not until the French protectorate was established over Vietnam in 1884 that sovereignty over the islands became contested. Kelly, Todd C., "Vietnamese Claims to the Truong Sa Archipelago," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies*, Fall 1999, 3, pp. 1-21.
- [4] For a short video documentary on tensions in the South China Sea, see: South China Sea, *Chinaboundaries.com*. <https://chinaboundaries.com/map/south-china-sea/>; and Eric Hyer, *Pragmatic Dragon: China's Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements*, UBC Press (2015), Chapter 12 (pages 236-262).