



OEWATCH

FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



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ON THE COVER:

President of TAIWAN Tsai Ing-wen reviews a Marine Corps battalion in Kaohsiung in July 2020.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_China_Marine_Corps_-_/media/File:President_of_TAIWAN_Tsai_Ing-wen_reviews_a_Marine_Corps_battalion_in_Kaohsiung_in_July_2020_臺灣總統蔡英文校閱海軍陸戰隊九九旅步二營.jpg; Attribution: CC By 2.0

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OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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People's Liberation Army Promoting Battlefield Commander's Initiative

By Kevin McCauley
OE Watch Commentary

People's Liberation Army (PLA) battlefield commanders have historically been constrained by the PLA's preference for centralized over decentralized command authority.¹ However, a recent article from the *PLA Daily*, the official newspaper of the PLA, addresses the need to move from centralized to mission command to allow for greater initiative by operational and tactical commanders. Doing so would provide the PLA with greater flexibility and adaptability to address rapidly changing battlefield situations and opportunities. The article argues that the PLA must “learn from the relevant concepts of mission command, optimize and improve the original command mode, and build a command mode suitable for future information-based and intelligent warfare.”

The article describes that mission command—a concept employed by the U.S. military—leverages frontline commanders' initiative on uncertain and chaotic battlefields due to their more realistic awareness of on-the-ground realities.² Mission command preserves the superior commander's operational intent, guidance, tasks, and resources while

allowing flexibility to the frontline commander to accomplish the mission. As it notes, “it is necessary to create an open architecture to enhance the system's ability to flexibly assemble and adapt to changes.”

Advancements in command-and-control systems and intelligent decision-making technologies will improve the ability of frontline commanders to make informed decisions. Allowing subordinate commanders to Observe, Orient, Decide, Act (OODA) will not only facilitate rapid decision-making but provide for more resilient command if communications with the superior headquarters are disrupted. The author states that mission command provides for greater decentralization of decision-making creating a stronger and more ubiquitous command-and-control system.

Mission command advocates fully leveraging the initiative of frontline commanders in a battlefield full of uncertainty and chaos to gain decision-making advantages.

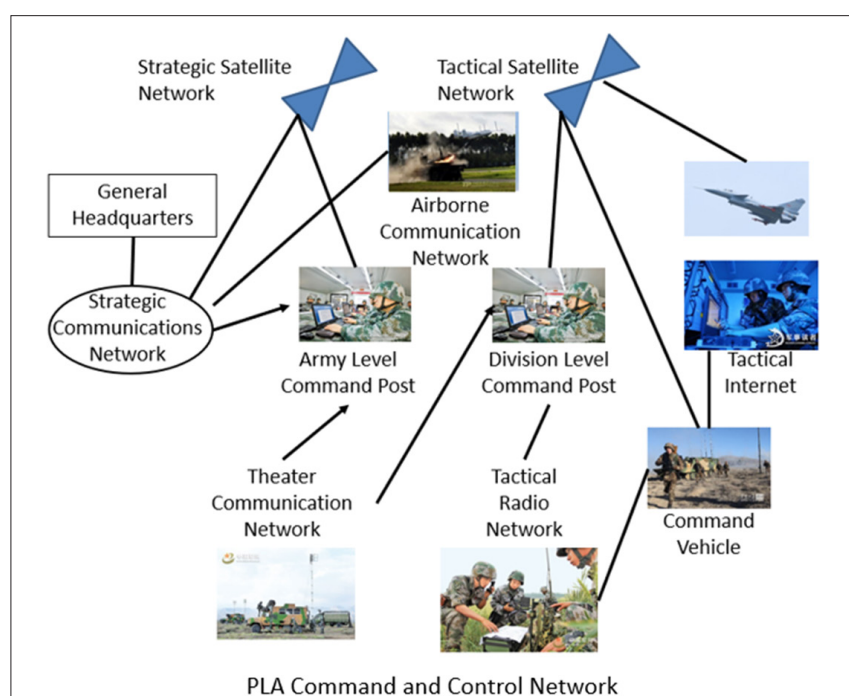


Diagram outlining PLA Command and Control Network.

Source: Liu Xiaoming et al, *Battlefield Information Management (战场信息管理)*, (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2012), 36

Source: Fie Paiguo, “从集中式指挥转向任务式指挥—美空军大力推动任务式指挥透视 (From Centralized Command to Mission Command – The U.S. Air Force Vigorously Promotes the Mission Command Perspective),” *PLA Daily* (official newspaper of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army), 24 August 2023. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-08-24&paperNumber=07&articleid=913630

Learn from relevant operational concepts to optimize and improve the command-and-control organizational model. Under the conditions of modern warfare, it is not easy to organize large-scale, long-term, and high-intensity air operations. If the combat command ability cannot be improved, everything is out of the question. Judging from the development practice of foreign militaries, the contradiction of being constrained by two aspects has become increasingly obvious. First, the operational command and control process is not perfect enough, and the hierarchical command mode is not perfect enough. The second is that the control-based command and control method cannot adapt to modern high-intensity air confrontation. So, facing future wars, how to optimize and improve the command-and-control mode? The effective way is to fully consider the confrontation environments of different intensities, learn from the relevant concepts of mission command, optimize and improve the original command mode, and build a command mode suitable for future information-based and intelligent warfare.

Build an open system architecture to lay a solid foundation for the flexible restructuring of the command-and-control system. To achieve mission command, it is necessary to upgrade the command-and-control capabilities of the entire system. On the one hand, it is necessary to create an open architecture to enhance the system’s ability to flexibly assemble and adapt to changes. On the other hand, it is necessary to promote node element transformation and promote the reorganization of digital space combat resources. Realizing the node element of operational entities is to digitize, network, serve, and standardize them, making them easier and more convenient to be called by other platforms.”

Notes:

- 1 For further information on PLA modernization efforts see: Kevin McCauley, “PLA Army Efforts Integrate New Technology and Equipment Into Units,” *OE Watch*, 08-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/421895>
- 2 Authoritative PLA publications indicate the need to promote more initiative by commanders, particularly at the tactical level. PLA authors believe this is necessary due to the dynamic and fast pace of modern combat operations as well as the need to take advantage of fleeting, unforeseen battlefield opportunities.

Chinese Cognitive Operations Might Impact Taiwan's Will To Resist

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

Taiwan might not be prepared to resist a Chinese invasion, according to Shen Po-yang, an associate professor at the Institute of Criminology at Taipei University. The following article excerpt from Taiwan cable TV network *Sanlih E-Television News* highlights some of Shen's remarks, which he gave during a meeting held by the World Taiwanese Association and the European Taiwan Association in Vilnius, Lithuania. Shen, who researches Chinese cognitive operations against Taiwan, attributes his conclusion to China's growing technological capability in disinformation operations and Taiwan's internal division. He explains that Chinese information operations against Taiwan primarily targets the 20 percent who consider themselves neutral, including those who are undecided on whether Taiwan should commit to war or surrender should the mainland invade. According to the article, a survey of Taiwan's vulnerability to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) cognitive warfare shows how divided the country is in its beliefs. For example, according to the survey, less than 20 percent of people in Taiwan believe the disinformation comes from external forces; 30 percent believe it comes from China; 20 percent believe it comes from the United States; and 20 percent believe it comes from Japan. According to Shen, "The reality is very far away (from what people believe)." Complementing the technical aspects of Chinese cognitive operations, Shen sees Xi Jinping's continued emphasis on the "China Dream" as an ideology to win over the people when the economy is bad and he concludes that Taiwan's will to resist will depend on their internal conditions.

A study in the *Oxford Journal of Global Security Studies*,¹ explains that China's vast cognitive operations against Taiwan are conducted through various governmental departments and party agencies that deal with Taiwan affairs including the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, the United Front Work Department, the PLA, and Propaganda



President of TAIWAN Tsai Ing-wen reviews a Marine Corps battalion in Kaohsiung in July 2020.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_China_Marine_Corps_-_/media/File:President_of_TAIWAN_Tsai_Ing-wen_reviews_a_Marine_Corps_battalion_in_Kaohsiung_in_July_2020_臺灣總統蔡英文校閱海軍陸戰隊九旅步二營.jpg; Attribution: CC By 2.0

The will to fight depends on our (Taiwan's) internal conditions. There are differences just on whether to resist China.

Department. The CCP's primary goal is to promote unification and to increase Taiwan's internal conflict and anti-independence views. The study describes four ways in which China conducts cognitive operations. First, China uses military intimidation as a kind of psychological manipulation to prevent Taiwan from seeking independence. Second, China uses economic and sociocultural factors to increase its influence by promoting bilateral exchange across the Taiwan Strait. Third, China uses Mazuism, a popular folk religion that originated in China but is practiced by 70 percent of Taiwan's population, to strengthen its connection with Taiwan culturally. Finally, China uses disinformation and content farms on the internet to sway public opinion.²

Source: “「台灣抵抗意志不如烏克蘭」學者:恐不及因應資訊戰 (Taiwan’s Will to Resist is Not as Good as Ukraine’s; Scholar: It May Not Be Able to Cope With Information Warfare),” *Sanlih E-Television News* (Taiwan cable TV network), 11 September 2023. https://www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=1351592&utm_campaign=viewallnews

Shen Boyang, a scholar who specializes in the CCP’s cognitive operations against Taiwan, said that he is worried that Taiwan does not have enough time to prepare for information warfare, because China’s technology is becoming more and more sophisticated, and Taiwan’s internal divisions have made The lack of will to resist China is different from the situation faced by countries such as Lithuania and Ukraine when facing Russia.

Shen Boyang pointed out at the forum that the main targets of China’s information manipulation on Taiwan are those who consider themselves neutral, neither blue nor green, including those who have not yet made up their minds on whether to commit war or surrender when facing the CCP’s invasion of Taiwan. This group of about 20% of Taiwanese people are gradually being China controls and locks in through cross-strait exchanges or the collection of personal information on the Internet.

His survey showed Taiwan’s vulnerability to the Chinese Communist Party’s cognitive warfare. For example, less than 20% of Taiwanese believe that fake news mainly comes from external forces, of which more than 30% point to China, but 20% each point to the United States or Japan. “With The reality is very far away.”

... there is the emotional aspect. After Xi Jinping came to power, he has continuously emphasized the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” internally, which may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because in the past, the CCP could rely on the economy to stabilize its internal affairs. “When the economy is good, there is no need to talk about great rejuvenation, but when the economy is bad, it must use ideology.”

What worries him most is the will of the Taiwanese people to resist. “This depends on our internal conditions. There are differences just on whether to resist China.” ...

Notes:

- 1 Tzu-Chieh Hung and Tzu-Wei Hung, “How China’s Cognitive Warfare Works: A Frontline Perspective of Taiwan’s Anti-Disinformation Wars,” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 4, December 2022 <https://academic.oup.com/jogss/article/7/4/ogac016/6647447>
- 2 Social media has an important role in China’s cognitive warfare tactics. Social media can be used to spread “deepfakes” and “accelerationism” to deliberately manipulate emotions and collective consciousness to sway public opinion and exacerbate polarization. For more information, see Cindy Hurst, “Chinese Observations on the Role and Impact of Social Media in Cognitive Warfare,” *OE Watch*, 05-2022 <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/chinese-observations-on-the-role-and-impact-of-social-media-in-cognitive-warfare/>; and Cindy Hurst, “China Wages Cognitive Warfare To Shape Taiwanese Public Opinion,” *OE Watch*, 02-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/china-wages-cognitive-warfare-to-shape-taiwanese-public-opinion/>

China Setting the Stage for Reunification

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) is predicting that unification with Taiwan is even higher on Chinese President Xi Jinping's agenda now that he is in his third five-year term as president. According to Taiwan's state-run national news agency Zhongyang Tongxunshe (Central News Agency), the MND bases its conclusion on plans and events over the past year. First, during the 20th National Congress in October 2022, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted the "one country, two systems" formula into its party constitution. The MND views this as providing definitive guidance on the CCP's Taiwan policy. Second, during the 14th National People's Congress in March 2023, Xi vowed to lead the CCP to "solidly" promote "the great cause of national reunification."¹

The CCP wrote the "one country, two systems" formula into its party constitution, which sets more definitive guidance on the party's Taiwan policy.

Finally, the generals appointed as members of the Central Military Commission, the military's leading authority, have been those with experience in combat, military technology, and handling Taiwan-related matters.² This was evident in the selection of the two vice chairmen, directly subordinate to Xi. First, Zhang Youxia was selected to serve another term as Vice Chairman. Particularly noteworthy is that Zhang's selection went against China's retirement norms: while the retirement age for the PLA is 68, Zhang was 72 when selected for this term. The flouting of these conventions is likely because Zhang has combat experience, although dated, from the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War. The second Vice Chairman, He Weidong, recently led the Eastern Theater Command, which is responsible for PLA operations in the East China Sea and Taiwan. These selections underscore Xi's strategic thinking.

Based on the article, it is important to note the MND is not predicting China will use force to unify with Taiwan by 2027. Rather, it assesses that China is ramping up efforts to promote reunification and build its military capability in the



Map showing the proximity between China and Taiwan.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995_-_/media/File:Taiwan_Strait.png; Attribution: Public Domain

event force is used. As the MND points out, the PLA's Rocket Force plans to establish precision strike capabilities by 2027 in the "first island chain" consisting of Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. However, the PLA also plans to establish a "comprehensive and versatile ground force" and push its naval and air force capabilities by 2035 to the "second island chain" consisting of Japan, Guam, and Micronesia. This will give China more capability to counter a potential offensive in support of Taiwan.

Source: Matt Yu and Shih Hsiu-chuan, “Pursuing Taiwan Unification High on Xi’s Third Term Agenda: MND,” Focus Taiwan: *CNA English News* (the national news agency of the Republic of China), 31 August 2023. <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202308310023>

Pursuing unification with Taiwan is likely to be high on the agenda during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s (習近平) third five-year term that began earlier this year, Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) said in a new report.

...At the congress, the CCP wrote the “one country, two systems” formula into its party constitution, which sets more definitive guidance on the party’s Taiwan policy, the MND said.

Another indication was the first speech given by Xi at the 14th National People’s Congress, after he was elected for an unprecedented third term as president, in which he vowed to lead the CCP to “solidly” promote the “great cause of national reunification,” it added.

Xi has prioritized those with expertise in military technology, combat experience and experience handling matters related to Taiwan in the appointing of CMC generals, the MND said.

The MND added that He Weidong (何衛東) was appointed to hold one of the two CMC vice chairmanships because he was well versed with People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military readiness, which would be an asset in the event of a cross-Taiwan Strait conflict.

The MND said the PLA’s Rocket Force aims to establish precise strike capabilities against adversaries in the first island chain by 2027, referring to the chain of islands that make up Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines.

It added that the PLA also aims to construct a comprehensive and versatile ground force, to modernize its navy so it is able to counter adversaries spanning from the first island chain to the second island chain by 2035, and to extend the attacking range of the air force to the second island chain by 2035.

Notes:

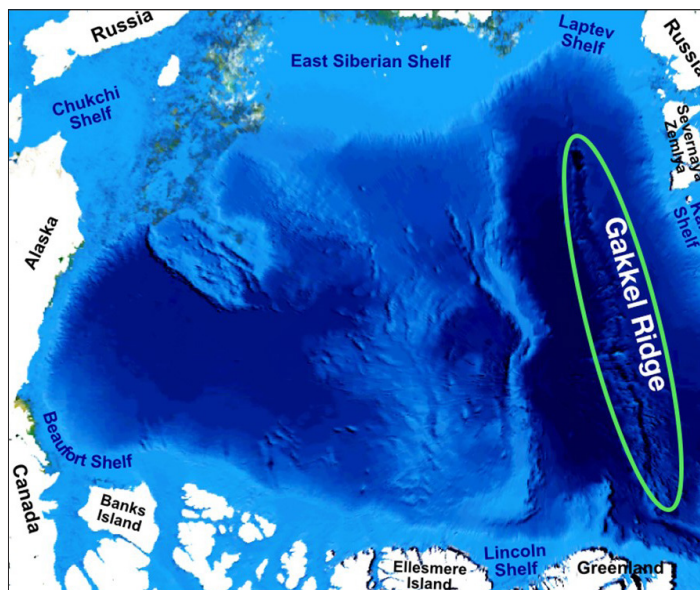
- 1 For recent statements from the current Chinese leadership regarding the importance of Taiwan, see: Dodge Billingsley, “Chinese Officials Justify Reaction To Western Presence In Taiwan Strait,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmsotr.doc.army.mil/2023/chinese-officials-justify-reaction-to-western-presence-in-taiwan-strait-2/>
- 2 For more information on the CMC’s current leadership, see: Brian Waidelich, “China’s New Military Leadership: Possible Strengths and Weaknesses,” Center for Naval Analyses, 11 November 2022. <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2022/11/chinas-new-military-leadership-possible-strengths-and-weaknesses>

Chinese Icebreaker Sails To the Arctic

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

In recent years, China has defined itself as “a near Arctic state.” Official Chinese statements have stressed that the Arctic belongs to the world and that China, as the world’s most populous state, is not content to let the nations of the Arctic Council, of which China is an observer, control the Arctic. As the excerpted article from the Norway-based The Barents Observer notes, China has dispatched the Xuelong-2 icebreaker ship to the Arctic. China is promoting the expedition as a scientific venture focusing on the Gakkel Ridge. However, recent Arctic initiatives with Russia¹ provide evidence that China is committed to a presence in the Arctic while strengthening China’s claims to Arctic resources.

China is determined to participate in Arctic governance and that it has legitimate interests and rights in the region.



Gakkel Ridge highlighted on map of main bathymetric features of the Arctic Ocean, taken mainly from Weber 1983 ‘Maps of the Arctic Basin Sea Floor: A History of Bathymetry and its Interpretation’ on a base of a screenshot taken from the NASA WorldWind software.

Source: Mikenorton, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gakkel_Ridge#/media/File:Arctic_Ocean_bathymetric_features.png (modified by Combat Films and Research to feature Gakkel Ridge as permission granted by CC BY-SA 3.0; Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0)

Source: Atle Staalesen, “China’s icebreaker Xuelong-2 is sailing to the North Pole,” The Barents Observer (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 17 August 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/08/chinas-icebreaker-xuelong-2-sailing-north-pole>

China’s icebreaker Xuelong-2 is sailing to the North Pole

In cooperation with researchers from Russia and Thailand, Arctic experts from the Chinese Polar Institute are sailing 15,500 nautical miles on an expedition to the top of the world. It is the country’s 13th Arctic Ocean scientific expedition and the fourth voyage to the region by Xuelong-2, the new and fully Chinese-built icebreaker. On the 12th of July, the vessel set out from Shanghai. On the 17th of August it was breaking through the sea-ice at 84 °N.

One of the purposes of the expedition, organized by the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources together with the Polar Institute, is to study geology and geophysics of the Gakkel Ridge. The researchers will also conduct investigations of atmospheric, sea ice, marine, and subsurface environmental surveys, as well as surveys of biomes and pollutants. According to Wang Jinhui, head of the expedition team, a key objective is to collect genetic specimens from the region. “We have isolated 130 strains of bacteria from the seawater and sediments and collected 68 genetic specimens of marine life to further enrich the polar gene bank and specimens of marine life. This also enhanced China’s capability in environmental protection and assessment of marine pollution in the Arctic Ocean,”

The vessel is a new ship with modern facilities for the researchers. The expedition team works in two shifts for 24 hours a day for about 40 days. A library and gym are on board the 122-meter icebreaker. A team of doctors

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provide medical services, and four chefs provide “a balanced diet for over 100 expedition members.” The expedition is conducted in cooperation with partners from Russia and Thailand. The icebreaker is due to return to Shanghai in late September.

Until 2020, the original Xuelong, an older Russian-built vessel, housed the Chinese Arctic expeditions, some of which proceeded along Russia’s Northern Sea Route, across the central Arctic Ocean, as well as through Canada’s Northwest Passage.

During the Arctic Circle China conference in 2019, Chief of China’s State Oceanic Administration underlined that “protecting the Arctic environment is a common responsibility and China will make its contribution to this.” He also stressed that China sees itself as “a near-Arctic state” and it will “actively participate with wisdom and strength to future protection and development.” In early 2018, the country adopted an Arctic policy that highlights joint efforts and cooperative approaches, and at the same time underlines that China is determined to participate in Arctic governance and that it has legitimate interests and rights in the region.

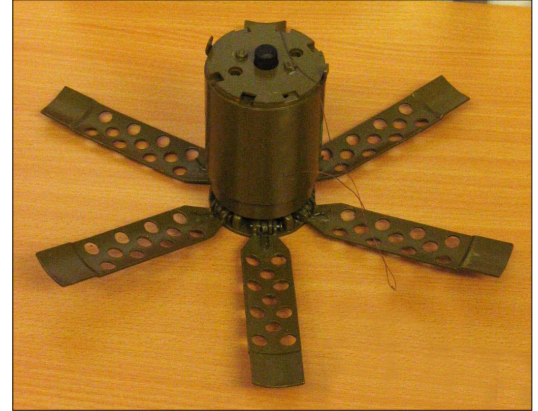
Notes:

- 1 For more information on China-Russia initiatives in the Arctic, see: Les Grau, “Russia and China Expanding Coast Guard Cooperation in Arctic,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-and-china-expanding-coast-guard-cooperation-in-arctic/>

Russia Plans To Add Remote Mining UAV Platoons to Engineer Units

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The war in Ukraine continues to drive changes in military units and doctrine. Innovative use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has been a common theme for both Russia and Ukraine since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Both countries have modified UAVs to lay mines. The accompanying excerpted article from the Russian monthly *Военная мысль* (*Military Thought*) discusses Russian plans to formalize this capability by creating a "special mining platoon" within certain engineer units. Although this is one of the first mentions of how adaptations from the so-called "special military operation"¹ are being implemented into Russia's version of a Modification Table of Organization and Equipment (MTO&E), it is unlikely to be the last. Other novel uses of UAVs, including as "suicide drones," will likely be integrated into Russian MTO&E structures soon.



A Soviet/Russian made **POM-2** fragmentation anti-personnel mine on display.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/POM-2_mine#/media/File:POM-2S.jpg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0

The use of UAVs for the remote laying of anti-personnel mines will ensure the element of surprise when used in both the defense and offense...

Source: D.F. Evmenenko and S.I. Melnik, "Дистанционное минирование местности при помощи Малых беспилотных летательных аппаратов (The use of small unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct remote mining)," *Военная мысль* [Military Thought] (monthly Russian military periodical), September 2023. <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/>

Combat actions in the special military operation do not have the characteristics of high intensity [warfare] and rapid battlefield changes due to widescale usage of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

The most widespread among them are multi-rotor helicopter-type devices (multicopters). Simple, cheap and reliable, they are easy to control and very maneuverable at low speeds and low altitudes. These systems can easily change targets in the field. In addition, such systems are easy to transport, scalable in size and load capacity...

The Second World War, military conflicts of recent decades, especially in the Persian Gulf region (Operation Desert Storm), and the US Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan show that their effectiveness increases several times when used suddenly and unexpectedly...

Although remote mining by aviation and artillery troops can be carried throughout the entire operational depth of an enemy formation, the remote mining capabilities of engineer troops are substantially more limited... The UMZ and GMZ-K universal minelayers only have a range of up to 200 m...

The need arose to develop a system that would allow the creation of minefields under any combat conditions in compliance with the requirements for safe the use of remote mining means for our troops. As part of solving this problem, specialists from the Tyumen Higher Military Engineering Command School (TVVIKU) developed a device for discharging antipersonnel POM-2R mines...

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The use of UAVs for the remote laying of anti-personnel mines will ensure the element of surprise when used in both the defense and offense...

It is proposed to use UAV crews with mine containers in a special mining platoon (SMP) with 6 UAVs... The platoon consists of two squads, each with 6 personnel, 3 UAVs, and an all-terrain vehicle such as a UAZ 'Wolverine'.

Characteristics of a Mine-Laying Multicopter-Type UAV (exact model unspecified in source)

UAV range	up to 5 km
Flight altitude	up to 1 km
Flight speed	up to 40 km/h
Operating time on one battery (normal conditions)	up to 30 min
Maximum take-off weight	12 kg
Type of mines used	POM-2R
Number of mines carried	4 mines
Self-destruction time	4-100 hours
Blast radius	16 meters
Temperature range	-20°—+50° Celsius
Frequency range (control)	2.4 GHz
Frequency range (video)	5.8 GHz

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.

Russian North Sea Fleet Deputy Commander Killed in Nagorno-Karabakh

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Attrition continues within Russia’s officer corps as Russian commanders die on the battlefield, even beyond Ukraine and Syria.¹ According to the Norway-based news outlet *The Barents Observer*, deputy commander and political officer of Russia’s Northern Fleet submarine forces, Ivan Kovgan, was killed in Nagorno-Karabakh on 20 September.² The article noted that Kovgan was deployed to the disputed region as the deputy commander of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. Kovgan’s SUV reportedly was struck by Azeri artillery, killing him and four other Russian servicemembers. It is unclear whether the strike on the Russian peacekeepers’ vehicle was intentional or a mistake as a result of the fog of war. In any case, the event prompted an immediate apology from Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Russian President Putin and the promise of an investigation. The article also noted that residents of the Kola Peninsula, where Kovgan resided, were shocked that he would have even been selected to serve in Nagorno-Karabakh. While units from the Russian Northern Fleet have been deployed to Ukraine, some with catastrophic consequences,³ the death of Kovgan while on a less-risky peacekeeping mission is an unexpected blow. Russia has lost many high-ranking officers in Ukraine, and losing another senior officer in far-off Nagorno-Karabakh is costly.

This was a man who belonged to the fleet, and even though he was a political officer, what did he do down there [Nagorno Karabakh]?



Map of the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh war showing Azerbaijan day-to-day advances as of 22 September 2023.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2023_Nagorno-Karabakh_War.svg; Attribution: CCA SA 4.0 Int

Source: Atle Staalesen, “Deputy Commander of Russia’s Northern Fleet submarine forces is killed in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *The Barents Observer* (Norway based naval news focused news source), 22 September 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/09/deputy-commander-russias-northern-fleet-submarine-forces-killed-nagorno-karabakh>

Kovgan was only days away from completing his assignment in the disputed territories between Armenia and Azerbaijan when his car came under attack. He and four more Russian servicemen were killed.

A photo reportedly taken on the site of the attack shows a Russian military SUV type UAZ Patriot that has crashed into a rocky hillside. At least four bodies can be seen in and around the vehicle.

The lethal attack came from Azerbaijani forces and took place on the 20th of September as part of a major onslaught on Armenia-backed forces in the region. It is reported to have taken place near the settlement of Canyonaq in the northeastern corner of the self-proclaimed republic.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in a telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin the following day apologised for the killings and assured that an investigation will be initiated and the guilty troops punished.

But for many locals in Gadzhievo it appear a mystery that a top officer from the Northern Fleet’s submarine forces was on duty in the far-away Nagorno-Karabakh.

“Who sent this first rank captain to that place?” a man writes in a comment on local social media in Gadzhievo. “This was a man that belongs to the fleet, and even though he was a political officer, what did he do down there? After all, he was our naval political officer with both body and mind!” he underlines.

Ivan Kovgan had reportedly been two months in Nagorno-Karabakh when he was killed. He was serving as Deputy Commander of the so-called peacekeeping forces that have been deployed in the area since the second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. Back home in the Kola Peninsula he was Deputy Commander of the Northern Fleet’s submarine forces with responsibility for military-political operations.

Notes:

- 1 Russia has lost several senior officers in Syria since 2016, including most recently Colonel Oleg Pechevisty, who was killed in May 2023. See: Isabel Van Brugen, “Russian Colonel Killed After Direct Strike on His Command Post – Reports,” *Newsweek*, 29 May 2023. <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-colonel-oleg-pechevisty-killed-syria-strike-ukraine-war-1803136> and “Администрация Подпорожского района (Administration of Podporozhye district),” ВКонтakte (InKontakt) Russian online social media and social networking service based in Saint Petersburg). 27 May 2023. https://vk.com/wall-167456645_21197
- 2 For additional information from the Russian perspective on the renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and presence of Russian peacekeepers, see: Kirill Strelnikov, “Прощание с Карабахом: уроки трагедии с двумя стульями (Farewell to Karabakh: lessons from the tragedy with two chairs),” *RIANovosti* (state-owned domestic Russian media outlet), 21 September 2023. <https://ria.ru/20230921/karabakh-1897672995.html>; “Messages appeared on the Internet about an attack by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces on a warehouse of Russian Peacekeepers, *Top War* (English language Russian military news focused media website, part of Military Review (Военное Обозрение)), 23 September 2023. <https://en.topwar.ru/226714-v-seti-internet-pojavilis-soobschenija-ob-udare-vs-azerbajdzhana-po-skladu-rossijskih-mirotvorcev.html>
- 3 The 200th is one of two Arctic infantry units subordinate to the Northern Military District’s 14th Army Corps, the 14th Army Corps is Ground Forces unit subordinate to the navy command, and as part of the Northern Military District it is subordinate to the Northern Fleet. For an investigative news piece on the fate of the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade in Ukraine see: “‘Wiped Out’: War in Ukraine has decimated a once feared Russian brigade,” *The Washington Post*, 16 December 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/16/russia-200th-brigade-decimated-ukraine/>

Russia Enlists Partners To Attack U.S. Dollar To Fund War in Ukraine



Bank Saint Petersburg sanctioned by the U.S. and UK on 24 February, one of many Russian banks sanctioned in the days following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Russia seeks to make strategic advances in the economic war in which it finds itself as it struggles to gain an operational advantage on the battlefield in Ukraine. Russian moves to end the global dominance of the U.S. dollar have taken on new urgency as the war in Ukraine has exposed how reliant Russia and other nations are on the dollar for their national economies and settlement of global financial transactions.¹ According to the excerpted article from Russian financial news source *RI-Centr.ru*, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin recently signed a resolution with “more than 30 friendly or neutral states,” including “all Central Asian states” to explore conducting financial settlements in national currencies rather than the dollar. The article acknowledged that the moves away from the dollar contained risks for banks and other financial institutions.

The article from the Russian news outlet *политический калейдоскоп (Political Kaleidoscope)* noted Indonesia, the world's seventh-largest economy and fourth-most populous country, has also begun the process of transitioning from the dollar for global trade and financial transactions. According to the article, Jakarta has set up a “National

Task Force that will support financial transactions in local currencies.” The article concludes by noting that “Indonesia has become the latest ‘heavyweight’ in the company of fighters against the dominance of the U.S. dollar in the global financial system” and that China, India, and Russia have agreed to switch to national currencies for mutual payments. Finally, the article noted that the BRICS nations² are pursuing a dollar alternative and that Russian President Putin recently emphasized that “de-dollarization is an irreversible process that is gaining inertia.” While the U.S. dollar is still the preferred safe-haven currency worldwide, Russia's (and China's) efforts to reduce its dollar dependence would give Russia increased flexibility to conduct trade, especially for commodities such as oil—a tool for financing the war in Ukraine and potential wars elsewhere—without the threat of adverse financial conditions imposed on its economy by a dominant U.S. dollar.³

The document contains a list of friendly and neutral states whose credit institutions and brokers will be able to trade on the Russian market for currencies and asset liabilities.

Source: “УТВЕРЖДЁН СПИСОК СТРАН — ПАРТНЁРОВ ПО ВАЛЮТНОЙ ТОРГОВЛЕ (LIST OF CURRENCY TRADING PARTNERS HAS BEEN APPROVED),” *RI-Centr.ru* (Russian financial news outlet), 21 September 2023. https://ia-centr.ru/publications/utverzhdyen-spisok-stran-partnyerov-po-valyutnoy-torgovle/?utm_source=finobzor.ru

The corresponding order was signed by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.

The document contains a list of friendly and neutral states whose credit institutions and brokers will be able to trade on the Russian market for currencies and asset liabilities.

There are more than 30 countries on the list, including all Central Asian states. Approval of the list is part of the process of transition to settlements in national currencies.

The approval of the resolution was announced in July 2023. At that time, the list of partner states included 44 countries. In the current message on the government website, 32 countries are mentioned. Israel and Georgia, which were previously named as included in the list, are not among them. This is not the final version of the document.

Russia and the countries of the post-Soviet space are progressively engaged in financial integration. Thus, on April 28, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) published a draft agreement that should simplify the admission of brokers from the union states to the exchanges of the participating countries. In addition, at the end of August, EEC members signed an agreement on bank guarantees in the field of public procurement.

Experts note that the proposed mechanisms do not yet fully solve the problem of risks for banks and other financial players.

Source: Sergey Manukov, “К дедолларизации подключилась одна из крупнейших экономик планеты (One of the largest economies on the planet has joined dedollarization),” *Political Kaleidoscope* (политический калейдоскоп), 21 September 2023. https://k-politika.ru/k-dedollarizacii-podklyuchilas-odna-iz-krupnejshix-ekonomik-planety/?utm_source=finobzor.ru

There are new additions to the camp of fighters against the dominance of the dollar in the global financial system and trade. Moreover, it is very significant and noticeable. Indonesia has joined the dedollarization process. This, by the way, is the seventh economy in the world, which, without a doubt, in one or two decades will rise another couple of positions in the ranking. In addition, Indonesia ranks fourth in the world in terms of population - approx. 280 million people.

Jakarta has created a National Task Force that will support financial transactions in local currencies (LCT). In Indonesia, remember, this is the Indonesian rupiah. In a statement, the head of the Indonesian central bank, Bank Indonesia, Perry Warjiyo, said that the transition to national currencies in settlements and trade with friendly countries will help not only strengthen the Indonesian financial market, but also stabilize the local rupiah.

“Increasing local currency transactions should help export-import activities, investments and cross-border payment transactions, including QRIS (Indonesia’s domestic settlement standard),” explains a top Indonesian banker.

Indonesia has become the latest “heavyweight” in the company of fighters against the dominance of the US

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dollar in the global financial system, consisting of China, India and Russia. Beijing, New Delhi and Moscow agreed to switch to national currencies for mutual payments. In addition, BRICS has not abandoned plans to introduce, if not a single currency of the organization, then at least a single payment mechanism. Indonesia has not yet joined BRICS, but its President Joko Widodo attended the group's recent summit in South Africa as a guest. Speaking at the summit via video link, Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized that dedollarization is an irreversible process that is gaining inertia.

Joko Widodo, by the way, not long ago called on local authorities to abandon foreign payment systems and switch to credit cards from local banks. True, he spoke not so much about dedollarization as about the possibility of banning such popular cards as Visa and Mastercard, following the example of what they did with Russia.

In the United States, the plans of China, Russia, India and other developing countries to deprive the dollar of the unofficial title of world currency are, at least outwardly, calmly and they claim that nothing can threaten the "green" in the foreseeable future, at least for several decades.

Recently, by the way, Zimbabwe announced its desire to join the bank created by the BRICS countries. As a result, rumors spread that this southern African country also wants to join the de-dollarization. However, according to Zimbabwe's former finance minister, abandoning the dollar could easily lead to economic disaster.

Notes:

- 1 For a Russian perspective on the dollar shortly after its invasion of Ukraine see: Илья Полонский, "Россия способна поставить точку в эпохе гегемонии доллара (Russia is able to put an end to the era of dollar hegemony)," Economic Enrichment (экономическое обозрение) (Russian financial news outlet), 18 March 2022. <https://finobzor.ru/116153-rossija-sposobna-postavit-tochku-v-epohe-gegemonii-dollar.html>
- 2 The BRICS nations are Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Coined in 2001, the term was originally BRIC and remained that way until the addition of South in 2010. Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are set to join the bloc and receive full membership on 1 January 2024.
- 3 Historically, when the cost of oil rises the dollar has depreciated. However, since 2022, roughly correlating with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the price of oil and the value of the dollar have moved in tandem. Therefore, high energy costs and a rising dollar have put additional pressure on economies like Russia's and China's. For an analysis of what is fueling the new connection between commodity prices and the strength of the U.S. dollar see: Boris Hofmann, Deniz Igan, and Daniel Rees, "The Changing Nexus Between Commodity Prices and the Dollar: Causes and Implications," *BIS Bulletin No. 74*, (Switzerland based Bank for International Settlements), 13 April 2023. <https://www.bis.org/publ/bisbull74.pdf>

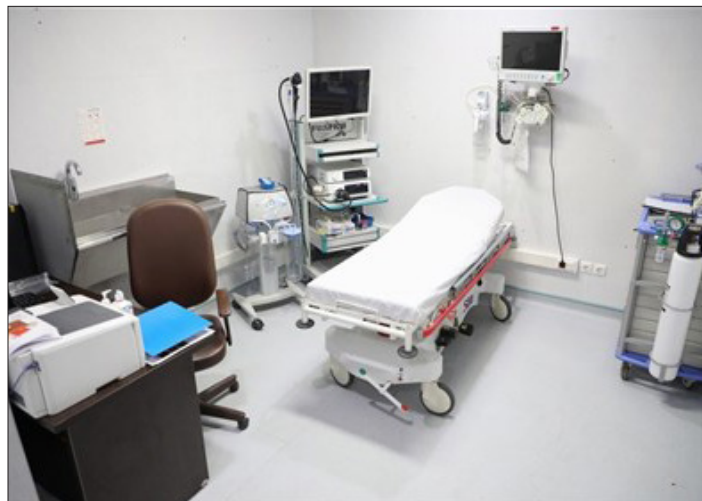
Iran Promoting Medical Tourism To Generate Hard Currency

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

Iran is facing a hard currency crunch. The excerpted article from *Iranian Students' News Agency* focuses on the Iranian government's desire to promote medical tourism to raise new hard currency.¹ Over the past year alone, the Iranian government says the industry has netted \$1 billion for the Iranian economy. On 3 July 2023, Mahdi Safari, Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy, said the Foreign Ministry hoped to attract 6 million medical tourists to Iran annually. Health Minister Bahram Einollahi said Iran expected 240 hospitals to accept medical tourists. The lack of international accreditation for Iranian hospitals, however, puts Iran at a disadvantage in comparison to Turkey and India, its two nearest competitors in the field. Nevertheless, as the regime looks for more hard currency, it seeks to overcome such challenges. On 22 July 2023, for example, Einollahi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, and Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Minister Ezzatollah Zarghami gathered to discuss the industry jointly in a roundtable with parliamentarians. Advertisements by medical tourism companies promise not only visa services, but also interpreters and hotel bookings, all of which require coordination between ministries.

The quality of Iran's medical education ... has led to the discussion of increasing medical tourism in the country.

There are also security and military aspects to the development of the medical tourism industry. First, while Iran's foreign ministry officially issues visas, the intelligence ministry must approve visa applications. Although Iranian medical tourism companies claim that the foreign ministry will allow Americans, British, and Canadians to purchase medical tourism packages, it is unclear the extent to which Iranian security services will view this as a backdoor for Iranian adversaries to access the country. Given the long history of Iranian hostage-taking, Western tourists might become prime targets. Second, it remains unclear how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) will address the issue. *Khatam al-Anbiya*, the IRGC's economic wing, controls up to 40 percent of the Iranian economy and tends to focus



View of an Iranian medical examination room in July 2023.

Source: <https://newsmedia.tasnimnews.com/Tasnim/Uploaded/Image/1402/04/03/1402040313545118927824543.jpg>; Attribution: Tasnim News Agency

its energy on industries that allow it to access hard currency.² While it will be difficult for the IRGC to involve itself in medical tourism, the potential growth of the sector into a multi-billion dollar income stream means it will either find a creative way or, as money often equates to power, find a way to shut down the industry to preserve its own privileged position.

Source: “Kifiyat-e Amuzesh-e Pezeshki Iran Movajeb Tawseah-e Turizm Darmani Shodeh Ast” (The Quality of Medical Education in Iran has led to the Development of Medical Tourism),” *Iranian Students’ News Agency* (an ostensibly private news agency close to Iran’s security and intelligence apparatus), 8 July 2023. <https://www.isna.ir/news/1402041710168>

The deputy minister of health for education announced the call for 3,000 staff members and said, the call will be made in several stages in different regions, each according to its need. Dr. Abulfazl Bagheri Fard, in a meeting with faculty members of Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences this morning, pointed out the increase in the number of available residency slots in this year’s exam, and the improvement in their pay, he noted, in the 13th government [led by President Ebrahim Raisi], a plan was presented to the Planning and Budget to increase the salaries of medical residents so that they would receive the same salary as general practitioners... He noted, “The quality of Iran’s medical education is both a source of pride and has led to the discussion of increasing medical tourism in the country. Training should be dynamic and up-to-date, and regulations should be revised based on conditions. For example, this topic was used to increase the number of available fellowships in 2022 based on structured interviews. He mentioned the inclusion of cardiac and thoracic surgery in the residency exam, and the ability to participate in the emergency medicine and anesthesiology residency exam without submitting a [broader] plan....

The Deputy Minister of Health for education referred to the review of the regulations on the promotion of faculty members based on their performance and impact in training and strengthening the position of the university, and added that the launch of the disciplines was also decided based on the needs of the country and with the advice of the board members.

Notes:

- 1 While Iranian officials often blame their country’s dire financial situation on sanctions, structural problems within the Iranian economy take a greater toll. The IRGC dominates certain industries, for example, and often refuses to subject itself to basic laws and regulations. The lack of commercial law and interference by an ever-shifting array of power centers hampers foreign direct investment. For these reasons, many contracts go unfulfilled. Rampant inflation and continued subsidies for bread, electricity, and gasoline hemorrhage hard currency. The opacity of spending, especially by the IRGC, and the arbitrariness of figures published by the Central Bank increases uncertainty about Iran’s hard currency reserves at any given time.
- 2 See: Michael Rubin, “IRGC Wins Multibillion Dollar Economic Projects” *OE Watch*, August 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmsom/oe-watch-past-issues/241432/download>

Iran's Supreme Leader Accuses West of Ukraine War Conspiracy

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

When Russia invaded Ukraine, Iran initially professed neutrality; however, this official neutrality did not last long.¹ In July 2022, Putin visited Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Tehran. Khamenei unequivocally endorsed Russia's invasion stating, "If you [Russia] had not taken the helm, the other side would have done so and initiated a war." In the below-excerpted speech featured on Khamenei's website, *Khamenei.ir*, the Supreme Leader provided more insight into his thinking about Ukraine. Khamenei sees the Ukraine war within the context of his own worldview in which all evils originate in the West. Specifically, he embraces the belief the military-industrial complex shapes all policy in Washington, stating: "The Ukrainians fight and get killed so that [American] weapons can be sold, so that Europe is forced to buy their [American] weapons, so the arms-producing companies can produce and sell weapons and fill their pockets." Interestingly, his embrace of Russia weakens a main pillar of the Islamic Revolution during the Cold War, which is that Iran would rely on "neither East nor

West," both of which revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini believed to be equally exploitive. Instead, the tenet holds that Iran is best served by an independent foreign policy.²

The Ukrainians fight and get killed so that weapons can be sold.

Additionally, Khamenei asserted that the United States seeks to steal Syrian oil. He claimed: "A government like that of the United States is stealing oil from Syria and is doing it openly in plain view of everybody." This assertion shows his embrace of another conspiracy theory and suggests that Iran could be an impediment to any reconciliation between the Syrian regime and the predominantly Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in whose territory the United States bases a small force. AANES currently controls many of Syria's oil fields.

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>

Today, they are willing to push the poor, helpless nation of Ukraine forward to fill the pockets of American arms-producing companies. That is what is happening. That is the case in Ukraine. The Ukrainians fight and get killed so that weapons can be sold, so that Europe is forced to buy their weapons, so the arms-producing companies can produce and sell weapons and fill their pockets. They are the same. They want to steal Syria's oil and they are stealing it. People imagine a thief to be an inferior, lowly person. A government like that of the United States is stealing oil from Syria and is doing it openly in plain view of everybody! They are the same, they have not changed.

Notes:

- 1 For an earlier discussion of Iran's history and the development of Iran-Russia relations, see: Michael Rubin, "Iranian Influence Extends to the Mediterranean," *OE Watch*, September 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/267904>
- 2 For example, see: Michael Rubin, "Will Iran Pivot to the East?" *OE Watch*, September 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/268252>

Presidential Candidate Assassination Shows New Depths of Ecuador's Insecurity

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary



Ecuadorian Presidential Candidate Fernando Villavicencio.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alternativ_crop_of_Fernando_Villavicencio.jpg
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Over the past three years, Ecuador has experienced a tremendous spike in violence led by the activities of transnational drug trafficking organizations often operating in collaboration with local gangs,¹ which has resulted in skyrocketing homicide rates.² Underscoring the extent of the violence, one of the leading candidates in Ecuador's snap presidential elections, Fernando Villavicencio, was assassinated in early August after a campaign rally in Quito. Villavicencio polled in the top tier of candidates poised to make the runoff round, with a message focused on anti-corruption efforts. Villavicencio was a journalist who rose to prominence uncovering and denouncing corruption in the Rafael Correa government, as well as links between organized crime and members of Correa's party.

He [Fernando Villavicencio] structured his campaign around the fight against mafias and drug trafficking. Days ago, the candidate said that he had been threatened with death by "one of the bosses of the Sinaloa Cartel."

According to the excerpted article from the Spanish daily *El País*, in addition to denouncing corruption, Villavicencio had spoken on the campaign trail about a comprehensive security plan for the country, including cracking down on organized crime and building maximum security prisons. Days before his assassination, Villavicencio alleged he had been threatened by a member of Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel with an interest in Ecuador. The allegation furthered speculation about the role of Mexico's top criminal organizations, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, in Ecuador's downward spiral of criminality. *Infobae*, an Argentine outlet with excellent regional coverage, states the Ecuadorian investigation has been unable to link Mexican cartels to the crime. Instead, the outlet reports that the investigative unit has uncovered firmer connections between those it suspects are responsible and the local gang Los Lobos and the Puerto Rican transnational crime group the Latin Kings. The development signals the difficulty of confirming the nexus between the Sinaloa and Jalisco cartels and local Ecuadorian gangs. It also indicates that high-level politicians may be a new target for Ecuador's criminal violence.

Source: “¿Quién era Fernando Villavicencio, el candidato presidencial asesinado en Ecuador? (Who was Fernando Villavicencio, the presidential candidate assassinated in Ecuador?),” *El País* (Spanish daily with excellent regional coverage), 10 August 2023. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-08-10/quien-era-fernando-villavicencio-el-candidato-presidencial-asesinado-en-ecuador.html>

Among Villavicencio’s proposals were building ‘a very high security prison’ to lock up the most dangerous criminals, militarizing ports to control drug trafficking, and creating an anti-mafia unit that would pursue drug traffickers with foreign support...He structured his campaign around the fight against mafias and drug trafficking. Days ago, the candidate said that he had been threatened with death by ‘one of the bosses of the Sinaloa Cartel.’

“Asesinato de Fernando Villavicencio: investigan los vínculos del sicario con bandas criminales ecuatorianas (Murder of Fernando Villavicencio: investigating the hitman’s links with Ecuadorian criminal gangs),” Infobae (an Argentine ou gional coverage), 20 September 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/09/20/asesinato-de-fernando-villavicencio-investigacion-los-vinculos-del-sicario-con-bandas-criminales-ecuatorianas/>

After the investigations carried out on the gunman’s mobile phone, the hitman’s links with organized crime groups in the country are being investigated...According to the report, the hitman recruited the first six detainees in the case, all of whom are Colombians from Cali...Others suspected of involvement have been linked to Los Lobos gang and the Latin Kings.

Notes:

- 1 For more information on Ecuador’s security challenges and the government’s attempt to stem homicides, see: Ryan C. Berg, “President Lasso Calls for ‘Plan Ecuador’ Amid Growing Security Concerns,” *OE Watch*, December 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/400849>
- 2 For more information on the genesis of Ecuador’s violent crime and its impact on local politics, see: Will Freeman, “A Surge in Crime and Violence Has Ecuador Reeling,” *World Politics Review*, June 14, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/surge-crime-and-violence-has-ecuador-reeling>

As Sahelian Jihadists Expand South, Côte d'Ivoire Stands as Model of Success

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

For the past several years, a primary concern in the Sahelian region of West Africa has been the ability of groups associated with the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda to push southward as they march to the littoral of the Bight of Benin.¹ While Mali and Burkina Faso continue to be the epicenters of jihadist activity, even historically immune countries like Togo, Benin, and Ghana have seen their northern regions, which border Mali and Burkina Faso, experience violence from these groups.² However, as the accompanying article from the pan-African think tank *The Institute for Security Studies* articulates, Côte d'Ivoire, which would reasonably experience similar threats, seems to have figured out how to protect itself from this southern push.

According to the authors, the country's success is due to its commitment to strategies of security and development. On the security side, the article notes that its "military and security interventions played a notable role in achieving the prevailing calm." These included several standard practices: the creation of a nationwide counterterrorism strategy; the addition of new weapons and armored vehicles; and the creation of a new counterterrorism center. Yet from the authors' perspectives, the real success story has been

Côte d'Ivoire's citizen-centric development efforts, targeting populations living in its rural north, who are most susceptible to violence and radicalization. To discourage their joining the insurgents, the government's social program seeks to "improve civilians' living conditions" to "reverse the perception among border communities that the state has abandoned them" so as to "reduce the risk that they are exploited by insurgents." The development program has focused on improving infrastructure, health, youth employment, and social safety allowances. A recent report by the global think tank International Crisis Group draws similar conclusions,³ further underscoring the broader perception of Côte d'Ivoire's efficacy on this front. As the United States and partner countries seek to stem the tide of jihadist violence, Côte d'Ivoire's approach might bear attention as a model that could be replicated elsewhere in the region.

The goal is to reverse perceptions among border communities that the state has abandoned them. Doing so will reduce the risk that they are exploited by insurgents.

Source: William Assanvo, "Has Côte d'Ivoire found the solution to violent extremism?," *Institute for Security Studies* (centrist pan-African security studies think tank), 25 July 2023. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/has-cote-divoire-found-the-solution-to-violent-extremism>

No significant terror attacks have been reported in northern Côte d'Ivoire over the past two years, suggesting that its approach to addressing the problem has been effective. With many other states in West Africa still facing a growing threat, what is the country doing right?

Côte d'Ivoire's border area with Burkina Faso was under substantial pressure from violent extremist groups between 2020 and 2021. Almost 20 attacks and incidents attributed to these groups were recorded in that period. These included attacks against positions and convoys of the defence and security forces, incursions into Ivorian territory, propaganda sermons, threats and intimidation of civilians.

In response, the government focused first on military and security operations, and then supplemented these with a social programme...

Following the Grand-Bassam attack, efforts to strengthen the security apparatus continued, including

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developing a national counter-terrorism strategy in 2018.

From 2019, the growing presence of extremists in Burkina Faso's forests along the border with Côte d'Ivoire led to increased vigilance and a stronger military presence in the north. In May 2020, a joint military operation was conducted with Burkina Faso.

This saw the creation in July 2020 of an operational zone in the north, the set-up of military camps in some border localities, and significant investments in increasing the defence and security forces' functional capacity. This included human resources, air assets, armoured transport vehicles and surveillance equipment.

A counter-terrorism intelligence centre, Centre de renseignement opérationnel antiterroriste, was created in August 2021 to improve intelligence gathering. Better regional cooperation between countries, particularly within the framework of the Accra Initiative in which Côte d'Ivoire participates, was another important part of the response.

The military and security interventions played a notable role in achieving the prevailing calm. Land, air and intelligence operations have contributed to reducing armed groups' ability to carry out incursions, move around, and operate within Ivorian territory. And reinforcing the presence of soldiers along the border has reassured civilians. It is also possible that the lull is due to the extremists withdrawing across the border to continue their violence there or adopt a low profile.

While this period of calm prevailed, the social component of the Ivorian response to the terror threat was started. It is being implemented under the framework of the government's second social programme (PS Gouv 2), which runs from 2022 to 2024. The programme's first strategic axis includes addressing the fragility in the northern border areas.

The programme was announced in November 2021 and officially launched in January 2022. It aims to improve civilians' living conditions by enhancing infrastructure and access to basic social services. The goal is to reverse perceptions among border communities that the state has abandoned them. Doing so will reduce the risk that they are exploited by insurgents. The programme focuses on education, health, access to electricity and drinking water, road maintenance, professional integration and youth employment, and providing social safety allowances.

The Ivorian approach of combining a military, security and social response isn't in itself innovative or fundamentally different from that used by neighbouring countries facing terrorism. Notable examples are in central Mali, the Burkina Faso region of the Sahel, and northern Togo. The difference in Côte d'Ivoire could lie in its implementation of these strategies.

Notes:

- 1 For more on the push of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State militants towards the West African coast, 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/>; Jason Warner, "Coastal West African States Brace for Wave of Terrorism From the Sahel," *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/428040>
- 2 West African states have taken various approaches to dealing with jihadist insurgents, especially on the topic of negotiations. For more, see: Jason Warner, "Sahelian Countries Divided on Negotiating With Al-Qaeda, Islamic State Militants," *OE Watch* 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/sahelian-countries-divided-on-negotiating-with-al-qaeda-islamic-state-militants/>
- 3 The International Crisis Group report largely agrees that the dual security and development approach of Côte d'Ivoire has been important, but also notes that the country's broader focus on economic development; the northern region's importance as a base of power for the ruling party; religious tolerance; and an ethnically and regionally balanced military also played their own roles. To read the International Crisis Group study on the topic, see: *International Crisis Group*, "Keeping Jihadists Out of Northern Cote d'Ivoire," International Crisis Group, 23 August 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>

Niger Claims France and Other West African States Planning Military Intervention

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

Soon after seizing power, the military junta of GEN Tchiani in Niger made it clear that it wanted the French military out of the country. As anti-French protests proliferated in the capital, Niamey,¹ the junta quickly annulled former security cooperation agreements with France. The playbook was familiar, as the first accompanying article from *Le Journal de l'Afrique* articulates: "With each [West African] coup d'état, the process is the same: discussions take place with the juntas in power, the French are asked to pack up, and Paris generally complies after a deaf dialogue." However, given a general reluctance for obeisance to the junta, France did not move its approximately 1500 troops immediately but stated that it would do so "once certain conditions are met." Accordingly, French troops appear to have remained on bases in Niger or repositioned to Chad or Benin.

With each coup d'état, the process is the same: discussions take place with the juntas in power, the French are asked to pack up and Paris generally complies after a deaf dialogue.

Tchiani's junta has accused France of planning a military intervention in collusion with Niger's neighbors as a result

of this delay, combined with the repositioning of these French troops in other countries.² According to the second article from the pan-African news aggregator *AllAfrica.com*, the Nigerien junta has claimed that France is repositioning troops in Senegal, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire for a military intervention in Niger. Acting on this fear, as per the third article from *TogoBreakingNews*, the Nigerien junta broke off military relations with Benin, accusing it of harboring "military personnel, mercenaries, and material of war," under the auspices of "an aggression sought by France, with members of ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States], against Niger." This follows a broader pattern of the vilification of France by francophone governments around the continent.³ Paris has rejected the claims of collusion.

The most recent discord between Niger and France is the latest in an increasingly predictable pattern. France's status in West Africa is arguably the worst it has been in years as francophone West African militaries conduct putsches, consolidate power, accuse France of malfeasance then demand its departure, and often, subsequently invite in Russia and the Wagner Group.

Source: Ben Eddine, "Les troupes françaises, sans base militaire fixe? (French troops, without a permanent base?)," *Le Journal de l'Afrique* (pan-African news aggregator), 8 September 2023. <https://lejournaldefrafrique.com/les-troupes-francaises-sans-base-militaire-fixe/>

It has become a habit for the French ministries of the Armed Forces and of Defence. With each coup d'état, the process is the same: discussions take place with the juntas in power, the French are asked to pack up and Paris generally complies after a deaf dialogue. After Mali, Niger. It's been over a month since Niamey and Paris clash over military presence in Niger. The military agreements linking the two countries have been denounced by the junta in power in Niger.

Because Paris would be in the process of redeploying part of its 1 soldiers stationed there in another African country. France may have taken the time to contest Niger's demands, so it finally gave in. While French soldiers no longer dare leave their respective bases and French aircraft have not taken off for several weeks, France affirms that it will withdraw "certain military elements" as soon as security conditions are met.

continue on 26

Source: Bamba Mousa, “Niger: Situation de crise - La France dément préparer une intervention militaire (Niger: crisis situation – France denies preparing a military intervention),” *AllAfrica.com* (pan-African news aggregator), 11 September 2023. <https://fr.allafrica.com/stories/202309110572.html>

Tensions between Paris and Niamey gave rise to a new skirmish last weekend. While continuing to refuse a rapid withdrawal of its troops from Niger, France denied the accusations made on Saturday September 9 by the junta, which accuses it of “deploying its forces in several countries of the Economic Community of African States of the West as part of preparations for an aggression against Niger, which it is considering in collaboration with this community organization.”

After the coup d’état of July 26, ECOWAS brandished the threat of military intervention as a last resort in the event of failure of negotiations, in order to restore constitutional order, to release the overthrown president Mohamed Bazoum and to restore its functions. A decision supported by France, which has around 1,500 soldiers in Niger. In a statement a few days ago, Niamey accused France to position troops and military equipment in Benin, Ivory Coast and Senegal, in preparation for an attack on Niger.

Source: Didier Assogba, “Niger: Le Bénin accusé d’abriter des mercenaires (Niger: Benin accused of harboring mercenaries),” *TogoBreakingnews.info*, 13 September 2023. <https://togobreakingnews.info/niger-le-benin-accuse-dabriter-mercenaires/>

The military in power announced the denunciation of the military agreement of July 11, 2022 with Benin.

For the new Nigerien authorities, this decision is justified by the authorization granted by the Beninese government for the stationing in the country of “soldiers, mercenaries and war materials” in the perspective of “an aggression desired by France, in collaboration with certain ECOWAS countries against Niger.”

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the anti-French sentiments in the African security sphere, see: Jason Warner, “Anti-French Sentiment Undergirds Overthrow of Nigerien Government,” *OE Watch* 08-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/anti-french-sentiment-undergirds-overthrow-of-nigerien-government/>; 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/>; Matthew Kirwin, Lassane Ouedraogo, and Jason Warner, “Fake News in the Sahel: ‘Afrancaux News,’ French Counterterrorism, and the Logics of User-Generated Media,” *African Studies Review*, 65 (4): December 2022, 911 - 938. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/886306>
- 2 The ECOWAS bloc have considered their own military intervention into Niger because of the undemocratic transfer of power in Niger. For more on perspectives of the potential ECOWAS intervention, see: Jason Warner, “West African States Split on Potential Intervention in Niger,” *OE Watch* 08-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/west-african-states-split-on-potential-intervention-in-niger/>
- 3 For examples of claims of French malfeasance by governments in Africa, see: 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/>; 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>;

Lebanese Street Gang Injects Culture Wars Into Lebanon's Volatile Security Environment

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

While not considered an imminent threat to state security, the Lebanese Christian street gang “The Soldiers of God” has received increasing attention due to its blend of populism and Hezbollah-style religious militancy. The first accompanying excerpt, from the Qatari-aligned English-language news website *The New Arab*, highlights some of the group’s similarities with populist movements in the West: it targets the LGBTQ community, is virulently anti-refugee, and is “at the forefront of Lebanon’s anti-vaxxer movement.” The Soldiers of God is a relatively small group, estimated to number in the hundreds, but its targeting of LGBTQ venues and events has given it outsized media attention and consequent growth potential. Ironically, according to the second excerpt from the independent Lebanese news website *Daraj*, these “bearded musclemen who cite the Bible” display “a striking resemblance” to Hezbollah, which is one of

their key enemies. The resemblances—“from their God-inspired moniker and their black clothes to the weapons they carry to the sectarian rule they try to impose in their areas” lead the author to wonder whether this is “an attempt to create a Christian Hezbollah.” According to the third excerpt from the pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar*, The Soldiers of God were involved in the October 2021 clashes between Shiite and Christian gunmen in Beirut’s Tayouneh neighborhood. These clashes, eventually contained by the Lebanese military, are arguably Lebanon’s most serious security incident in recent years.¹ While the Soldiers of God may not be an important player in Lebanon’s current security environment, their emergence is indicative of Lebanon’s domestic challenges: state weakness, increasing insecurity, and the growing appeal of armed religious militancy.²



Ironically, the Soldiers of God have a striking resemblance with their Shiite counterparts of Hezbollah.

The Soldiers of God’s coat of arms shows the wings of St. Michael. Below is an image of St. Michael.

Source: Bonifazio Veronese, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santi_Giovanni_e_Paolo_-_St_Michael_Vanquishing_the_Devil.jpg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0

Source: “Explainer: Who are the ‘Soldiers of God’ targeting Beirut’s queer community?” *The New Arab* (Qatari-aligned English-language news website), 25 August 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-are-soldiers-god-targeting-beirut-lgbt-scene>

“They are a fringe Christian group they are basically hooligans. Their mission in life is basically to go against LGBTQI+ people,” Lea Z, an LGBTQI+ activist, told The New Arab...

The group’s insistence that the LGBTQI+ community is connected with a sinister pedophilic conspiracy echoes far-right groups’ rhetoric in other countries, such as the US. The group is also at the forefront of Lebanon’s anti-vaxxer movement and is virulently anti-refugee, claiming to protect its community from Syrian and Palestinian refugees...

Source: “Who are Lebanon’s ‘Soldiers of God’?” *Daraj* (Independent Lebanese News Website), 12 September, 2022. <https://daraj.media/en/101291/>

So, who are these bearded musclemen who cite the Bible? ...

Ironically, the Soldiers of God have a striking resemblance with their Shiite counterparts of Hezbollah: from their God-inspired moniker and their black clothes to the weapons they carry to the sectarian rule they try to impose in their areas. Are we witnessing an attempt to create a Christian Hezbollah? Do Christian parties and leaders genuinely stand behind them? Daraj tried to communicate with the Soldiers of God, but the only thing one member said was that they “speak in the name of Christ, defend the Bible and Christianity.”

Source:

«ي تاذل ن مأل تاي ادب ... «برلا دونج»

(The Soldiers of God... the Start of Self-Protection),” al-Akhbar (Leftist pro-Hizbullah Lebanese daily), 3 December 2022. <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/350422/%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A>

In the “Tayouneh crime,” on October 15, 2021, when members of the Lebanese Forces opened fire on demonstrators, resulting in the death of seven and the wounding of dozens, records of investigations conducted by Army Intelligence showed that the night before, members of a group calling themselves “Soldiers of God” wrote religious slogans and drew crosses in neighborhoods in the eastern region, to raise sectarian tensions. This was accompanied by incitement on social media. According to the records, many of them spread out in several areas and “on alert without making their weapons visible.” The investigative records also mentioned the names of individuals belonging to this group who participated in the shooting, and indicated that they are linked to the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Société Générale Bank, Antoun Al-Sahnawi, and receive funding from him. ...

Security reports speak of this group as “a Christian extremist group that may pose a threat in the future,” even though its activity “is still limited to protecting its areas from what it considers to be intruders and ideologies that oppose the teachings of the Church.”

Notes:

- 1 For more on this see: Christophe Abi-Nassif. “Making sense of the Beirut clashes,” *The Middle East Institute*, 15 October 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/making-sense-beirut-clashes>
- 2 On the challenges facing the Lebanese Armed Forces, see: Hanin Ghaddar. “Can the Lebanese Army Prevent a Hezbollah-Christian Conflict?” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 August 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/can-lebanese-army-prevent-hezbollah-christian-conflict>

Indonesia Continues Updating Its Counter-Extremism Doctrine

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Indonesia believes it is not fully free from terrorist violence despite its success in counter-extremism programming, which has seen it reintegrate prominent former terrorists,¹ and the general reduction of Islamic State and al-Qaeda-allied attacks in the country. The country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, believes the threat of global terrorism persists, including in Indonesia, as the excerpted article of the Indonesian-language article in *tempo.co* notes. Speaking to the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum at the UN General Assembly in New York on 20 September, Marsudi noted that drone and artificial intelligence (AI) use as well as online propaganda by terrorist groups are on the rise. However, she focused primarily on how Indonesia's rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) program needed to evolve in light of the continued risks. First, Marsudi highlighted that the R&R program must extend to making communities more resilient and not concentrate their efforts simply on terrorists already in prison. This reflects how the latest terrorist attacks in Indonesia have been perpetrated by new suspects whom the intelligence services could not have previously detected.² Rather, the attacks have been carried out by communities in which neighbors, not intelligence services, would have been better situated to identify the radicalized families that committed the attacks.

Second, Marsudi is concerned about how emerging technologies can facilitate extremist groups as evidenced by her comments on drones and AI. In response, Indonesia launched a program earlier this year called Knowledge Hub (I-KHub) on Countering Violent Extremism. In the second excerpted article in Indonesia's *antaranews.com*, I-KHub is described as an initiative to produce reports about enhanc-

For Indonesia, rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) must encompass all facets not only for former terrorist prisoners, but also to strengthen the resilience of the communities and environments that receive them,' [Marsudi] added.

ing Indonesia's national security based on the latest data and research globally. This would encompass, among other topics, the intersection of technology and terrorism. The continued push in Indonesia to bolster its R&R program demonstrates that despite its successes, the country is neither complacent nor content with the current levels of extremism and looks poised to further defend itself against the evolving nature of terrorist attacks.



Ali Fauzi Manzi (Mantan Napiter).

Source: AntaraTV, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ali_Fauzi_Manzi_\(Mantan_Napiter\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ali_Fauzi_Manzi_(Mantan_Napiter).jpg); Attribution: CC x2.0

Source: “Sidang PBB, Menlu Retno Marsudi Berbagi 3 Upaya Rehabilitasi dan Reintegrasi Mantan Teroris (UN Session, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi Shares 3 Rehabilitation and Reintegration Efforts for Former Terrorists),” *tempo.co* (weekly Indonesian-language magazine covering news and politics from a perspective historically critical of government), 21 September 2023. <https://dunia.tempo.co/read/1774807/sidang-pbb-menlu-retno-marsudi-berbagi-3-upaya-rehabilitasi-dan-reintegrasi-mantan-teroris>

In the beginning of her speech, the Foreign Minister stated the global threat of terrorism continues to increase and evolve. Terrorist actions are becoming more diverse: the use of online propaganda and the exploitation of new technologies, including drones and AI, are also on the rise. The Foreign Minister also stated that the number of deaths due to terrorism has increased over the past 5 years. “For Indonesia, rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) must encompass all facets not only for former terrorist prisoners, but also to strengthen the resilience of the communities and environments that receive them,” she added.

First, Indonesia emphasizes a “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” approach, as mandated in the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Countering of Extremism. Second, it ensures the progress in technology and research is not misused. Rapidly advancing technology can provide space for the growth of extremist ideas. Therefore, Indonesia has launched the Indonesian Knowledge Hub (I-KHub) to integrate data systems and support research-based decision-making efforts to combat extremism while ensuring national security.

Source: “BNPT launches knowledge products to prevent violent extremism,” *antaranews.com* (state-owned news organization providing neutral, or slightly pro-government, coverage of Indonesian affairs), 5 July 2023. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/287271/bnpt-launches-knowledge-products-to-prevent-violent-extremism>

The National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) launched four knowledge products in the form of results of analyses and studies related to countering violent extremism that leads to terrorism in Indonesia. “Today, we released a knowledge product that we uploaded on a digital platform called the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub) BNPT,” Head of BNPT Rycko Amelza Dahniel stated. The BNPT head explained that the four knowledge products launched were I-KHub BNPT Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism Outlook, K-HUB PCVE Outlook, Mid-Term Evaluation RAN PE, and Analysis of Local Government Readiness to implement RAN PE. Dahniel explained that the four knowledge products were written collaboratively with a multi-stakeholder and multidisciplinary perspective involving civil society organizations, experts or academics, and development partners.

Notes:

- 1 One of the most notable former terrorists that Indonesia has re-integrated was Ali Fauzi. Fauzi is the youngest brother of one of the 2002 Jemaah Islamiyah Bali bombers and was imprisoned from 2006 to 2009 for having supplied bomb components for an attack on a Jakarta police station. However, after his release, he earned a Ph.D. in Islamic studies and began a de-radicalization and counter-extremism NGO on his family’s property. Among others, Fauzi has taken 2002 Bali bombing mastermind, Umar Patek, under his wing and guaranteed Patek will not return to terrorism after Patek’s early release from prison in 2022. See: “Indonesia’s BNPT head pays visit to Ali Fauzi, Umar Patek,” *antaranews.com*, 4 May 2019. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/124825/indonesias-bnpt-head-pays-visit-to-ali-fauzi-umar-patek>
- 2 In 2018, three “family-based suicide attacks” in which women and children participated were carried out in Surabaya and Sidoarjo. Similar attacks occurred the next year and the trend has continued. The fact that these attackers were inspired by the Islamic State but not organizationally or individually connected to the group highlighted how “more targeted and effective preventive measures,” and especially de-radicalization initiatives, were needed to reach Indonesians, increasingly including women. See: T. Unaesah Rahmah, “Women in Jihad.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* Vol. 12, No. 4 (June 2020), 21-26.

Maduro, With Venezuelan Election Looming, Heads to China for Support

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Upcoming elections and increasing pressure at home drove Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro to head to China in September 2023 to reignite relations. In the past, China was Venezuela's greatest benefactor. During the years of President Hugo Chávez (1998-2013), Venezuela received over \$60 billion in loans through a combination of sovereign lending, China's policy banks, and large development projects.¹ However, during Nicolás Maduro's government (2013-present), Venezuela's economy fell precipitously through a combination of mismanagement and corruption, causing China to withdraw much of its support in 2015 and 2016. Ever since, Maduro has struggled to return to China's good graces and convince the Chinese Communist Party that he can be a good steward of Venezuela's economy. While in China, Spanish daily *El País* reports Maduro had an agenda aimed at finding solutions to Venezuela's grave economic crisis and rebuilding robust bilateral ties.

Maduro's efforts were in vain. As one of Mexico's main daily newspapers *La Jornada* states, the two partners signed dozens of agreements, but none of them involved the depth of investment Venezuela received during the Chávez years. Maduro's trip failed to yield the kind of agreement he needed to reset his economy. The agreements reveal that China no longer sees Venezuela as its principal partner in Latin America to challenge the United States

geopolitically. To assuage Maduro, China and Venezuela upgraded their bilateral ties to an "all weather relationship." While this represents an upgrade in the hierarchy of China's foreign relations, Maduro's trip revealed the fundamental distrust that persists in Beijing about its ability to support Caracas monetarily and get a return on its investment.² Lack

China is Venezuela's largest creditor... The restructuring of this enormous amount of money has been one of the headaches in relations between both countries.

of Chinese financial support and a presidential election likely upcoming in 2024 suggest Maduro will have to rely on greater repression to hold onto power. Additionally, Maduro's largely empty-handed return from China may be seen by Russia as an opening to deepen their strategic ties to Venezuela, given Moscow's desire to use Latin America as a counterpoint to U.S. policy in Europe, and specifically, support for Ukraine.³



Former President Hugo Chávez receives a Chinese delegation. No Latin American leader traveled more to Beijing than Hugo Chávez during his presidency.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chavezcandanga/639609667/>;
Attribution: Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Source: “Nicolás Maduro visita China para tratar de paliar la crisis económica de Venezuela (Nicolás Maduro visits China to try to alleviate the economic crisis in Venezuela),” *El País* (Spanish daily with excellent regional coverage of Latin America), 12 September 2023. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-09-12/nicolas-maduro-visita-china-para-tratar-de-paliar-la-tesis-economica-de-venezuela.html>

Maduro arrived with an eminently economic agenda and the intention of finding solutions to the crisis that is shaking the country... The intention is to strengthen ties that have been diluted in recent years and realign interests in an international theater polarized by the tense relationship between the United States and Beijing... China is Venezuela’s largest creditor, the Latin American country that has the largest debt with Beijing: since 2007, it has received about 60 billion dollars in Chinese state loans... The restructuring of this enormous amount of money has been one of the headaches in relations between both countries and was the driver behind Maduro’s last visit to Beijing in 2018.

Source: “Relación China-Venezuela será elevada a su máximo nivel: Xi Jinping (China-Venezuela relationship will be raised to its highest level: Xi Jinping),” *La Jornada* (one of Mexico’s daily newspapers), 13 September 2023. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2023/09/13/mundo/relacion-china-venezuela-sera-elevada-a-su-maximo-nivel-xi-jinping/>

Chinese President Xi Jinping announced this Wednesday in a meeting with his counterpart Nicolás Maduro in Beijing the strengthening of relations with Venezuela, which will be raised to their highest level... “All weather relations” are the highest level of Chinese diplomatic relations. Only a handful of countries (Pakistan, Russia, Belarus) have this status.

Notes:

- 1 For more information about China’s role in supporting Hugo Chávez’s government, see: Stephen B. Kaplan and Michael A. Penfold, “China-Venezuela Economic Relations: Hedging Venezuelan Bets with Chinese Characteristics,” Wilson Center for International Scholars. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/china-venezuela-economic-relations-hedging-venezuelan-bets-chinese-characteristics>
- 2 For additional analysis on the bind China finds itself in with Venezuela—too important to cut relations, yet too untrustworthy to deepen them—see: “The Future of Sino-Venezuelan Relationship: Make or Break?,” *Harvard International Review*, December 22, 2021. <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-future-of-the-sino-venezuelan-relationship-make-or-break/>
- 3 For more information on how Russia views its relations with Latin America as a counterpoint to U.S. policy in Europe, see: Ryan C. Berg, “What Does Russia’s War in Ukraine Mean for Latin America and the Caribbean?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 1, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-latin-america-and-caribbean>

Kazakhstan Draws on Lessons From War in Ukraine

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Kazakhstan has always been concerned that its northern regions could be annexed by Russia.¹ As a result, Kazakhstan's armed forces carried out an air defense exercise in February 2023 and a command-staff exercise in early September 2023 that appeared to draw on lessons from the war in Ukraine, even if it was not explicitly stated.² According to the accompanying excerpted article from the Kazakhstan-based Russian-language online newspaper *Informburo*, the command-staff exercise, *Batyl Toytarys – 2023* (Brave Resistance – 2023) involved brigade tactical groups, air support, and special forces in scenarios that included defending against a river crossing and recapturing a hydroelectric power station from an enemy force. The article notes that the exercise took place in four different

Units of special operations forces and the National Guard liberated the Kapchagai hydroelectric power station, which was captured by a mock enemy.

regions in the country, two of which are near the Kazakhstan-Russia border. It also notes that Kazakhstan's Navy took part in the exercise by securing facilities in the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstani officials did not release any further information on the conditional enemy for the exercise, but it appears to be working through a scenario of dealing with a conventional enemy who would target multiple regions of the country on a large scale.



Russian and Kazakh military to discuss security in Central Asia.

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

Source: Aygerim Ummat, “Токаеву показали, как проходят военные учения ‘Батыл тойтарыс – 2023’ (Tokayev was shown how the armed forces carried out the exercise ‘Batyl toytarys – 2023’),” *Informburo* (Russian-language online newspaper in Kazakhstan), 5 September 2023. <https://informburo.kz/novosti/tokaevu-pokazali-kak-proxodyat-voennye-uceniya-batyl-toitarys-2023>

...the Head of State Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited the strategic command and staff military exercises “Batyl Toytarys - 2023”...

Brigade tactical groups, with the support of aviation, as well as in cooperation with units of ground forces and special operations forces, worked out tactical actions to capture the designated enemy line on the opposite bank while overcoming a water barrier.

Units of special operations forces and the National Guard liberated the Kapchagai hydroelectric power station, which was captured by a mock enemy. The units of the Ministry of Emergency Situations worked to alleviate the consequences of the man-made disaster and worked out measures to provide humanitarian assistance to the population.

According to a single concept and plan, which was developed by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a strategic regrouping of troops was carried out in the areas where the exercises will be held...the Navy, with the support of aviation and special operations forces, ensured the security of economic facilities in the Caspian Sea.

The corresponding joint combat training tasks were carried out at the training grounds of Almaty, Karaganda, North Kazakhstan, and Abay regions.

Notes:

- 1 For more information on Kazakhstan’s exercise and the cancelled parade, see: Matthew Stein “Kazakhstan Draws Lessons From the Russia-Ukraine War,” *OE Watch* 03-2023. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/437097>
- 2 Kazakhstani public perceptions of Russia are trending negative. A recent public survey revealed that 30 percent of the Kazakhstani population had lost its positive perception of Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, while half of those questioned did not change their perception of Russia. Conversely, 5 percent of those surveyed had a better perception of Russia. For more detail see: “Треть казахстанцев стала хуже относиться к России после начала ее вторжения в Украину (A third of Kazakhstanis have a worse attitude toward Russia after the start of its invasion of Ukraine),” *Vlast*, 18 May 2023. <https://vlast.kz/novosti/55152-tret-kazahstancsev-stala-huze-otnositsa-k-rossii-posle-nacala-ee-vtorzenia-v-ukrainu.html>

“Axis” of Military Regimes Strengthens in West Africa With Support From Russia

By Jason Warner
OE Watch Commentary

A new pro-Russia geopolitical bloc is gaining steam in West Africa. Composed of francophone military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the new bloc is showing itself to be a cohesive and problematic new alliance in regional military, security, and political affairs with assistance from Russia and the Wagner Group. The first excerpted article, from the French state-sponsored *RFI* reposted on the pan-African news aggregator *AllAfrica.com*, includes the first known reference to a so-called “Mali-Russia-Niger Axis.” To that “Axis,” one should also add Burkina Faso, a close ally of Mali, the Nigerien junta, and Russia. Mali and Russia formed the basis of this “Axis” after its two coups in 2020 and 2021, and Burkina Faso’s own 2022 coup led it to quickly fall in with the other two states.¹ Niger’s own military-led overthrow led its new government to the newest member of the “Axis.”

Mali has been a supporter of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Increasingly, West Africa is being split into two camps. On one side is the described pro-Russia axis, while on the other side are the France-friendly countries like Senegal,⁴ Cote d’Ivoire, Benin, Togo, and Nigeria, the latter of which chairs ECOWAS.

Niger junta leader General Abdourahamane Tchiani announced that his country will allow the military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso to send their soldiers into Niger to defend against an attack.

The four countries increasingly support one another. According to the *RFI* article, Russia recently vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have kept UN observers in Mali. This veto was both a boon for Mali, which had demanded the end of the UN’s peacekeeping mission, and for Russia, which the UN had, in veiled language, accused of widespread human rights abuses in Mali. The second article from *AllAfrica.com* states that the Nigerien junta recently signed a pact with Mali and Burkina Faso to allow their troops to enter Niger to defend it against an external attack. This pact was made in reference to discussions of a potential Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) military intervention into Niger to oust that country’s leader, General Abdourahamane Tchiani.² Regarding Russian involvement, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger all have varying degrees of engagement with the Wagner Group.³ Moreover, in all three countries, Russian misinformation and disinformation campaigns, particularly decrying French presence, have been rampant. In return,

Source: Melissa Chemam, “West Africa: Niger’s Junta Finds Support in Mali and Russia, But France Stands Firm,” AllAfrica.com (pan-African news aggregator), 11 September 2023. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202309120079.html>

The leaders of Russia and Mali have agreed the political crisis in Niger should be resolved using diplomacy and not force. Meanwhile, France has rejected accusations by Niger’s coup leaders that it’s planning a military intervention.

The Kremlin said President Vladimir Putin and interim Malian leader Assimi Goita had talked by telephone at Bamako’s request.

The comment came a day after Niger’s military rulers accused former colonial power France of assembling troops, war materials and equipment in several neighboring West African countries with a view to “military intervention” in the Sahel state.

A Mali-Russia-Niger axis

During his telephone exchange with Putin, Goita thanked Russia for vetoing an attempt by the UN Security Council to keep a team of UN experts in Mali.

The experts had accused “foreign forces”, a veiled reference to the Russian mercenary group Wagner, of involvement in widespread abuses in Mali.

Mali shares a long border with Niger, and, immediately after the coup, its junta voiced support for Niger’s new military rulers.

It has on several occasions stated its opposition to a military intervention there.

Mali has shifted sharply to Russia since back-to-back coups in 2020 and 2021, becoming one of the few nations to back Moscow at the United Nations over its invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin added that Putin and Goita also discussed cooperation between Russia and Mali on economic and commercial issues, and on “anti-terror” operations.

Ecowas leaders have threatened to intervene militarily in Niger, the fourth West African nation since 2020 to suffer a coup after Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea.

Source: “Niger: Junta Leader Signs Order to Allow Help from Burkina Faso, Mali Military,” AllAfrica.com (pan-African news aggregator), 25 August 2023. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202308250228.html>

Niger junta leader General Abdourahamane Tchiani announced that his country will allow the military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso to send their soldiers into Niger to defend against an attack.

Tchiani had been in a meeting with the foreign ministers of Burkina Faso, Olivia Rouamba, and Mali, Abdoulaye Diop, visited Gen Tchiani in Niamey before signing the order.

West African regional bloc Ecowas was threatening to use force if President Mohamed Bassoum is not reinstated, but the regional West African bloc is focusing on diplomacy for now.

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Notes:

- 1 For more reading on the relationships between these four countries, see: Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso Claims Disguised Jihadists, Not Military, Responsible for Civilian Killings,” *OE Watch* 06-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/burkina-faso-claims-disguised-jihadists-not-military-responsible-for-civilian-killings/>; Jason Warner, “Vast Majority of Malians Express Confidence in Russia’s 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, “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, “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, “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 on the perspectives of the potential ECOWAS intervention, see: Jason Warner, “West African States Split on Potential ECOWAS Intervention in Niger,” *OE Watch* 08-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/west-african-states-split-on-potential-intervention-in-niger/>
- 3 Mali has a substantial Wagner presence in the country. In Burkina Faso, the government has denied the official presence of Wagner, though many observers, including Ghana’s president, have claimed that the private military company does indeed operate there. In the case of Niger, reports have emerged that the Tichani has requested Wagner’s presence, though it is yet unconfirmed if this call has been answered. For more on Burkina Faso’s relationship with Wagner and Russia, see: Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso Fights Terrorism With Recruits and Russia,” *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/burkina-faso-fights-terrorism-with-recruits-and-russia/>
- 4 Even within Senegal, members of the political commentariat have decried Senegal’s potential participation in a theoretical ECOWAS intervention into Niger. For instance, an op-ed signed by more than one hundred Senegalese in the news outlet *Sud Quotidien* called participation in such an intervention “a neocolonial military adventure.” See: “Afrique de l’Ouest: L’aventure militaire neocoloniale du President Macky Sall (West Africa: The neocolonial military adventure of President Macky Sall),” *Sud Quotidien* (Senegal-based news outlet), 6 September 2023. <https://fr.allafrica.com/stories/202309070398.html>

Russian Influence Fades in Southern Syria

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Russia’s fading presence and loss of influence in southern Syria was on display during recent antiregime protests by the ethnoreligious Druze minority group in the Syrian province of Suweida.¹ As of mid-September, the protests had been going on for over a month. Russia, which had previously mediated between the regime and the Druze, was nowhere to be seen.² Suweida’s protest movement—which has ebbed and flowed throughout the civil war—was motivated by longstanding deterioration in living conditions.

A prominent Druze leader, speaking to protesters who had been injured by regime forces in mid-September, placed blame for the unrest on local Iranian agents and allies. As reported in the first excerpt, from the Lebanese news website *al-Modon*, he accused them of stealing Syrian wealth and brainwashing its citizens with a “subversive” ideology. Russia’s absence from the volatile situation in Suweida is as noteworthy as are the strident accusations made against Iran and its local allies. In 2018, Russia had established itself as an effective mediator between the Syrian regime and Sunni rebels from Daraa, the province immediately to the west of Suweida. Russia did so by bringing rebel factions into a Russia-controlled proxy force known as the “5th Corps.”

Two years ago, as reported in the second accompanying excerpt, from Qatar’s *al-Jazeera*, Russia began handing

control of its southern proxies to the Syrian regime, and Iran took advantage of this situation through its influence in Syrian Military Intelligence and the Syrian Army’s 4th Division.³ Druze discontent with Iran’s influence rose due to Iranian proxies and allies in the regime extracting scarce resources from Suweida’s economy—including lucrative cross-border smuggling routes into Jordan and the Gulf. In 2022, a group of Druze leaders sought Russian assistance in curbing Iran’s local influence, on the assumption that Russia maintained sway in this part of Syria. In response, Russia sent a group of lowly military police with no decision-making powers, in what was a clear hint of waning Russian influence.⁴ The situation has only become starker with the Suweida protest movement. Indeed, as of mid-September, the Kremlin had made no official statement on the protests in Suweida, and Russian government-linked media blamed them on the United States, as noted in the third accompanying excerpt, also from *al-Modon*. The Kremlin is no longer able to provide even the illusion of influence in this part of Syria. Iran, for its part, appears to have solidified its influence in the south, but in doing so has made itself increasingly unpopular.

In the last two years, the decline of the Russian role within Syrian territories has become clear...

Source:

“صا اصل راب نيره اظت م ل فادهت سا دع ب.. اهت ايش ل ي م و نار ي دض داه ل ل و عدي ي رحه ل ا: اء ادي و س ل ا” (Suweida: al-Hajiri calls for jihad against Iran and its militias... after protesters shot at), *al-Modon* (Lebanese news website), 13 September 2023. <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2023/9/13>

He considered that the “security movement” that opened fire on demonstrators in Suwayda was the product of the “corrupt” security services that have been tampering with Syria for years, stressing that the demonstrators should not be drawn into the plan of these agencies to attack the people of Suwayda...

He considered that the authority in Iran is “racist and corrupt” and entered Syria in order to “steal the country and its wealth and change people’s minds in a direction they are not convinced of,” stressing that Iran, its militias, and the Lebanese Hezbollah are “occupiers and we do not accept their presence in Syria...and we announce this publicly.”

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Source:

؟ايروس ي ف نار ي ذوفن ني ج و غ ي رب لتقم يوق ي له .. دس أل ا ءك عك

(Assad's cake... will the killing of Prigozhin strengthen Iranian influence in Syria)," *al-Jazeera* (Qatari news outlet), 6 September 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.net/midan/reality/politics/2023/9/6/ل-ه-دس-أل-ءك-عك-ل-وح-ع-ار-ص-ل-تق-م-ي-وق-ي>

In the last two years, the decline of the Russian role within Syrian territories has become clear. This was not limited to the disappearance of Russian hopes for reaching a political solution to the war that has been going on for more than ten years, but it also amounted to cutting off Russian support for many of Moscow's agents in Syria...

The Iranians took advantage of this opportunity in order to remove Russia relatively from the scene and capture former proxies whom the Kremlin could no longer support militarily and financially. This happened with the Syrian regime's Eighth Brigade, one of the most loyal units to Russia within the armed forces in southern Syria, which was reduced. Russia halved the salaries of its members, and in 2022 it completely stopped communicating with the brigade, which prompted the brigade to work for the Syrian Military Intelligence Directorate, one of Iran's most powerful agents. At the same time, the National Defense Forces militias east of Deir ez-Zor, led by Hassan al-Ghadhban, separated from Moscow. In favor of the Iranian-backed Fourth Division, after Moscow failed to pay the salaries of the members for a full six months.

Source:

ن ان بل نم .. ء ا دي وس ل ا ءض ا ف ت ن ا ر ق ت و ك س و م

(Moscow reads the Suweida uprising... from Lebanon)," *al-Modon* (Lebanese news website), 5 September 2023. <https://www.almodon.com/opinion/2023/9/5/>

Although more than two weeks have passed since the Suweida uprising, the Kremlin remains silent about it. ...

What is relatively new this time in accusing the West of being behind the Suweida uprising is the claim of an American plan to destabilize the region by controlling the network of financial flows linked to the crisis in the Lebanese banking system...

On the first of this month, the Topwar website, which is linked to the Russian Ministry of Defense, published a text regarding the Suwayda uprising entitled "The Syrian Protests and the US Strategy in Lebanon"...

Notes:

- 1 The Druze are an esoteric, monotheistic ethnoreligious group that constitute 3 percent of Syria's population, concentrated in Suweida Province. There are also Druze communities on the Syria-Israel border and in Lebanon. Unlike neighboring Sunni-majority Daraa Province—the heartland of Syria's rebellion—the Druze-majority province of Suweida carved out an effective position of neutrality in Syria's civil war. By staking out a neutral position, the Druze effectively became "strategic bedfellows" of the Assad regime. See: Fabrice Balanche. "The Druze and Assad: Strategic Bedfellows," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 20 October 2016. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/druze-and-assad-strategic-bedfellows>
- 2 See for instance: "Syrian government releases detainees with Russian mediation in Syria's Suwayda," *North Press Agency*, 11 July 2020. <https://npasyria.com/en/44220/>
- 3 For more see: Lucas Winter. "Growing Iranian Influence Near the Border with Israel in Southwest Syria," *OE Watch*, March 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fms0/m/oe-watch-past-issues/368233>
- 4 Key Druze leaders refused to meet with the powerless Russian delegation, which consisted of military police. See: Sources: Eight Demands to Russian Delegation in Suweida," *al-souria.net* (Syrian opposition news website) via *The Syrian Observer* (Syrian media aggregator), 9 August 2022. <https://syrianobserver.com/news/77992/sources-eight-demands-to-russian-delegation-in-suweida.html> and "Suweida: Men of Dignity refuses to meet Russian delegation," *al-Araby al-Jadeed* (Qatari-aligned daily), 10 August 2022. <https://tinyurl.com/4tsmy3t2>

Nigerien Civilians Calm Despite Threat of Conflict With Benin

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 18 September, the Cameroon-based website, *lopinion-plus.com*, published the below excerpted French-language article, which highlighted ongoing tensions in the region between Niger and Benin. According to the article, Niger's military coup leaders, who overthrew the country's democratically elected leadership in August, are closing the border with Benin. The new coup leaders in Niger allege that Benin is transporting Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) soldiers and French equipment to the border to support a potential invasion of Niger to restore the country's civilian leadership.¹ The article notes that civilians in the Nigerien town of Gaya, which is situated near the border with Benin, remain unconcerned. Some civilians, for example, point to the longstanding territorial dispute over Lété (Summer) Island in the Niger River between Benin and Niger that began in 1963.² The ramping up of forces on the Nigerien side of the border in response to the alleged ECOWAS actions now resembles that of 1963, but, civilians expect tensions to subside as they did 50 years ago.

Nevertheless, geopolitical circumstances are different now. As the second excerpted French-language article from 20 September in *Jeune Afrique* reported, Niger has significant support in the Sahel from other post-coup countries, such as Mali and Burkina Faso. For example, the article



The Benin-Niger border crossing is set to be closed as per Niger's fears that Benin might use the crossing to move ECOWAS troops and French equipment into Niger.

Source: YoTuT from United States; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_border_crossing_into_Benin_from_Niger_\(5488529569\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_border_crossing_into_Benin_from_Niger_(5488529569).jpg); Attribution: CC x2.0

Benin is accused of welcoming and transporting French equipment and ECOWAS soldiers to the border with Niger...At that location, residents say they are less worried.

mentioned how Burkina Faso passed a law authorizing the country's military forces to aid Niger if any other "external army," such as Benin's, intervenes in Niger's domestic affairs. Unlike the border dispute in 1963, the current tensions have a greater probability of reverberating throughout West Africa.

Source: "Niger: l'armée renforce son dispositif à la frontière du Bénin (Niger: the army reinforces its presence on the border with Benin)," *lopinionplus.com* (French-language Cameroon-based publication covering Francophone African affairs), 18 September 2023. <https://lopinionplus.com/niger-larmee-renforce-son-dispositif-a-la-frontiere-du-benin/>

Nigerien soldiers reinforced their security measures in Gaya, a border town between Malanville in Benin and Kamba in Niger that is located more than 300 kilometers from Niamey. [Benin] is accused of welcoming and transporting French equipment and ECOWAS soldiers to the border with Niger.

At that location, residents state that they are less worried.... In the years 1963-64 there were tensions between Benin and [Niger] because of Lété Island and there was a law enforcement deployment in Gaya. So this is the second time that we have this type of deployment..." explained a resident.

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Source: “Le Burkina Faso vote une loi autorisant l’envoi de soldats au Niger (Burkina Faso votes for a law authorizing the sending of soldiers to Niger),” *Jeune Afrique* (French language online publication focusing on pan-African affairs), 20 September 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1484544/politique/le-burkina-faso-vote-une-loi-autorisant-lenvoi-de-soldats-au-niger/>

On September 19, the Transitional Legislative Assembly passed a law authorizing the sending for “three renewable months” a military contingent to neighboring Niger, which has been threatened by an armed intervention of West African countries since the coup of July 26. The law, which was proposed by the transitional government, was unanimously approved by 71 members.

These three countries [Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali], which are led by military regimes, signed a charter on September 16 in Bamako to establish an alliance of “collective defense and mutual assistance”, thus creating the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Notes:

- 1 On 5 August, Benin announced that it would support ECOWAS to resolve the political unrest in neighboring Niger. Several West African states expressed willingness to military intervene in Niger if ECOWAS sanctioned an intervention. This could, therefore, imply that Benin will become a launchpad for an ECOWAS invasion of Niger if an invasion is sanctioned. See Philip Churm, “Benin pledges support for ECOWAS over Niger,” *AfricaNews.com*, 5 August 2023, 2023. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/08/05/benin-pledges-support-for-ecowas-over-niger/>
- 2 In the early 1960s, Dahomey (as Benin was known until 1975) and Niger failed to resolve through negotiations their border dispute over Lété (Summer) Island, but both countries’ militaries eventually disengaged from the border region. Ultimately, the International Court of Justice ruled in Niger’s favor in 2011. The island is 16 km long and 4 km wide and is passable by foot for pastoralists from one bank of the river to the other bank during the dry season. For more, see: Markus Kornprobst, “The management of border disputes in African regional subsystems: comparing West Africa and the Horn of Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 40:3 (2002), 369-393.