

OEWATCH

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FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Issue 2

2024

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ON THE COVER:

Chinese container ship off the coast of Los Angeles, California.

Source: Corey Seeman, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cseeman/11102246564/>; Attribution: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

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Chinese Strategists Consider Weaponizing “Complexity Science”

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

The complexity of warfare increases as new capabilities, such as unmanned aircraft, loitering munitions, cyber warfare, and others, are introduced. As complexity increases, so do the risks, prompting Chinese military thinkers to explore the possibilities of using “complexity science,” the study of complex systems, to their advantage. The first excerpted article, published by the People’s Liberation Army’s official newspaper, *PLA Daily*, and reposted to the Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China’s website, underscores the importance of understanding basic science versus the concept of “complexity science.” A traditional, cause-and-effect system assumes a linear outcome, which is predictable. However, as the article points out, in a complex system, the topic of study of “complexity science,” one slight change could have a huge impact on the course or outcome of the war.¹

Complexity science is important in both defensive and offensive operations. For example, offensively, the article explains that destroying a key node of an opponent’s network information system, the glue that holds together the joint operations system, can serve as a force multiplier. In defensive operations, to protect their own systems, PLA commanders need to completely understand the emerg-

ing nature of complex war systems so that they can predict or anticipate where the adversary might attempt to degrade their systems. In offensive operations, on the other hand, they should use their insight to shape the war and create winning opportunities for themselves. The article explains that coming up with countermeasures and improving the ability to predict emerging technology can be facilitated through modeling and simulation. It also suggests taking advantage of the unpredictable and “fighting opportunities” in combat “to catch the opponent off guard with thunderous momentum.”

“The network information system ... can be damaged or controlled by destroying key nodes in the network information system, creating a destruction ‘multiplier’ effect of ‘100-1=0.’”

The second article, published by China’s top military decision-making command body, the Central Military Commission’s authorized news source, *China Military Online*, details “complexity” in command-and-control (C2) systems. It explains that complexity science offers a new way to understand, guide, and practice war. It also recommends using complexity, around C2, as a weapon to

complicate the opponent’s decision-making capacity, while also facilitating one’s own abilities. The key to accomplishing this is by breaking the traditional decision-making methods and reshaping those of the opponent. Humans, becoming increasingly intertwined with machines in the decision-making process at all levels, will create “unprecedentedly prominent battlefield management issues,” the article argues. As variables become more complex it is easier to reshape the opponent’s decision-making process by limiting the adversary’s intelligence capabilities, impairing their reflexes, creating confusion at the intersection, and pushing the opponent to their breaking point.

Source: Liu Haiye et al, “认真研究并加以把握运用, 战争复杂系统的涌现性 (Carefully Study and Understand the Emergence of Complex War Systems),” *PLA Daily* (official news source of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army), 17 November 2023. <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/16267413.html>.

Informatization and intelligentization in the network information system is the “glue” and “catalyst” of the joint operations system. However, it does not always guarantee the network’s effectiveness in driving the entire joint combat system. The network information system not only can serve as a “multiplier” of “1+1>2” in aggregating combat forces that are widely distributed and have heterogeneous functional role, it can be damaged or controlled by destroying key nodes in the network information system, creating a destruction “multiplier” effect of “100-1=0”.

Make good use of the emergent nature of complex war systems: ...In recent years, the continued advances in modeling and simulation, artificial intelligence, big data and other technologies, has provided new support for commanders to grasp the emergent nature of complex war systems. If commanders can fully grasp the emergent nature of complex war systems, they might be able to perceive, foresee, utilize or even create “points” where war

emerges before their opponents do, thereby becoming more proactive in shaping the war situation and creating winning opportunities.

Gain insights in advance and implement changes before the enemy. Once the emergence of complex war systems occurs, it could cause major global or local changes in the entire battlefield. “Forewarned is forearmed, without prejudging the waste”. Only by sensing and anticipating the possible emergence of key nodes in the war system and key turning points in the combat process before the opponent does, can we implement changes before the enemy and disrupt their operations...(we should) implement various countermeasures for war preparations, and improve the pertinence and predictability of military training and preparations... Methods such as modeling and simulation, which can provide insights into the emergence of complex war systems, should be actively applied to build, restore, and simulate real combat environments and operations in virtual war spaces.

Source: Hu Xiaofeng, “从复杂性科学看指挥控制领域变革趋势 (A Look at Changing Trends in Command and Control From the Perspective of Complexity Science),” *China Military Online* (news source authorized by the Central Military Commission and sponsored by the People’s Liberation Army), 2 January 2024. http://www.81.cn/11_208543/16277640.html

Complexity science has provided new possibilities for understanding war and guiding war practice. In the field of command and control, complexity can be used as a weapon to make the opponent’s decision-making more complicated, while oneself can easily deal with it. The key to achieving this effect is to break

the original traditional decision-making method and reshape the opponent’s decision-making process.

How to Create Complexity

In future wars, as the combat system becomes larger and larger, humans and machines become more

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intertwined in decision-making at all levels, especially the widespread use of intelligent combat platforms, resulting in unprecedentedly prominent battlefield management issues.

Traditional decision-making only changes the decision-making parameters, not the decision-making process, so the decision-making complexity is constant... If complexity methods are introduced, the opponent's decision-making process can be reshaped, forcing the opponent to introduce new parameters, leading to an increase in decision-making complexity. For example, if one's own camouflage effect exceeds the opponent's existing reconnaissance capabilities, it forces it to find new reconnaissance and positioning methods, thereby prompting it to change its decision-making process and make decision-making more complex. So, how to create complexity? It is generally

believed that there are mainly the following four methods.

Limit intelligence capabilities. *By creating uncertainty to enhance complexity and reduce the adversary's situational awareness, the adversary can only act with the support of limited information...*

Impaired reflexes. *Create complexity by leveraging adaptive characteristics to weaken adversaries' operational responsiveness...*

Create confusion at the intersection. *Creating chaos and complexity by crossing boundaries to create new emergent effects...*

Facilitate tipping point transitions. *Push your opponent to the breaking point and create complexity, resulting in non-linear transitions...*

Notes:

- 1 The first article uses an old the British proverb as an example. "For want of a nail, the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe, the horse was lost. For want of a horse, the rider was lost. For want of a rider, the battle was lost. For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail." This analogy underscores the importance of each node, down to the most basic one (the nail). For more on this proverb, see "A Little Neglect May Breed Great Mischief," *Citadel website*, accessed 20 January 2024. <https://web.citadel.edu/root/images/commandant/assistant-commandant-leadership/for-the-want-of-a-nail.pdf>

China's Economic Interests at Risk With Rise of Houthi Shipping Attacks

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

The Israel-Hamas conflict and the conflict's subsequent spread to Yemen and the Red Sea is challenging Chinese economic interests and policy in the region. In early January, Chinese shipping giant China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and Hong Kong-based subsidiary Overseas Orient Container Line announced that they would cut service to Israeli ports in response to Houthi attacks on ships destined for Israel. According to the first excerpted articles from the Israeli business news publication *Globes*, China has in effect sacrificed trade with Israel to maintain shipping access to the Red Sea. While the article vilifies the Chinese position, China is in a bind because both Israel and Iran are significant regional trading partners with China. The Houthis are militarily and diplomatically supported by Iran. China must balance

its priorities in the region between Iran and Israel—and any regional war would be bad for China's Middle East interests.¹

In the second excerpt, taken from a speech delivered by China's UN Ambassador less than a week after the COSCO announcement, the Ambassador noted that “the waters of the Red Sea are an important transportation channel for goods and energy” and called on the Houthis to “to immediately stop harassing merchant ships and respect the navigation rights of merchant ships from all countries in the Red Sea waters, in accordance with international law.”² Not long after, a Houthi official interviewed by Russian news source *Izvestia* stated that all Russian and Chinese ships would be safe navigating the Red Sea but that ships aligned with Israel would be subject to targeting. The Houthi spokesman continued “Our

goal is to raise the economic costs for the Jewish state to stop the carnage in Gaza.” However, despite these assurances, any economic pain that Israel might feel because of reduced shipping to its ports also transfers to China, complicating its economic strategy in the Middle East.

“China is the customer for 90% of the oil exported by Iran. The chances of the Houthis firing on ships of a state-owned Chinese company are therefore very low, raising questions about the reasons for COSCO's decision”

Chinese container ship off the coast of Los Angeles, California.

Source: Corey Seeman, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cseeman/111102246564/>; Attribution: CC By-NC-SA 2.0



Source: “Chinese shipping giant COSCO to stop visiting Israeli ports,” *Globes* (Israeli business news), 7 January 2024. <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinese-shipping-giant-cosco-to-stop-visiting-israeli-ports-1001467115>

Chinese state-owned shipping giant COSCO Shipping has stopped visiting Israeli ports, “Globes” has learned. The company, the fourth largest container shipping line in the world, with about 11% of world trade, decided on this step even though it is not much threatened in the Red Sea, because of the very fact that it is Chinese, and because of China’s ties with Iran, the patron of the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Besides the effect on trade between the Far East and Israel, COSCO’s decision is significant because it cooperates with Israeli shipping line ZIM, which will have to operate more ships on the Far East routes, which is liable to will lead to higher shipping costs, since XIM will be short of ships.

The second direct effect will be on the Haifa Bayport, which is operated by another state-owned Chinese company, SIPG. The port is dependent on the many

COSCO ships that visit it.

The Houthis are threatening to attack vessels of any company that sails to Israel, but China is the customer for 90% of the oil exported by Iran. The chances of the Houthis firing on ships of a state-owned Chinese company are therefore very low, raising questions about the reasons for COSCO’s decision, of which international shippers have yet to be notified.

A pointer to COSCO’s step was the recent announcement by its Hong Kong-based subsidiary OOCL that it was ceasing to sail to Israel because of “operational problems”. That announcement, intended to enable it to sail in the Red Sea without interference by the Houthis, led to wide criticism. In the end, the company caved in, like Singapore-based shipping line ONE (Ocean Network Express).

Source: “常驻联合国代表张军大使在安理会红海局势紧急公开会上的发言 (Speech by Ambassador Zhang Jun, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the Security Council’s emergency public meeting on the Red Sea situation),” PRC Permanent Mission to the United Nations, published by Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 12 January 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zwbdt_673032/wjzs/202401/t20240114_11223386.shtml

Mr. President: *China thanks Russia for its initiative to hold this emergency meeting and thanks Assistant Secretary-General Kyali for his briefing. The United States, Britain and other countries have carried out air strikes on targets in Yemen, further escalating tensions in the Red Sea region. China expresses serious concern about this.*

The waters of the Red Sea are an important transportation channel for goods and energy. For some time, the Houthi armed forces have repeatedly attacked and seized merchant ships in the Red Sea

waters, disrupting international trade order and not conducive to regional stability. China has repeatedly called on the Houthis to immediately stop harassing merchant ships and respect the navigation rights of merchant ships from all countries in the Red Sea waters in accordance with international law. China also calls on all parties, especially influential major powers, to play a constructive and responsible role in jointly safeguarding the safety of waterways in the Red Sea.

We regret to see that the brazen military actions taken by relevant countries against Yemen not only caused infrastructure damage and civilian casualties, but also aggravated security risks in the Red Sea waters and did not help protect the safety of commercial ships and freedom of navigation. Relevant military actions may also impact the political process in Yemen. We fail to see how such a military operation could achieve the stated intended objectives.

It must be noted that the Security Council has never authorized any country to use of force against Yemen. The military actions taken by relevant countries run counter to the purpose of Resolution 2722 just adopted by the Security Council. China reiterates that no country shall misinterpret or abuse international law and Security Council resolutions to create new tensions in the Red Sea waters.

Mr. President: *The current tensions in the Red Sea are one manifestation of the spillover effects of the conflict in Gaza. Letting the conflict in Gaza prolong while hoping that the conflict will not expand may be wishful thinking. It is even more contradictory and irresponsible to advocate preventing conflicts from spilling over, while at the same time adding fuel to the fire and provoking military confrontation. The Middle East is already on the brink of extreme danger. What we should avoid most at the moment is reckless military adventurism. What we need most is calmness and restraint to prevent further expansion of conflicts. We urge all relevant parties, especially the influential powers, to abide by the UN Charter and international law, adhere to the correct direction of dialogue and consultation, and make practical efforts to maintain peace and stability in the Red Sea and the Middle East. Thank you, Chairman.*

Source: В «Ансар Аллах» гарантировали безопасность судам РФ и КНР в Красном море (Ansar Allah guaranteed the safety of Russian and Chinese vessels in the Red Sea),” *Izvestia* (Russian news source), 19 January 2024. В «Ансар Аллах» гарантировали безопасность судам РФ и КНР в Красном море | Новости мира | Известия | 19.01.2024 (iz.ru)

The Yemeni Houthi movement Ansar Allah is attacking US and British ships in the Red Sea; as for other countries, including Russia and China, their shipping in the region is guaranteed safety. A member of the Ansar Allah Politburo, Muhammad al-Buheiti, stated this on January 19 in an interview with Izvestia.

“As for all other countries, including Russia and China, their shipping in the region is not threatened. Moreover, we are ready to ensure the safety of the passage of their ships in the Red Sea, because free navigation plays a significant role for our country,” Al-Buheiti noted.

The politician also added that any Israeli ships or

those connected with Israel will not have the slightest opportunity to sail through the Red Sea - attacks on them will continue.

“Ansar Allah does not pursue the goal of capturing or sinking this or that sea vessel. Our goal is to raise the economic costs for the Jewish state to stop the carnage in Gaza. If the crews of the ships that came under our fire had not ignored our warning signals and changed their direction, the further escalation that the American side caused in the interests of protecting Israel could have been avoided,” he said.

Earlier, on January 17, the military representative of the Ansar Allah movement, Yahya Saria, said that it

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launched a missile attack on the American ship Genco Picardy in the Gulf of Aden. According to him, the Houthis recorded a direct hit on the ship.

On the same day, the UK Navy's Maritime Trade Coordination Center (UKMTO) reported that a drone attacked a ship off the coast of Aden, Yemen, which led to a fire on board the ship. A previous attack on a

ship in the Red Sea was reported the day before. The Houthis then took responsibility for it and confirmed the fact of a missile attack on the bulk carrier Zografia, which was flying the Maltese flag.

The Houthis began attacking shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden from November 2023 to protest Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip.

Notes:

- 1 For a previous perspective on the conflict in Gaza's impact on China interests in the region see: "Israel's close economic ties with China worked well – until the Gaza conflict," *South China Morning Post*, 2 November 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3240061/israels-close-economic-relationship-china-worked-well-until-gaza-conflict-revealed-its-limits>
- 2 A wide range of global reporting has indicated that China is also said to have put pressure on Iran to rein in the Houthis, while the United States has asked China to take more of a role in mediating the conflict in Israel.

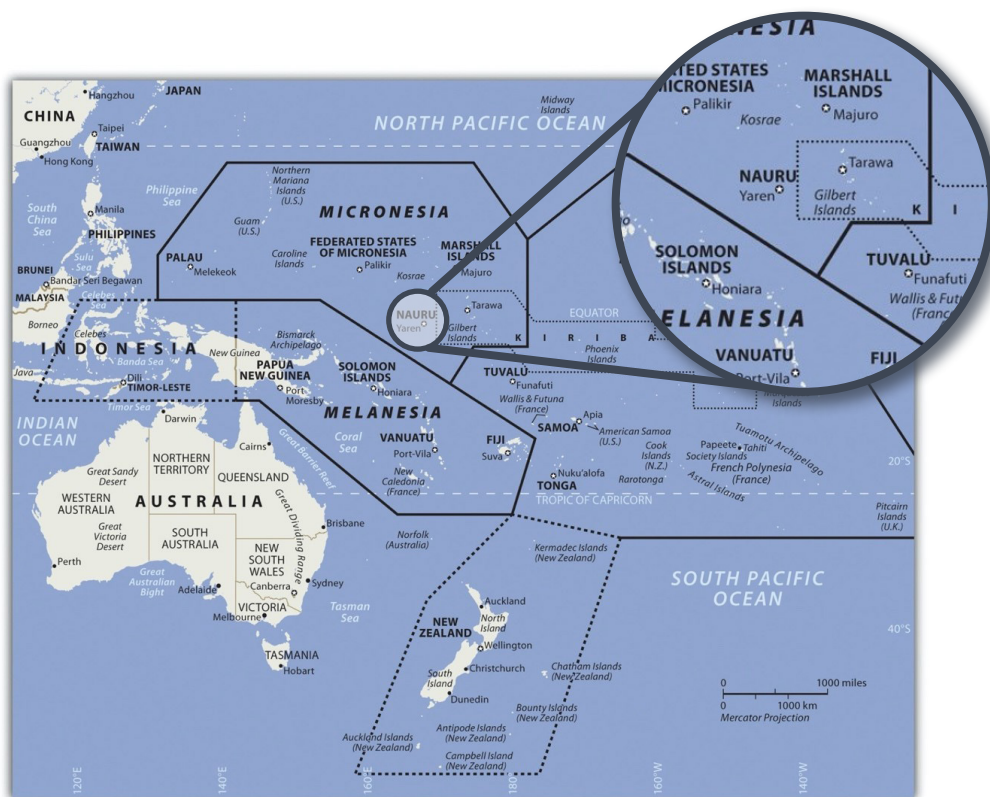
Nauru Recognizes China, Further Isolating Taiwan

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

On 15 January, a day after the election of a pro-independence presidential candidate in Taiwan, the tiny Pacific Island nation of Nauru announced a switch of diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China.¹ The switch has left Taiwan with official diplomatic ties to only 12 states,² although Taiwan enjoys unofficial support from others, including the United Kingdom and the United States. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning noted that,

“China appreciates and welcomes the decision of the government of the Republic of Nauru,” according to the below excerpt from the printout of a press conference. Mao Ning skirted a question about whether Taiwan’s accusation “that China has lured Nauru with monetary support” was true. There has been broad criticism of China’s tactics insinuating that it bribes nations to turn from Taiwan. According to the excerpted article from Singapore-based *Channel News Asia*, Taiwan accused China of engaging “in money diplomacy by offering

far more money than what Taiwan provides to allies.” The same article also references an official statement from Nauru noting that the move to recognize China is a “significant first step in moving forward with Nauru’s development.”³ Regardless, Nauru’s shift towards Beijing is the latest of several countries that have switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China—10 since 2016—and the latest manifestation of China’s long-term strategy to grow its influence in the region and isolate Taiwan.



Map of the Pacific or Oceania region featuring Nauru.

Source: World Regional Geography, <https://open.lib.umn.edu/worldgeography/part/chapter-13-the-pacific-and-antarctica/>; Attribution: CCA-NC-SA 4.0 Int

“As a sovereign country, the Republic of Nauru independently made the right choice to announce that it recognizes the one-China principle, breaks the so-called “diplomatic ties” with the Taiwan authorities, and seeks to reestablish diplomatic ties with China. This fully shows that the one-China principle is where global opinion trends and where the arc of history bends.”

Source: “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 15 January 2024. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202401/t20240115_11224311.html

CCTV: *The government of the Republic of Nauru officially announced its decision to recognize the one-China principle, break the so-called “diplomatic ties” with the Taiwan authorities and seek to reestablish diplomatic ties with China. What’s your comment?*

Mao Ning: *As an independent sovereign country, the Republic of Nauru announced that it recognizes the one-China principle, breaks the so-called “diplomatic ties” with the Taiwan authorities and seeks to reestablish diplomatic ties with China. China appreciates and welcomes the decision of the government of the Republic of Nauru.*

There is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory, and the government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China. It’s what has been affirmed in Resolution 2758 of the UN General Assembly and is a prevailing consensus among the international community. China has established diplomatic relations with 182 countries on the basis of the one-China principle. The Nauru government’s decision of reestablishing diplomatic ties with China once again shows that the one-China principle is where global opinion trends and where the arc of history bends. China stands ready to work with Nauru to open new chapters of

our bilateral relations on the basis of the one-China principle.

NHK: *Why did the government of Nauru announce the decision to cut diplomatic relations with the Taiwan authorities after the elections in Taiwan?*

Mao Ning: *The government of Nauru announced that it recognizes the one-China principle, breaks the so-called “diplomatic ties” with the Taiwan authorities and seeks to reestablish diplomatic ties with China. This is a choice made independently by Nauru as a sovereign country. It shows that the one-China principle is where global opinion trends and where the arc of history bends.*

Reuters: *A Taiwan official just said that China has lured Nauru with monetary support. May we know how much money is China going to give Nauru?*

Mao Ning: *As a sovereign country, the Republic of Nauru independently made the right choice to announce that it recognizes the one-China principle, breaks the so-called “diplomatic ties” with the Taiwan authorities and seeks to reestablish diplomatic ties with China. This fully shows that the one-China principle is where global opinion trends and where the arc of history bends.*

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Source: “CNA Explains: Why tiny Nauru ditched Taipei for Beijing – and why it matters,” *Channel News Asia* (Singapore based, Asia specific news service), 16 January 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/nauru-taiwan-china-diplomatic-can-explains-4051026>

The Nauru government also said in a statement that the move was in the “best interests” of the island nation and its people.

It added that Nauru would be moving to follow the “one China principle” and was seeking a resumption of full diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China – referring to China’s official name.

“This means that the Republic of Nauru will no longer recognise the Republic of China (Taiwan) as a separate country but rather as an inalienable part of China’s territory,” said the statement.

It also called this “a significant first step in moving forward with Nauru’s development.”

China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and sees it as having no right to establish state-to-state ties - a position which Taipei rejects...

Nauru’s move announcement also coincided with a visit to Taiwan by an unofficial delegation from the United States, much to Beijing’s displeasure.

But Mr Sung said while the timing conveniently gave Nauru’s diplomatic switch added significance, the US trip was not the trigger. “Moves like this take time to pull off,” he noted.

Taiwan also alleged that China had engaged in “money diplomacy” here, by offering Nauru far more money than what Taipei provides to allies.

Notes:

- 1 This is not the first time that Nauru has switched allegiances between Taiwan and China. See: China formally restores diplomatic relations with Nauru after Pacific island nation cut Taiwan ties,” *AP*, 23 January 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/china-nauru-taiwan-diplomatic-recognition-23fd9cdd0210a2340b5ae2092d2a85d1>
- 2 The 12 entities that continue to maintain official diplomatic relations with Taiwan are: Marshall Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, Eswatini, Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, and the Holy See (Vatican).
- 3 For a discussion of China’s efforts to turn Latin American countries, see: Ryan Berg, “Honduran Presidential Visit Kicks Off New Relations With China,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/honduran-presidential-visit-kicks-off-new-relations-with-china/>; and Ryan Berg and Wazim Mowla, “Taiwan’s Future in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *The Diplomat*, 1 September 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/taiwans-future-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

China-Based Oriental Space Launches Its First Medium-Lift Rocket

By Alpha Ngo
OE Watch Commentary

China is making strides in its commercial launch technologies. According to the excerpted article from the Chinese news outlet *People's Daily Online*, on 11 January 2024, a Chinese commercial launch vehicle designer called Orienspace¹ successfully launched its first Gravity-1 medium-lift rocket carrying 3 Yunyao-1 (18-20) global weather data satellites into low orbit. The Gravity-1 rocket, (known as “引力-1号,” “Yinli-1,” or simply “YL-1”) has been in development since 2021 and is the launch vehicle for the Yunyao-1 satellites.

Several facets of the Gravity-1 make it an important development for China. First, it can support a very large payload of approximately 20-30 low-orbit satellites, which is larger than China's previous largest rockets' payloads, the CAS Space's Kinetica-1 and China Rocket's Jielong-3. Gravity-1 can provide a payload of 6.5 tons to low orbit, whereas Kinetica-1 can provide a payload of 2 tons and Jielong-3 can provide a payload of 1.5 tons to low orbit. Second, Oriental Space can launch Gravity-1 within 5 hours of manufacturing, giving Oriental Space the capability to address emergency launch requests. Third, Gravity-1 is the lowest price in the current Chinese launch market.² The capabilities of Gravity-1 could provide China with the ability to launch mul-

multiple low-earth orbiting satellites at a faster and more cost-effective rate than their competitors enhancing China's communication, military reconnaissance, and technology testing.



▲ Gravity-1 launch vehicle.
Source: <https://www.orienspace.com/productPage>; Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

“The trend in Chinese commercial launch companies since 2020 has been to shift towards larger rockets. Orienspace is looking to develop and launch Gravity-2 and Gravity-3 soon. Both rockets having a low earth orbit payload greater than Gravity-1.”

Source: “全球运力最大固体运载火箭引力一号首飞成功 (The world’s largest solid launch vehicle Gravity-1 successfully made its maiden flight),” *People’s Daily Online* (Chinese government news outlet), 12 January 2024. https://finance-people-com-cn.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/a/2024/0112/c1004-40157723.html?_x_tr_sch=http&_x_tr_sl=zh-CN&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=sc

“At 13:30 on January 11, my country’s Taiyun Satellite Launch Center used the Gravity-1 Yaoyi commercial launch vehicle in the sea near Haiyang, Shandong, to successfully launch 18-20 Yunyao-1

satellites into the predetermined orbit...

Gravity-1 is capable of carrying more than twice that of the previous largest Chinese solid rockets, CAS Space’s Kinetica-1 and China Rocket’s Jielong-3.”

Notes:

- 1 See Orienspace’s official website (东方空间). <https://www.orienspace.com/>
- 2 This is according to Oriental Space’s website and a recent article featured in the American news outlet *SpaceNews*. See: Andrew Jones, “Orienspace breaks Chinese commercial launch records with Gravity-1 solid rocket,” *SpaceNews*. 11 January 2024. <https://spacenews.com/orienspace-breaks-chinese-commercial-launch-records-with-gravity-1-solid-rocket/>

Russia Standardizing Munitions Used on First-Person View UAVs

By Charles Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from the Russian military enthusiast website, *Armeyskiy Standart*, describes the role and importance of small first-person view (FPV) unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that are being used extensively in Ukraine. Many of these commercially produced UAVs have been repurposed from reconnaissance duties and modified to carry various munitions that can be effectively dropped on enemy personnel and/or equipment.¹ The second accompanying excerpted article from the Russian newspaper, *Izvestia*, discusses Russian efforts to further the FPV concept by developing standardized munitions for FPV UAVs. As the article explains, improvised

explosives for use with small FPV UAVs are unstable and have resulted in crews being “blown up” by their own munitions.

The impacts of the adoption of standardized munitions for FPV UAVs will likely extend long after Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine concludes. The en masse use of FPV UAVs is likely seen by the Russian military, and many others,² as necessary for tactical success on the modern battlefield, especially in the conduct of close-range reconnaissance and fires. The adoption of standardized munitions will facilitate interoperability in the burgeoning Russian UAV industry and significantly lower already relatively low manufacturing costs. Standardization is a necessary

“Previously, we had to independently manufacture, adapt, and “collectively develop” munitions. All this is unsafe. Now having a standard munition will make everyone’s job easier and safer...It’s no secret that some crews were blown up by their own munitions”

step if Russia intends to place FPV UAVs into its table of organization and equipment structure, given their effectiveness and cost for delivering close-range reconnaissance and fires.

Source: Rustem Klupov, “FPV— дроны завоевывают поле боя: В ходе СВО впервые широко применены новые средства поражения (FPV— UAVs are conquering the battlefield: The new weapons were widely used in the SMO for the first time),” *Armeyskiy Standart* (Russian military enthusiast website), 7 December 2023. <https://armystandard.ru/news/20231261712-o0qQy.html>

In reports of special military operations [SMO], there are more and more reports of the use of so-called FPV (First-Person View) UAVs on the line of combat contact in the tactical depth at close-range. FPVs are quadcopters, or multi-rotor UAVs, equipped with a camera that transmits video to the operator-pilot’s control device. The pilot controls the UAV using this video feed, giving him the feeling of actually being in the UAV’s cockpit...

We can say that FPV UAVs are the “know-how” of

SVO. They have wide ranging capabilities to destroy a variety of enemy targets. Having a small mass, they can lift a load several times their own weight and carry it at a speed of 120–140 km/h over a distance of 15–16 km... At the same time, the cost of one UAV is on average from 30 thousand to 60 thousand rubles [/\$330-660].

The versatility of FPV UAVs also lies in the fact that they can carry out additional reconnaissance of an object, deliver high-precision strikes and can carry

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munitions for various purposes — high-explosive, shaped-charge, fragmentation, thermobaric, incendiary, and kinetic...

The ability to use FPV UAVs in the tactical depth at close-range, which is most saturated with troops, allows these UAVs to always find their target, and having the capability to employ specialized munitions

to ensure the reliable destruction of a variety of objects.

The comparative effectiveness of FPV UAVs with other traditional means of destruction distinguishes this type as cheaper and more pragmatic in terms of accuracy and range of use.

Weapons Effectiveness at Close-Range Tactical Depth

	FPV UAV	9M133 ‘Kornet’ Antitank Guided Missile	Raptor Tactical (.338) Sniper Rifle	152mm Fougasse Artillery Shell
Range (m)	16,000	550	1,850	17,000
Probability of defeating a target when fired at max range	.5	.8	.4	.3
Potential targets	armored vehicles, personnel, fortifications	personnel	armored vehicles, personnel, fortifications	armored vehicles, personnel, fortifications
Cost per use	\$1,100-1,320	\$120,000-150,000	\$16.50	\$1,320

Source: Roman Kretsul, Alexey Ramm, and Dmitry Astrakhan, “С легким — на подъем: для FPV-дронов начали выпускать штатные боеприпасы (Easy goings — standardized munitions have begun to be produced for FPV UAVs),” *Izvestiya* (major Russian daily newspaper), 1 December 2023. <https://iz.ru/1613625/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm-dmitrii-astrakhan/s-legkim-na-podem-dlia-fpv-dronov-nachali-vypuskat-shtatnye-boepripasy>

...Several enterprises of the Russian defense industry have established serial production of ammunition for FPV UAVs, regular deliveries to the troops began this fall, two sources in the military department told *Izvestia* and confirmed by an interlocutor in the military-industrial complex.

The new ammunition is equipped with universal mounts that allow it to be suspended under almost all types of FPV UAVs used in the special military operation zone. Now the troops are receiving

fragmentation, high-explosive fragmentation and cumulative warheads. In the future, their line is planned to be expanded.

Externally, a munition for an FPV UAV looks like a tube. New munitions are delivered to the troops in special protective plastic cases. As the publication’s interlocutors noted, the main advantage of the new products is their compactness combined with high power. This is achieved through the use of special explosives. Therefore, serial produced munitions are

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much superior improvised munitions...

“Previously, we had to independently manufacture, adapt, and “collectively develop” munitions. All this is unsafe. Now having a standard munition will make everyone’s job easier and safer...It’s no secret that some crews were blown up by their own munitions...” said Dmitry Uskov, a volunteer and contributor to the “13 Tactical” Telegram channel, told Izvestia...³

FPV UAVs are one of the most dynamically developing areas of unmanned aviation. The operator controls such a device while wearing virtual reality glasses, like a pilot. With the proper skill, this allows you to deliver a UAV with a warhead precisely to the target, for example, to the door of a dugout or a vulnerable projection of an armored vehicle. For most other weapon systems, such precision is unimaginable...

Notes:

- 1 For other Russian uses of drones on the battlefield, see: Charles Bartles, “Russia Plans To Add Remote Mining UAV Platoons To Engineer Units,” *OE Watch*, 09-2023. <https://fmsotradoctradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-plans-to-add-remote-mining-uav-platoons-to-engineer-units/>
- 2 For a recent examination of Taiwan’s position regarding drones on the battlefield, see: John Lubianetsky, “Taiwan Addressing Drone Technology Gap With China,” *OE Watch*, 10-2023. <https://fmsotradoctradoc.army.mil/2024/taiwan-addressing-drone-technology-gap-with-china/>
- 3 *13 Tactical* is a pro-Russia site on the Telegram platform, as found at: https://t.me/s/tactical_13/2665

Former Wagner Troops Integrated Into Chechen Unit Fighting in Ukraine

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

On 12 December 2023, a platoon of former fighters from the disbanded Wagner Group carried out an operation in Ukraine-controlled Bakhmut. The operation, a successful assault on the town, marked one of the few times that the official Russian news agency, TASS, has mentioned the Wagner Group after its failed mutiny in 2023 and the death of its mercurial leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

While the article does not provide significant detail about the operation itself, it confirms that remnants of Wagner are still actively fighting in Ukraine. The platoon, called Kamerton (or “Tuning Fork”), is under the command of the Akhmat Special Forces, a 12,000-strong Chechen special forces unit that is part of the Russian National Guard.¹ Roughly 1,200 Akhmat fighters are estimated to be fighting in Ukraine, though their poor discipline has drawn criticisms (they have been dubbed the “TikTok Army” for their social media posts).²

The second excerpted article from TASS, published on 1 December 2023, provides more detail about Kamerton’s operational capability. It describes the platoon as having both an assault and artillery capability, which supports previous reporting that Akhmat forces not only engaged



Southwestern part of Bakhmut (Donetsk region of Ukraine) during the battle for the city in Spring 2023.

Source: State Border Guard Service of Ukraine [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bakhmut_during_the_battle_\(2023-04-05\),_frame_16531.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bakhmut_during_the_battle_(2023-04-05),_frame_16531.jpg); Attribution: CCA 4.0 Int

in trench clearing operations but also provided artillery support to assist Russia’s 4th Brigade and other forces in the disputed Donetsk region. Adding a platoon with artillery capability to Akhmat would fill a void in the unit structure as the Chechens are traditionally equipped and trained as light infantry or paramilitary combatants. Still, even if Kamerton includes an artillery component, it would be relatively small given the unit is described as a platoon.

Assuming the TASS stories are accurate, they provide preliminary evidence on the whereabouts of a small handful of Wagner fighters, how they are being used in Ukraine, and their current capabilities. The Akhmat battalion is a logical unit for former Wagner fighters as they were close and shared the same battlespace during the battle for Bakhmut in early

2023. Incorporating Wagner remnants into Akhmat units may also plug a capability gap and be easier than trying to integrate the former Wagner fighters into a standard Russian Army infantry or artillery unit.³ However, it remains unclear how the remnants of Wagner, or another private military company, will fill the void Wagner left in other parts of the world.⁴

“A platoon dubbed Kamerton (Tuning Fork) consisting of fighters from the now-defunct Wagner Private Military Company (PMC), who had been incorporated into the ranks of the Akhmat special forces group, has carried out a successful assault on a Ukrainian-occupied elevated point.”

Source: “Собранный из бойцов ‘Вагнера’ отряд ‘Камертон’ провел первый штурм к западу от Артемовска, (Platoon formed from ex-Wagner PMC fighters carries out first assault near Artyomovsk),” TASS (official news agency of Russian government), 12 December 2023. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19516415>

A platoon dubbed Kamerton (Tuning Fork) consisting of fighters from the now-defunct Wagner Private Military Company (PMC), who had been incorporated into the ranks of the Akhmat special forces group, has carried out a successful assault on a Ukrainian-occupied elevated point near the western outskirts of Artyomovsk, the platoon commander, who goes by the call sign “Press,” told TASS.

“Prior to this, it was everyday routine [frontline activities] – reconnaissance and fire strikes. Yet, this was precisely an assault on a key elevated point in this

sector directly by the Kamerton platoon with support from the 4th brigade. In six minutes, Kamerton’s assault groups entered the elevated point and engaged in combat in a trench. They wiped out the enemy and opened up space for the operations of their neighboring platoons,” the commander said.

According to him, the positions taken will help develop further progress in this sector of the line of contact. “The 4th brigade and other Russian forces in this area are being covered by Kamerton’s artillery,” he clarified...

Source: “Командир собранного из бойцов “Вагнера” отряда рассказал о выполнении задач в ходе СВО (The commander of the detachment assembled from Wagner fighters spoke about the implementation of tasks during the Northern Military District),” TASS (Russian state media), 1 December 2023. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/19427897>

According to the head of “Kamerton”, which is part of “Akhmat”, its fighters are engaged in “the whole range of tasks.”

The Kamerton detachment, which consists of former fighters of the Wagner PMC and is part of the Akhmat special forces, performs a full range of tasks in the area of the special military operation. The detachment commander with the call sign Press reported this to TASS.

“Tuning Fork” includes both assault groups and armored and artillery formations.

“Taking into account experience and past operations, we are faced with the whole range of tasks, as well as other Akhmat special forces units. From training

personnel, combat coordination to carrying out combat missions on the line of combat contact,” Press said.

He clarified that Akhmat is a self-sufficient division with its own approaches and methods. According to the Press, Akhmat’s management has allowed Kamerton to fully exploit its strengths.

“Tuning fork” inherited and brought with it in full all the best qualities inherent in “musicians” (fighters of the Wagner PMC - TASS note), both in matters of corporate ethics and in direct approaches to solving combat missions. PMC fighters in the Akhmat special forces are a unique alloy,” added the unit commander.

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Notes:

- 1 Akhmat Special Forces operating in Ukraine, led by Chechen commander, Aпти Alaudinov, operated closely with Wagner Group prior to Prigozhin's mutiny and siege of Russian military HQ in Rostov. Although the relationship changed, it would not be far-fetched for Wagner personnel to be incorporated into the Chechen ranks as the units and personnel worked together. Also of importance, the Akhmat Special Forces was initially a predominantly Chechen unit. Over time the unit has become home to many ethnicities from the Russian Federation and prides itself as multicultural, multi-religious, comprised of Jews, Muslims and Christians—according to multiple statements from its commander Aпти Alaudinov posted to his Telegram channel.
- 2 Borzou Daragahi, "Putin's lapdog wears Prada: Chechen leader Kadyrov poses on TikTok while his men kill civilians in Ukraine," *The Independent*, 7 April 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/kadyrov-chechen-putin-ukraine-chechnya-b2052357.html>
- 3 To see more on Wagner Group activities around the world, see FMSO's archives here: <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/tag/wagner-group/>
- 4 A recent report by the Center for New American Security suggests that the Wagner Group has created a new "model that other Russian opportunistic actors will seek to replicate," especially given the lack of financial resources for Russia's military and civilian elite. See: Kimberly Marten, Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Carisa Nietzsche, "Potential Russian Uses of Paramilitaries in Eurasia," CNAS, 17 January 2024. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/potential-russian-uses-of-paramilitaries-in-eurasia>

Russia Continues To Enhance Its Arctic Infrastructure

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Amid sanctions, Russia continues to develop the infrastructure necessary to exploit and export its vast natural resources, especially in the Arctic. The Yenisei River is a major river flowing northward that originates in Mongolia and bisects Russia. It is a key economic transport route of vital energy and metals from the industrial city and extraction

centers of Norilsk. According to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, products move by rail from Norilsk to the river port of Dudinka, where they are shipped to the Arctic Ocean and then to ports east and west on the Northern Sea Route. Russia is investing heavily in increasing the carrying capacity of the Northern Sea route,¹ already moving energy to its Pacific customers on ice-class LNG carriers and oil tankers.

The Dudinka port is at capacity and the riverside village of Tochina is being rapidly expanded. Reportedly, 21 riverside terminals are under construction to handle petroleum exports. Russia’s focus on new routes to its Asian markets, China and North Korea, will help it circumvent the sanctions and survive a protracted war in Ukraine.



Map of the Yenisei River showing national borders.
Source: Kmusser, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yeniseirivermap.png>;
Attribution: CCA-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported

“The 5.8 km long pipeline is a key component of Vostok Oil, the biggest industrial project currently unfolding in the Russian Arctic. According to Russian state oil company Rosneft and its subsidiary RN-Vankor, as many as 25 ships have taken part in dredging operations in the Yenisei during summer 2023. As winter approached, the company started laying the pipeline on the riverbed. The new pipeline will cross the Yenisei River near Tochina.”

Source: Atle Staalesen, “Oilmen start building of underwater pipeline across the Yenisei,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 19 December 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2023/12/oilmen-start-building-underwater-pipeline-across-yenisey>

The 5.8 km long pipeline is a key component of Vostok Oil, the biggest industrial project currently unfolding in the Russian Arctic. According to Russian state oil company Rosneft and its subsidiary RN-Vankor, as many as 25 ships have in taken part in dredging operations in the Yenisei during summer 2023. As winter approached, the company started laying the pipeline on the riverbed. The new pipeline will cross the Yenisey River near Tochina.

The pipes have a 820 mm diameter and wall thickness of 22 mm. The 5,8 km long installation will connect the eastern and western shores of the major Arctic river. Its starting point is in the village of Tochina, about 60 km north of Dudinka.

Rosneft is under great time pressure to build this part of the Vostok Oil project. On a number of occasions, company CEO Igor Sechin has reiterated that the project will produce more than 30 million tons

already in 2024. By 2030, the Vostok Oil will produce more than 100 million tons per year, most of it to be exported through the Northern Sea Route to Asian buyers.

A significant number of wells are drilled in the Taymyr Peninsula and several hundred km of pipeline are under construction. The oil will be exported from the Sever Terminal on the coast of the Yenisei Bay.

In the course of summer 2023, more than one million tons of goods have reportedly been shipped to the construction sites along the Yenisei, including 120,000 tons of oil pipes.

Rosneft have developed 21 mooring point for ship deliveries in the area and as many as 402 ships have reportedly been involved in project shipments this year.

Notes:

- 1 For additional reporting on Russian activity in the Arctic see: Les Grau, “Russian Arctic Seaports Expand Activity Despite War In Ukraine,” *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russian-arctic-seaports-expand-activity-despite-war-in-ukraine/>

Russia Changes Arctic Icebreaker Names To Honor History



The Russian Nuclear Icebreaker Arktika, the first of its class of nuclear-powered icebreakers.

Source: Abarinov, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Nuclear_Icebreaker_Arktika.jpg?uselang=ru - Лицензирование; Attribution: Public Domain

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Russia is changing the planned names of its next two icebreakers, usually named for Russian geographic regions, to reflect Russian history. Russia is renaming its next two Arktika class nuclear icebreakers after previous leaders Stalin and Lenin.¹ The next icebreaker, which was to be named *Kamchatka*, will now be named *Stalingrad*, and the following *Sakhalin* will become the *Leningrad*. According to the excerpted article from *The Barents Observer*, “the naming of ships in Russia has become increasingly politicized” as Moscow seeks to sustain the memory of those Soviet victories, both significant in Russian history. Both dictators, Stalin and Lenin, overmatch even Ivan the Terrible in Russia’s long history. After Stalin’s death, Soviet Premier

“The naming of ships in Russia has become increasingly politicized. Recently, state oil company Rosneft put its new tanker on the water. It is named the Aleksei Kosygin after the prominent Soviet Politburo representative. In Soviet history, a significant number of ships have carried Stalin’s name.”

Khrushchev led the de-Stalinization campaign and amongst other initiatives, renamed Stalingrad to Volgograd and Leningrad back to St. Petersburg. Undoubtedly the current Russian invasion of Ukraine is part of

Putin’s rationale. To many Russians, the names denote sacrifice, heroism, and victory—important historical rallying points in the current context of Russian losses and determination in Ukraine.

Source: Atle Staalesen, “In chilly return to past, Putin names new icebreaker “Stalingrad,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 20 November 2023. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2023/11/shadow-strife-and-aggression-descends-arctic-putin-names-new-icebreaker-stalingrad>.

The projected nuclear-powered icebreaker was originally to be named Kamchatka. But the Kremlin now appears to have intervened and renamed the powerful ship Stalingrad. According to the government-controlled newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the name change comes after a proposal from Governor of Volgograd region Andrei Bochkarev. Putin has approved the idea and the icebreaker will carry the name Stalingrad, Bochkarev told the newspaper. “The initiative is important for the preservation of the memory of the bravery of protectors of Stalingrad during the Great Patriotic War”. The city of Volgograd was called Stalingrad until 1961. It was site of one of the most bloody and cruel battles during the whole Second World War. Up to 1.9 million people are believed to have been killed in the battles that raged between August 1942 and February 1943. It is considered a turning point in the

war that ultimately led to the fall of Hitler’s Nazi regime.

The Stalingrad will be Russia’s sixth icebreaker of the Project 22220. Its construction is due to start in 2024. Russia currently has three vessels of this class in operation. The Arktika, Sibir, and Ural keep Arctic ports and shipping lanes open for shipments. The Yakutia and Chukotka are due to be ready for operations in 2024 and 2026 respectively. In addition to the renaming of the Kamchatka to Stalingrad, Putin has reportedly also approved the renaming of the Sakhalin to Leningrad.

The naming of ships in Russia has become increasingly politicized. Recently, state oil company Rosneft put its new tanker on the water. It is named the Aleksei Kosygin after the prominent Soviet Politburo representative. In Soviet history, a significant number of ships have carried Stalin’s name.

Notes:

- 1 For previous reporting on Russia’s nuclear icebreaker production, see: Les Grau, “Russia Cutting Back On Nuclear Icebreaker Production,” *OE Watch*, 04-2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-cutting-back-on-nuclear-icebreaker-production-2>

Russia’s “Africa Corps” Set To Replace Wagner in Niger

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Russia’s Wagner Group became heavily involved in Africa in the years before the death of its founder Yevgeny Prigozhin in an airplane crash in August 2023. The mercenary fighter company deployed its troops primarily to West African countries where France was the security guarantor but had become ostracized by military juntas and authoritarian regimes, such as in Mali, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Sudan.¹ Wagner, in turn, became a key means for Russia to exert influence on the leadership of those countries, which often resulted in Russia being granted special concessions, such as access to resources. However, the Wagner brand name has fallen out of favor with the Kremlin for African operations following Prigozhin’s rebellion against Russian leadership. Yet, the benefit for Russia of having mercenary military formations in Africa still exists. As a result, Russia may replace Wagner with a new, but similarly purposed, “Africa Corps.”

The excerpted French-language article on the website of *Radio France Internationale* highlighted the visit in December 2023 of Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Evkourov (often spelled Yevkurov) to Niger, where the two countries agreed to strengthen military cooperation.² The was significant because it was the first time a



Russian mercenaries provide security for convoy with president of the Central African Republic.

Source: Clément Di Roma/VOA, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RussiansecurityBangui.png>; Attribution: CC x 2.0

Russian delegation visited Niger since the 2023 coup and demonstrated Russia’s endorsement of Niger’s new military junta, whereas Western countries criticized the coup. Additionally, only one month after the coup, the new junta in Niger requested from Russia Wagner’s protection of the junta from internal and external threats, including a potential military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States³.

Evkourov’s visit solidifies the new partnership between Russia and Niger, with Wagner—or the new “Africa Corps”—as the vehicle for Russian influence. The article noted that, based on an analysis of Telegram social media channels, “Africa Corps,” like Wagner, would welcome mercenaries. Indeed, the offer of a relatively high salary, health insurance with

free medical care, and life insurance, all under the supervision of Evkourov, would motivate mercenaries to join. Such inducements attract, in particular, Russian Army veterans whose professional skill set and sense of adventure is otherwise not compatible with civilian life. Further, the article indicates Russian military intelligence and businessmen close to Vladimir Putin support “Africa Corps.” The similarities between Wagner and “Africa Corps” strongly suggest the latter is a continuation of the former under different branding.

“The future Russian Army “Africa corps” is presented by certain Telegram channels as intended to replace Wagner.”

Source: “Russie: Moscou prépare un «corps militaire africain» pour prendre la suite de Wagner (Russia: Moscow is preparing an “African military corps” to replace Wagner),” *Radio France Internationale*, (French state-owned radio news website reporting on international affairs), 5 December 2023. [rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231205-russie-moscou-prepare-un-corps-militaire-africain-pour-prendre-la-suite-de-wagner](https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231205-russie-moscou-prepare-un-corps-militaire-africain-pour-prendre-la-suite-de-wagner)

A Russian delegation led by the Deputy Minister of Defense is in Niamey. This is the first official visit by a member of the Russian government to this country since the July 26 coup which broke diplomatic relations between Niger and its international partners. The delegation led by the Russian Deputy Minister of Defense, Colonel-General Younous-bek Bamatguireevich Evkourov, was received by the head of the Nigerien military regime, General Abdourahamane Tiani. At the end of the meeting, the parties continued “to sign documents to strengthen military cooperation between the Republic of Niger and the Russian Federation

The future Russian Army “African corps” is presented by certain Telegram channels as intended to replace Wagner. Former mercenaries would be welcome. The conditions include a high salary of nearly 3,000 euros, free medical care, and life and health insurance, all under the supervision of Deputy Defense Minister Yunous-bek Bamatguireevich Evkourov. Other sources suggest that the unit receives direct patronage from Russian military intelligence, under the leadership of a businessman close to the president... This last scenario would be very similar to that applied to Wagner

Notes:

- 1 In the final week of December 2023, the last remaining 1,500 French troops withdrew from Niger. In addition, Niger previously vowed to stop selling minerals to France and removed diplomatic immunity from the French Ambassador to Niger, who departed the country in August. With the closure of the French Embassy in Niamey on 31 December 2023, the 127 years of a French diplomatic presence in Niger came to an end. This followed a similar French withdrawal from Burkina Faso earlier in 2023 and from Mali in 2022. For additional details, see Morgane Le Cam, “France completes troop withdrawal from Niger, closes embassy,” *lemonde.fr*, 22 December 2023. [lemonde.fr, 22 December 2023. lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/12/22/france-completes-troop-withdrawal-from-niger-closes-embassy_6367061_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/12/22/france-completes-troop-withdrawal-from-niger-closes-embassy_6367061_124.html)
- 2 Evkourov is an interesting choice to lead Africa Corps because he was close to Yevgeny Prigozhin but remained loyal to the Russian Defense Ministry during Prigozhin’s mutiny. Evkourov played a mediating role during the mutiny. When Prigozhin’s Wagner forces entered Rostov and seized the city center, Evkourov received Prigozhin hospitably and defused tensions. However, after Prigozhin’s death, Evkourov led a delegation to Syria, Libya, Central African Republic, and other countries where Wagner operated and told Wagner forces that the Defense Ministry would take over the leadership of Wagner.
- 3 (See: Jason Warner, “West African States Split On Potential Intervention In Niger,” *OE Watch*, Issue # 08, 2023, <https://fmsotrados.army.mil/2023/west-african-states-split-on-potential-intervention-in-niger/>).

Spotlight on Vatanpour, Iran’s “Most Active” Airbase

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

When the Iranian Air Force makes news, it is often for bad reasons, such as when its aging jets crash.¹ The excerpted article from Iranian news outlet defapress.ir features the Shahid Vatanpour Army Air Base south of Isfahan, providing some previously under-reported detail on the fact that it is a logistics and training base.² The article also provides insight into activity and flight hours flown at Vatanpour and other air bases. For instance, the 168-fold difference in hours flown between Vatanpour and the Tehran Army Air Base is striking (366,477 vs. 2,177 hours). As a training base, it makes sense that there would be many flight hours logged at Vatanpour. However, delegation may be part of the enormous number

of hours flown out of the base with Vatanpour being more central, less congested, and better suited as a logistical hub. Additionally, the metrics may be somewhat skewed because Iran stations certain F-14s at Tehran’s Mehrabad International Airport rather than at the Army Air Base, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operates airliners for military transport and logistics under the guise of passenger and cargo planes.

The aircraft themselves also tell a story. The short number of flight hours for the Chinooks stationed at Vatanpour may reflect, both the small number of Chinooks that remain in service and their poor condition.³ The inventory of Bell Helicopters has likewise shrunk, though the smaller platform and easier access to spare parts enables greater flight time.⁴

“If the army helicopters were not present, the costs in blood and treasure...would have been far greater.”

The excerpted article itself may serve another purpose as well. While the IRGC can rely on its many business interests to increase its official budget by more than an order of magnitude,⁵ the regular Army has no such recourse. Even with the end of many international sanctions, funding remains limited. By highlighting the importance of Vatanpour, the IRGC may be seeking to protect the base should the Army’s top brass be considering an Iranian equivalent of a base realignment commission.

Source: “Paygah-e Isfahan: Fa’altarin Paygah-e Havaniroz Artesh” (Isfahan Base: The Army’s Most Active Air Force Base), *defapress.ir* (official news agency of Iran’s defense ministry), 14 January 2024. <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/644683>

The Army Ground Forces are among the most influential forces that comprise the armed forces of our country. Within the ground forces is the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Aviation, colloquially known as “Havaniruz,” that has performed many missions in its existence, especially since the victory of the Islamic Revolution when it participated prominently in battle, security, and relief operations. In many cases, if the army helicopters were not present, the costs

in blood and treasure we may have paid would have been far greater. The pilots of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Aviation carry out both helicopter and fixed wing missions. The Chinook pilots have the least numbers of flights, and the [Bell] 209 [Cobra], [Bell] 205, [Bell] 206, and [Bell] 214 pilots the most flight hours. The fixed-wing pilots also fly with [Dassault] Falcons, [Fokker F-27] Friendships and [Rockwell 690] Turbo Commander jets from Iran

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Army airbases in Tehran, Mashhad, Abyek [Qazvin], Masjid Suleiman, Khuzestan, Kerman, Kermanshah and the general support group and Vatanpour training center in Isfahan.... In the fixed-wing sector, Falcon jet pilots have the lowest number of flights and Turbo Commander pilots have the highest number of flights.

In addition, the pilots assigned to the Islamic Republic of Iran Army Air Force base in Tehran recorded the least flight time with 2,177 hours, while the pilots assigned to the Shahid Vatanpour base in Isfahan recorded the highest amount, with 366,477 hours.

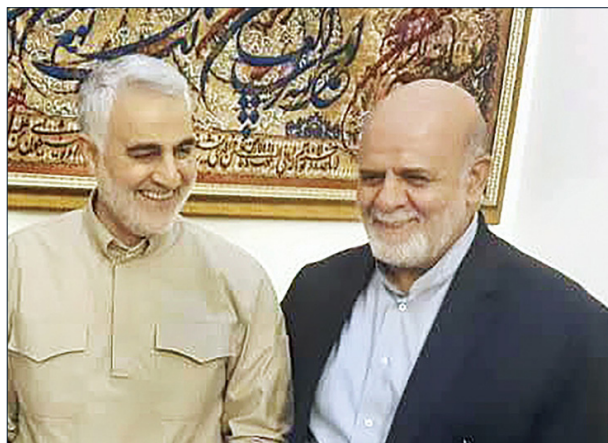
Notes:

- 1 For previous discussion of Iranian fighter jet crashes, see: Michael Rubin, "Iranian F-14 Crash Highlights Iran's Need for New Fighter Contract" *OE Watch*, 08-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/iranian-f-14-crash-highlights-irans-need-for-new-fighter-contract/>
- 2 The Iranian air forces are often subordinate to other branches of the Iranian military. Within both the regular Army and in the IRGC, the ground forces and navy are more prominent. In 2008, the Air Defense Force split from the Army's Air Force to become its own distinct military branch focused on anti-aircraft capabilities. The IRGC, meanwhile, folds the role of its air force into the strategic missile and space forces, both of which outshine Iran's aging jetfighters and other military aircraft. While Tehran spotlights its satellite launches and precision missiles, the bulk of its manned air force dates from prerevolutionary days with most aircraft more than a half century old.
- 3 Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's Chinooks numbered more than 100. They were once a workhorse for the Iranian Army. Famously, less than a year before the Islamic Revolution, four Iranian Chinooks strayed into Soviet airspace during a training mission, leading to the downing of two, with eight fatalities. Today, the Iranian Army Air Force may have at most two in service, the rest destroyed during the Iran-Iraq War, through attrition, or cannibalized for spare parts.
- 4 For background into Iran's efforts to keep its helicopter fleet flying, see: Michael Rubin, "Iran: Reconstruction and Overhaul of Helicopters" *OE Watch*, March 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/368233/download>
- 5 For background about the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' economic interests, see: Michael Rubin, "The IRGC Wins Multibillion Dollar Economic Projects" *OE Watch*, August 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/241432/download>

Iran Hints It Will Supply Air Defense Weaponry to Palestinians

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

The advisor to the commander of the Qods Force, Iraj Masjedi, used the 3 January anniversary of the 2020 death of former Qods Force chief Qassem Soleimani to deride both the United States and Israel. The anniversary has become an annual commemoration in Iran.¹ Multiple Iranian politicians and military officers give speeches lionizing Soleimani and condemning the United States. While the Iranian population is inured to such bombast, the speech by Masjedi was noteworthy for its specificity about providing anti-air defenses to the Palestinians. In practice, support for Palestinians means support for Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas, both of which act as proxies for Iran.² “A day will come when they [the Pales-



Iraj Masjedi, a Qods Force commander and former Iranian ambassador to Iraq, meets with Qassem Soleimani, the late leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force.

Source: https://jamejonline.ir/files/fa/news/1402/10/13/1064448_573.jpg; Attribution: Jamejonline.ir

tinians] will not allow bombardments by the Zionists and they will obtain air defense weapons,” he promised. Masjedi’s resume enhances the importance of his words. He was a former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general, Soleimani’s top advisor, and a former Ambassador to Iraq who today serves as a supreme advisor to the IRGC-Qods Force. If Iran can smuggle anti-aircraft missiles

into Gaza, Hamas could target Israeli aircraft engaging in the Gaza fight and endanger commercial traffic servicing Ben Gurion Airport, with approach and departure routes over the West Bank.

Source: “Sardar Masjedi: Filistiniha beh Salah Pedafandi Dast Miyaband” (General Masjedi: Palestinians to Get Defensive Weapons), *Fararu.com* (nominally independent web portal close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), 8 January 2024. <https://fararu.com/fa/news/698061>

The supreme advisor to the commander of the Qods Force [Iraj Masjedi] said that the strength of the Islamic Resistance is increasing daily. He said, “The Palestinians are fighting with rockets today, but a day will come when they will not allow bombardments by the Zionists and they will obtain air defense weapons,” he added.

Referring to America’s evils in the region, Masjedi said, “What is the commander of CENTCOM doing

in Israel?” American planes are regularly sending weapons and bombs to Israel. The United States claim to stand for human rights when in fact they are the parents of terrorism.

The Americans have the largest army in the world but I tell you, they do not base one division of it in the United States itself, and instead it is spread out in the world. What are U.S. bases doing in the region? By what right are they based all over the world?

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Armies are responsible for maintaining their own territorial security. Where in the world do the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Islamic Republic of Iran Army have military bases? In this situation, the Americans tell others that Iran is interfering in the world, but this is very shameful.

He also referred to the weakness of the Israeli army in confronting the Palestinian resistance, saying that the Israelis have a special force called the Golani

Brigade, which is considered to be a special force to deal with the Palestinians, but this brigade was so badly hit by the resistance forces that it was ordered to withdraw and the other five brigades of the Israel Defense Forces were forced to withdraw.

The Supreme Advisor to the commander of the Qods Force also emphasized that the regional resistance forces with the support of the Iranian resistance force will break the hands of the enemies.

Notes:

- 1 Against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war, this year's commemorations of Soleimani's death stretched on for a week with senior political and military officials including, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, making statements testifying to Soleimani's embodiment of the revolutionary values Iran seeks to espouse.
- 2 Iran initially embraced late Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat and his Palestine Liberation Organization, the Iranian regime began to shift its support to Hamas following Arafat's decision to begin negotiating with Israel at the end of the Reagan administration and largely broke with the PLO and the Palestinian Authority it dominated following the Oslo Accords. For an earlier discussion of Iran's concept of strategic boundaries extending to its west, see: Michael Rubin, "Khamenei Speaks On Necessity Of Palestinian 'Resistance,'" *OE Watch*, 06-2022. <https://fmsso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/khamenei-speaks-on-necessity-of-palestinian-resistance/>

Iran Rationalizes Russia’s Pro-Arab Position on Disputed Islands



By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

Despite official warmth, Iran has reason to be suspicious of Russia, given Russia’s historic willingness to interfere in Iranian politics and/or infringe on Iranian sovereignty.¹ The excerpted opinion piece from Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated news outlet *Fararu.ir*, highlights that one of the most sensitive sovereignty issues for Iran today revolves around three islands—Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tonb Islands—occupied by Iranian forces in 1971 to prevent the UK from transferring their control to the UAE. While international law sides with the UAE, Iran has been unwilling to return the islands due to their strategic importance overseeing the shipping lanes on the Persian Gulf side of the Strait of Hormuz. Indeed, Abu Musa has become home to a major IRGC base.²

The excerpted article seeks to rationalize Russia’s decision to side with the UAE over Iran on questions about the islands’ sovereignty. It argues the UAE is an important outlet for the Russian economy in an era of isolation and sanctions. Russian officials may also believe Tehran has become so dependent on Moscow that Iran has little choice but to accept Russia’s pro-UAE position on the matter. Regardless, short of civil war distracting Iran during any transition following Khamenei’s death, there is little possibility that the UAE could liberate its occupied territories or that Russia could compel Iran to abandon the three islands. Still, Iranians have long memories and are unlikely to forgive the Kremlin for what they see as a betrayal. Iran may tilt more toward China in the future or simply bide its time and lick its wounds. But, when

“Russia seems to take for granted its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Iranian graphic depicting the strategic location and Iranian control over Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tonb Islands.

Source: https://www.tabnak.ir/files/fa/tags/4706/1674926_155.jpg; Attribution: Tabnak.ir

Iranians feel the moment is right, they will use the Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tonbs episode to justify a future betrayal of Russia.

Source: “Cherayi Mawzehgiri Russiyeh dar Khasus Jazair She Ganeh” (What Explains Russia’s Position with Regard to the Three Islands?),” *Fararu.com* (nominally independent web portal close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), 31 December 2023. <https://fararu.com/fa/news/695771>

Russia is a country that does not make treaty of friendship with anyone but rather pursues only its own interests. To put it simply, from the Russian perspective, there are no strategic enemies or strategic friends. Russians... do not see everything as zero sum game. For example, Russia is now at odds with the West, but it has also maintained cooperation on some issues, openly or covertly.

With this brief preamble, we return to recent Russian behavior with regard to the three islands. First, we need to look at things globally. Everyone knows well that America’s power in the world, if not weak is waning. On the other hand, China, with its strong economic backing and lack of arrogance in the style of the West – now has a positive image in the world. By mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia, China somehow announced its presence in the region, though it had been in place for many years as an emerging

power in the world that is transforming from bipolar to multipolar....

Perhaps one of the main reasons for Russia’s recent stance is the oil dollars of Arab countries, which have caught the eye of [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and Russia under sanctions. Moscow is under severe pressure due to Western sanctions, so it seems that with full cooperation with Arabs on the issue of the three Persian Gulf islands, it intends on one hand to influence the circle of America’s Arab allies and on the other hand, take a realistic view of its national and financial interests.... Russia seems to take for granted its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the West has no place in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kremlin officials have sided with Arab countries without worrying about Iranian reactions.

Notes:

- 1 For an earlier discussion of Iran’s the history and 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-past-issues/242569/download>
- 2 For background on the island dispute, see: Michael Rubin, “Revolutionary Guard Chief Exacerbates UAE-Iran Island Dispute,” *OE Watch*, June 2012, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195617>

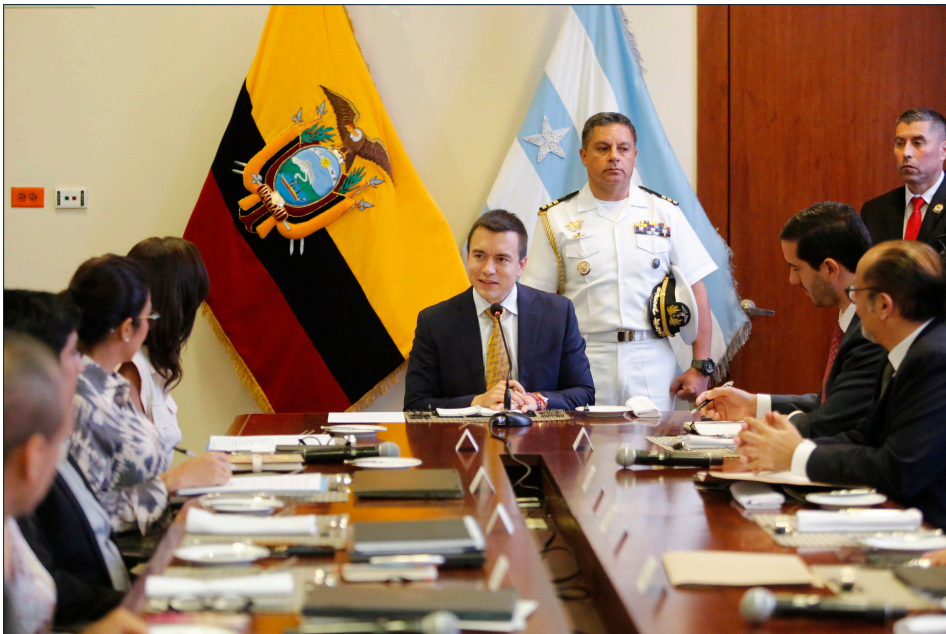
Rising Violence Prompts Ecuador To Declare “Internal Armed Conflict”

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Ecuador has been reeling from a dramatic increase in homicides over the past four years as gangs have evolved into transnational criminal organizations linked to Mexico’s drug cartels.¹ The country’s homicide rate rose from 6.7 per 100,000 citizens in 2019 to an estimated 45 per 100,000 in 2023.² In a recent 48-hour period, two notorious gang leaders escaped prison, gangs laid siege to the University of Guayaquil, and one group stormed a live news broadcast, televising the bedlam for nearly 20 minutes before cutting the transmis-

sion, reports center-left Argentine news outlet *Clarín*. In response to this spate of violence, the recently elected Noboa government declared a state of emergency. However, the continued threat posed by multiple criminal groups has led Noboa to dramatically increase the sense of urgency, declaring instead an “internal armed conflict.” This empowered the nation’s armed forces to enforce a 60-day curfew and restore domestic security, according to Ecuadorian digital news outlet *Primicias*. The decree enumerated nearly two dozen armed groups and classified them as domestic terrorist organizations, the outlet

says. Noboa is only a few months into his term, following a presidential campaign that featured the assassination at the hands of criminal groups of Fernando Villavicencio, a popular anticorruption candidate.³ To complement his presidential decree, Noboa announced a package of increased measures, including the construction of additional maximum-security prisons and the expropriation of criminal assets. The effectiveness of these measures bears watching throughout 2024 to see if Ecuador follows down a similar path as El Salvador or continues to spiral down into criminality and violence.



Noboa, the youngest president in Ecuador’s history, faces a crisis of insecurity.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidenciaecuador/53367780040/>; Attribution: Flickr, PDM 1.0 DEED

“President Daniel Noboa issued...an executive decree that reforms the current state of emergency and recognizes the existence of an ‘internal armed conflict.’”

Source: “Súplicas de ‘no me maten’ y una granada en el bolsillo: así tomó en vivo un grupo narco el canal de televisión en Ecuador (Pleas of ‘don’t kill me’ and a grenade in the pocket: this is how a drug group took over a television channel in Ecuador live),” *Clarín* (Argentina’s oldest outlet that is generally considered center left), 9 January 2024. https://www.clarin.com/mundo/grupo-armado-irrupio-transmision-vivo-canal-television-ecuador_0_0okSuT5tJC.html

An armed group stormed the live broadcast of a television channel in Ecuador, threatening those who were in charge of the programming with guns and weapons of war. There were also violent episodes

at the University of Guayaquil and on commercial premises...the security forces stated only two hours after the assault that they were able to recover the taken buildings.

Source: “Noboa declara conflicto armado interno y dispone la salida de militares (Noboa declares internal armed conflict and orders the departure of soldiers),” *Primicias* (a digital news outlet based in the capital, Quito) 9 January 2024. <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/politica/noboa-conflicto-armado-interno-militares/>

President Daniel Noboa issued...an executive decree that reforms the current state of emergency and recognizes the existence of an ‘internal armed conflict.’ Therefore, it provides for the immediate mobilization and intervention of the Armed Forces and the Police in the national territory. The decree

was issued minutes after armed attackers took over the TC Television facilities and broadcast live. This new decree establishes the identification of... organized crime groups as ‘terrorist organizations and belligerent non-state actors.’

Notes:

- 1 Previous governments, unable to stem the growth in criminal potency, have issued pleas to the international community for a “Plan Ecuador,” akin to the wide-ranging security assistance plan and social makeover that helped save Colombia from similar threats in the 1990s and 2000s. For more information, see: Ryan Berg “President Lasso Calls for ‘Plan Ecuador’ Amid Growing Security Concerns,” *OE Watch*, 12-2021. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-21393-00-00-00-40-08-49/2021_2D00_12_2D00_01-President-Lasso-Calls-for-_1C20_Plan-Ecuador_1D20_-Amid-_2800_Berg_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true
- 2 For more information on rising homicide figures in Ecuador, see: “How Ecuador Became Latin America’s Deadliest Country,” *The Economist*, 10 January 2024. <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2024/01/10/how-ecuador-became-latin-americas-deadliest-country>
- 3 For more on Villavicencio, see: Ryan Berg, “Presidential Candidate Assassination Shows New Depths of Ecuador’s Insecurity,” *OE Watch*, 09-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/presidential-candidate-assassination-shows-new-depths-of-ecuadors-insecurity/>

Houthis' Red Sea Attacks Not Only Motivated by Gaza

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

While recent naval attacks by Yemen's Ansarallah group—better known as the Houthis—have been justified as being in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, Ansarallah's build-up of capabilities to engage in an anti-access naval campaign was motivated by domestic concerns that predate Israel's operations against Hamas in Gaza. Beginning on 19 October, Ansarallah began targeting primarily commercial vessels in the Red Sea using unmanned aerial vehicles, ballistic missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles. The majority of these weapons were shot down by ships from the USS Gerald Ford Carrier Strike Group.¹ These attacks were concurrent with other attacks carried out by Iranian

allies, all presented as in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza and as part of a coordinated anti-Israel response by members of the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance"—Hezbollah in Lebanon, "Islamic Resistance" militias in Iraq, and Ansarallah in Yemen.

According to the accompanying excerpt from the official Yemeni daily 26 September, Ansarallah leaders have justified their buildup of anti-ship capabilities as motivated by their adversaries "exposing the country's sovereign oil, gas and fishery resources to unprecedented plunder" and their attempts to "expand and control the most important strategic ports and islands, such as Socotra and Mayun [also known as Perim Island]." From Ansarallah's perspective, its domestic adversaries—both the Sau-

di-backed Internationally Recognized Government and the Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council—have used the early 2022 UN-brokered truce in Yemen to tighten control over resources and strategic locations on Yemen's coastline with foreign assistance and complicity.² In August 2023, a few months before hostilities broke out in Gaza, Ansarallah officials threatened to sink two oil tankers seeking to transport Yemeni oil for export from ports in the Gulf Aden under the control of Ansarallah's domestic opponents. Ansarallah's position vis-à-vis Red Sea shipping prior to 7 October, per the article, was "to encourage international navigation through the [Bab El Mandab] Strait provided that it does not harm the sovereignty, unity, security or independence of the Republic." Thus, while Ansarallah's attacks on shipping vessels transiting Bab El Mandab are—at least rhetorically—linked to Israel's invasion of Gaza, they should also be understood as a deliberate effort by the group to assert control over the entirety of Yemen's territorial waters and internationalize the struggle for control of Yemen's resources and strategic locations.



Yemen map showing major population centers as well as parts of neighboring countries and the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

Source: CIA Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/yemen/map>; Attribution: Public Domain

Source:

Yemeni capabilities for protecting national seas and waterways,” 26 September (official Yemeni daily), 25 September 2023. <https://www.26sep.net/index.php/local/64705-2023-09-25-05-09-57>

“ةين طول ه ايم ل او راح بل ا ةي ام ح يف نم ي ل ا ت اردق“

“We were in a raging war with two ships coming to the port of Aden to plunder Yemeni gas, and they retreated four times, most recently yesterday. We informed the companies that owned the ships ‘Sinmar Jane’ and ‘Bolivar’ that we would strike them if they entered to loot gas from the port of Aden, and they are ready to do so. A few days earlier, President Al-Mashat vowed to ‘target the military bases of the Saudi-Emirati coalition forces on the Yemeni islands.’ At that time, he concurred with the Chief of Staff of the Naval Forces and Coastal Defense, Brigadier General Mansour Ahmed Al-Saadi, ‘on the level of qualitative armament that the naval forces now possess, which enables them to confront the enemy with all merit and ability, and allows them to meet the challenges...”

The Minister of Defense, Major General Muhammad Nasser Al-Atifi, had previously confirmed that maritime security of Yemeni territorial waters would be a priority in the next stage... The preparation of the naval force comes in light of the enemy mercenaries’

relinquishing of national sovereignty, and their exposing the country’s sovereign oil, gas and fishery resources to unprecedented plunder. Alongside this organized plunder are the occupation’s efforts to expand and control the most important strategic ports and islands, such as Socotra and Mayun. It was necessary for the Yemeni armed forces to carry out their duty to protect the territorial waters and the sovereign wealth of oil, gas and fisheries from the dangers coming from the coalition of aggressors and their mercenaries from inside and outside the country, and to prepare themselves as a deterrent weapon for all these ambitions. Regarding freedom of international navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the position of the Republic of Yemen is specific and clear, which is to encourage international navigation through the Strait provided that it does not harm the sovereignty, unity, security or independence of the Republic.

Notes:

- 1 For details on Ansarallah’s naval arsenal, see: “A Maritime Menace: The Houthi Navy,” *Oryx Blog*, 2 January 2023. <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2023/01/a-maritime-menace-houthi-navy.html>; “Houthis Showcase Large Arsenal Of Missiles, Drones At Sana’a Military Parade,” *MEMRI*, 21 September 2023. <https://www.memri.org/tv/houthis-showcase-large-arsenal-missiles-drones-military-parade>; “Under Fire in the Bab al-Mandab: Houthi Military Capabilities and U.S. Response Options,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 8 December 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/under-fire-bab-al-mandab-houthi-military-capabilities-and-us-response-options>; “Houthi anti-ship missile systems: getting better all the time,” *IISS*, 4 January 2024. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/01/houthi-anti-ship-missile-systems-getting-better-all-the-time/> For details on Ansarallah’s anti-ship ballistic missiles, see: “We Might Have Just Seen the World’s First Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile Attack,” *Popular Mechanics*, 1 December 2023. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a45964460/first-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-attack-houthi-rebels/>
- 2 For more on control over Socotra, see: Lucas Winter, “Regional Friction Over Yemen’s Socotra Island,” *OE Watch*, June 2018. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-17883-00-00-00-27-93-72/2018_2D00_06_2D00_01-Regional-Friction-Over-Yemen_1920_s-Socotra-Island-_2800_Winter_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true; For more on control over Yemen’s Arabian Sea ports, see: Lucas Winter, “Saudis Seek Pathway to the Arabian Sea,” *OE Watch*, October 2018. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-17883-00-00-00-26-69-08/2018_2D00_10_2D00_01-Saudis-Seek-Pathway-to-the-Arabian-Sea-_2800_Winter_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true

Jordan Alarmed by Escalation in Syrian Smuggling Tactics

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Jordanian authorities are signaling growing alarm over the willingness of smugglers from Syria to use armed force to circumvent tightened Jordanian border security. This comes at a delicate moment for the kingdom due to Israel's campaign in Gaza, given Jordan's large Palestinian population and concerns that Jordan could become a conduit for weapons to be smuggled into the West Bank. Smuggling has long been an economic mainstay for communities along the Syria-Jordan border, especially after the Syrian government lost control of key border crossings during the Syrian civil war. Since then, smuggling across the border has become increasingly institutionalized and largely controlled by networks within the Syrian Army's 4th Division, many of them linked to Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. Concerns that potentially hostile armed groups control smuggling routes from Syria has led Jordan to tighten security across the shared border, in turn leading smugglers to seek new ways to circumvent border security. Recent reports and statements suggest that smuggling networks in Syria are increasingly willing to use force to get across the increasingly monitored border.

The first accompanying excerpt, from the Syrian opposition news website *alsouria.net*, explains how

small-scale smuggling has “evolved into full-fledged armed clashes, with the explicit objective of forcibly crossing the border by targeting Jordanian border guard forces.” The article adds that Jordanian authorities are concerned about weapons being smuggled into the kingdom. Particularly noteworthy was a mid-December firefight in which a Jordanian border guard was killed, weapons were seized, and an airstrike took place on a purported smuggling safehouse inside Syrian territory, attributed to but not claimed by the Jordanian military. The second excerpt, also from *alsouria.net*, details the handful of weapons seized during the incident—a handful of rocket propelled grenades, mines, and sniper rifles. Although troubling from a Jordanian perspective, the small number of weapons were likely not part of the primary cargo being smuggled, but rather used by smugglers to force their way across the border. Instead, as the excerpt notes, the primary cargo was hashish and five million Captagon pills, likely destined for Saudi Arabia. The production and export of Captagon, a synthetic amphetamine-like substance—produced in Lebanon and Syria and consumed heavily in Gulf countries—has become a key part of Syria's wartime economy.¹ The third accompanying excerpt, from the English-language *Arab Weekly*, claims that Jordan is inflating the threat

from smugglers to “secure assistance and stronger cooperation” from Gulf countries, most prominently Saudi Arabia, the destination for much of the contraband. If evidence emerges that weapons are being smuggled across the border, concerns that these weapons could end up in the hands of Shia groups in Saudi Arabia would likely elicit a response from Riyadh.

Smuggling along the Syria-Jordan border peaks in the cold winter months, due to the dense fog that often envelops the area at night, hampering visibility for those seeking to curb smugglers. While the seasonal uptick is expected, the increasing willingness of smugglers to engage in firefights with Jordanian border guards is concerning. The failure of increased Jordanian border security measures is a latent concern for Amman. Given that Iran and Hezbollah exert substantial influence over smuggling networks in Syria, the Syria-Jordan border may well become an additional regional flashpoint.

“What were initially infiltration and smuggling attempts have evolved into full-fledged armed clashes, with the explicit objective of forcibly crossing the border by targeting Jordanian border guard forces.”

Source: “Syrian-Jordanian Border Battle Ends With Airstrikes, Amman Hints at Iran’s Involvement,” *alsouria.net* (Syrian opposition news website) via *The Syrian Observer* (Syrian news aggregator), 20 December 2023. <https://syrianobserver.com/news/86785/syrian-jordanian-border-battle-ends-with-airstrikes-amman-hints-at-irans-involvement.html>

What were initially infiltration and smuggling attempts have evolved into full-fledged armed clashes, with the explicit objective of forcibly crossing the border by targeting Jordanian border guard forces... This form of military operations and clashes underscores the significant challenges confronting Jordan due to the Syrian regime and the escalating influence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria. Despite

the security measures and military tightening implemented by Amman along the Syrian-Jordanian border, smuggling operations have not only persisted but have also intensified. A particularly alarming security threat arising from these clashes is the initiation of arms and rocket smuggling operations, underscoring the extent of Iranian pressure on Jordan.

Source: “‘War and death’ on the Syrian-Jordanian border... messages, warnings, and open options,” *alsouria.net* (Syrian opposition news website), 19 December 2023. <https://www.alsouria.net/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%88%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A/>

The Jordanian army seized about five million Captagon pills and about 13,000 hashish palms, in addition to 4 Rocket Launcher missiles, 4 RPG

missiles, 10 anti-personnel mines, a G3 sniper rifle, and a M-16 type rifle equipped with a sniper scope.

Source: “Is Jordan inflating smugglers’ threat on border with Syria?” *The Arab Weekly* (London-based Arabic-language weekly), 19 December 2023. <https://the arabweekly.com/jordan-inflating-smugglers-threat-border-syria>.

Observers believe however that Jordan is exaggerating the developments in the border region, pointing out that the phenomenon of active gangs is not new and that most countries suffer from it. Jordan is not an exception, especially since the neighbouring country, Syria, is gripped by security chaos, observers

told The Arab Weekly. They suggest the exaggeration may be related to Jordan’s desire to present itself regionally, especially to the Arab Gulf countries, as the first line of defence for regional security. The aim, according to observers, is to secure assistance and stronger cooperation.

Notes:

- 1 For more on the Captagon trade, see: Lucas Winter, “Pharmaceutical Drugs and the Syrian War,” *OE Watch*, December 2015. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195975> and Lucas Winter, “Syria Becoming Center of Illicit Drug Production and Export to Europe and Arabian Peninsula,” *OE Watch*, January 2021. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-21393-00-00-38-05-55/2021_2D00_01_2D00_01-Syria-Becoming-Center-of-Illicit-Drug-Production-_2800_Winter_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true

Taliban Challenged by Uptick of Islamic State–Khorasan Province Attacks

By Christopher Betts
OE Watch Commentary

Despite counterterrorism efforts by the Taliban, the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP) has been responsible for a series of attacks in Afghanistan since the new year. According to the first excerpted article from Pashto-language public service news *Radio Azadi*, the Taliban previously stated it had defeated IS-KP; however, recent activity by the group indicates otherwise. Since its inception in 2014, IS-KP has conducted bombing and suicide attacks against both civilian and government targets, mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, resulting in an estimated 309 fatalities in 2021.¹ In January 2024, IS-KP claimed responsibility for detonating an improvised explosive device in Kabul, killing two civilians and wounding 14 more. This was the second IS-KP bombing in Afghanistan in less than a week.² These attacks followed the highly publicized IS-KP–claimed attack in Kerman, Iran, on 4 January, which killed as many as 84 people and injured scores more. Iran called it the single deadliest attack in the country since 1979.

Recent reporting suggests Afghanistan is once again being used as a terrorist training ground—this time by IS-KP rather than al-Qaeda. According to the second excerpted article from the Saudi news source *Independent Persian*, two IS-KP suicide bombers



▲ Taliban Humvee in Kabul.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taliban_Humvee_in_Kabul,_August_2021_\(cropped\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taliban_Humvee_in_Kabul,_August_2021_(cropped).png); Attribution: Public Domain

were arrested in Pakistan and accused of planning to bomb the leaders of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam and National Awami political parties.³ The captured bombers admitted to receiving training in the Paktia province in Afghanistan, a remote area that shares a border with Pakistan. The article further notes that counterterrorism talks continue between Pakistan and Afghanistan, intended to decrease tension resulting from disagreements on how to handle Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leaders currently residing in Afghanistan. Although weakened, IS-KP appears able to continue to stage attacks in Afghanistan and the region at large.

The Taliban is situated in a delicate position in the region, with any potential missteps in its counterter-

rorism strategy leading to an IS-KP resurgence. Internal disputes in the Taliban government have led to some Tajik Taliban members in the northern part of Afghanistan being investigated for links to IS-KP. Additionally, the Taliban does not appear to have any intention to reconcile with communities formerly linked with IS-KP, which could be a source of additional recruits for the organization. Finally, there is an ongoing concern among TTP leadership about members potentially defecting to IS-KP should the group's jihad in Pakistan end.⁴

“The Taliban government has said that it has defeated the Daesh group and will not allow the terrorist organization to use the territory of Afghanistan to pose any threat to other countries... At the same time, the spokesperson of the US Department of State said that the Taliban should remain committed to the fight against terrorism.”

Source: “هـل بـوژ گـرم ون ای کلم د و ا هـن دواچ ی پرمول لاک ۲۰۲۴ د ی ک ل ب ا ک (The first explosion of 2024 in Kabul and civilian casualties),” *Radio Azadi* (Radio Free Europe Affiliate), Accessed 13 January 2024. <https://pa.azadiradio.com/a/32763886.html>

At least two civilians were killed, and 14 others were injured in the first explosion of 2024 in Afghanistan, which took place in Dasht Barchi, a Shia-populated area west of Kabul. Khaled Zadran, the spokesman of the Taliban government’s Kabul police headquarters, said in a statement late yesterday that a car-type vehicle was targeted in the blast. He announced the beginning of the investigation regarding this incident, for which no one has accepted responsibility. Before this, the Khorasan province branch of the Islamic State group or Daesh has accepted responsibility for some deadly attacks in the west of Kabul.

In the month of November, there was an explosion in Dasht Barchi that killed at least 7 people, and the responsibility was taken by Daesh, the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State group. According to the report of Agence France-Presse, although the level of insecurity has greatly increased after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, some armed groups, such as the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State group, or Daesh, are still considered a serious threat. The Daesh group also claimed responsibility for the killing of Dawood Muzamal, the Taliban governor for

Balkh, last year. He was killed in a bomb attack in his office.

The Taliban government has said that it has defeated the Daesh group and will not allow the terrorist group to use the territory of Afghanistan to pose any threat to other countries. According to the report of the French news agency, the Acting Minister of Defense of the Taliban, Mohammad Yaqub Mujahid, last week announced a 90 percent decrease in the attacks of the Daesh group during the last year in Kabul. This is while the intelligence of the United States of America has said that the Daesh group in Afghanistan is involved in the bombings of the city of Kerman, Iran, last Wednesday. Two well-informed sources told the Reuters news agency last Friday that the communication information collected by the US proves that this attack, which killed nearly 100 people, was carried out by two attackers from the Khorasan province branch of the Islamic State group or Daesh... Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has denied this report while talking to the media. He said that ISIS has no capacity or presence in Afghanistan to plan any attack in Iran. At the same time, the

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spokesperson of the US Department of State said that the Taliban should remain committed to the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan...

Last Wednesday, January 3rd, explosions took place in Kerman city of Iran during the ceremony of Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of IRGC Quds Force. Iran has called it the deadliest attack in

the country since 1979. A day after the incident, the Islamic State or Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack on Thursday and said that two of its members planted explosives on their bodies. The group did not say that this was done by the Afghan branch of the Islamic State group or Daesh...

Source: «ناتسکاپ رد «ناتسن اغفا رد هدی دش زوم آ» ش عاد یراحتنا مجاهم و دت ش ادزاب» (Two ISIS suicide bombers ‘trained in Afghanistan’ were arrested in Pakistan),” *Independent Persian* (Persian language Saudi Research and Marketing Group Agency media outlet), 13 January 2024. <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/382361/>

Pakistan’s Counter-Terrorism Department said on Friday, January 12, that two suicide bombers belonging to the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State (ISIS), who planned to attack Maulana Fazl-ul-Rehman, the leader of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Party, and Amil Wali Khan, the leader of the National Awami Party of that country, have been arrested. According to the *Express Tribune*, Najmul Hasnain Liaqat, one of the senior officials of Pakistan’s counter-terrorism department, said in a press conference in Peshawar that the two suicide bombers were arrested in Peshawar and two suicide vests, three hand grenades, and some explosives were recovered from them.

The official of the Anti-Terrorism Department said that the explosives of these suicide attackers have been neutralized, and they have confessed to planning suicide attacks against Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman and Emil Wali Khan in the initial investigations. He said that these two ISIS suicide bombers were trained in Paktia province in Afghanistan and then went to Pakistan. Pakistan’s counter-terrorism department has not provided a document about the suicide training of these two ISIS members in Afghanistan.

Taliban officials have not commented on this matter so far. But the Taliban deny training terrorists, including ISIS, in Afghanistan.

The Taliban call their suicide bombers “martyrs”. These forces have been trained in the training centers of the Taliban in such a way that they are ready to kill themselves to achieve the “dream of reaching heaven”. Among these suicide forces, there are a large number of young people who are waiting in line for a suicide attack and blowing themselves up on the way to the Taliban’s targets... Recently, ISIS has launched explosive and suicide attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman traveled to Afghanistan on Sunday, and met with Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Hasan Akhund, the prime minister of the Taliban, Maulvi Abdul Kabir, the political deputy of the prime minister of the Taliban, Amir Khan Motaghi, the foreign minister of the Taliban, Mullah Yaqub, the minister of defense of the Taliban, and other officials. Jamiat Ulema Pakistan has claimed that Mullah Yaqoob told Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman that the Taliban do not distinguish between themselves and Pakistan, and Mullah Yaqoob has expressed hope

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that the tension between the Taliban and Pakistan will decrease...

The tension between the government of Pakistan and the Taliban regime has been formed in connection with how to deal with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The government of Pakistan wants the Taliban to hand over the leaders of the TTP inside the territory of Afghanistan and not to allow this group to use the territory of that country to attack. But on the other hand, Taliban reject the presence of foreign terrorists

like TTP in Afghanistan. Senior Taliban officials have repeatedly said that TTP is Pakistan's internal problem and that country must deal with it. Following the domination of the Taliban over Afghanistan, the number of explosive and terrorist attacks in Pakistan has increased. TTP and its allied groups are responsible for most of these attacks. ISIS is also trying to increase attacks in Pakistan. America has described the presence of Daesh in Afghanistan as a serious threat to the region and the world.

Notes:

- 1 For additional information on IS-K's history, ideology, tactics, and a summarized threat assessment, visit: Catrina Doxsee, and Jared Thompson. "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 8 September 2021. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>
- 2 See: "تفرگ هدهع رب مه ار لب اک رد رابگرم راجفنا نیمود تی لویئسم شعاد" (ISIS also claimed responsibility for the second deadly explosion in Kabul)," *Radio Farda*, 9 January 2024. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/kabul-isis/32768439.html>
- 3 Pakistan's parliamentary election is scheduled for 8 February 2024. A detailed list of political parties and their political affiliations published by the UK Government can be found here: "Country Policy and Information Note Pakistan: Political Parties and Affiliation," Home Office UK Government, May 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/645cb936ad8a03000c38b295/PAK_CPIN_Political_parties_and_affiliation.pdf
- 4 The ICCT published a recent analysis on the potential resurgence of IS-KP and the Taliban's counterterrorism efforts at: Antonio Giustozzi. "The Islamic State in Khorasan between Taliban counter-terrorism and resurgence prospects," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, January 30, 2024. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/islamic-state-khorasan-between-taliban-counter-terrorism-and-resurgence-prospects>

Venezuela's Maduro Regime Threatens Annexation of Guyanese Territory

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

In December 2023, the Maduro regime of Venezuela oversaw a referendum about a long-disputed region called the Essequibo, which represents more than two-thirds of neighboring Guyana's territory.¹ The Essequibo region—roughly the size of the state of Florida—has been administered by Guyana for more than 100 years, according to an arbitral award in Paris in 1899. The Maduro regime announced that 95 percent of Venezuelans who voted approved all five questions on the referendum. This included an explicit rejection of the recent jurisdiction granted to the International Court of Justice upon referral of the case by the UN's Secretary General, as well as a commitment by the Venezuelan state to recover the territory by all means necessary “within the law.”²

Accordingly, the first excerpted article from Chilean news outlet *La Nación* reported that Maduro announced the creation of a new Venezuelan state called Guayana Esequiba, constituted by the territory of Essequibo. Maduro followed the announcement by encouraging state-owned enterprises to exploit the natural resources of the Essequibo area, as well as a small mobilization of troops and equipment near the border.³ According to *La Nación*, this has given rise to the possibility of in-

ter-state conflict, a rare worry in Latin America. However, many countries in the region, as well as Venezuela's political opposition, have interpreted Maduro's threats to annex the Essequibo as a domestic ploy aimed at distraction. In the excerpted article from Argentina's *Urgente24*, Venezuelan opposition leaders claimed that the referendum was a nationalistic distraction. The outlet says that Maduro is looking for a change in

narrative after the recent successes of the country's opposition, including the election of María Corina Machado, as the unified opposition candidate to face Maduro. Distraction or not, Maduro's actions have engendered an environment that is rife with possibilities for miscalculation as both sides stake out maximalist positions.⁴

“The Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, ordered the immediate exploration and exploitation of oil, gas and mines in the territory of Essequibo, an area in dispute with Guyana, just one day after the ‘yes’ victory was announced in the referendum that claimed sovereignty over the territory.”



Maduro pushed the December 3rd referendum, partially as a distraction from his abysmal poll numbers.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/125816678@N05/39329361431>; Attribution: Flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED

Source: “Maduro propone ley que busca anexar Essequibo a Venezuela: Pide explotar recursos naturales (Maduro proposes a law that seeks to annex Essequibo to Venezuela: He asks to exploit natural resources),” *La Nación* (a Chilean daily with over one hundred years reporting on the region), 6 December 2023. <https://www.lanacion.cl/maduro-propone-ley-que-busca-anexar-essequibo-a-venezuela-pide-explotar-recursos-naturales/>

The Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, ordered the immediate exploration and exploitation of oil, gas and mines in the territory of Essequibo, an area in dispute with Guyana, just one day after the ‘yes’ victory was announced in the referendum that claimed sovereignty over the territory. Through a

government act broadcast on radio and television, the president ordered that they immediately proceed ‘to grant operating licenses for the exploration and exploitation of oil, gas and mines in the entire area of our Guayana Esequiba.’

Source: “Referéndum y nueva ‘Guyana Esequiba:’ Maduro distrae (Referendum and new ‘Guyana Esequiba:’ Maduro distracts),” *Urgente24* (an Argentine outlet with both opinion and news) 6 December 2023. <https://urgente24.com/mundo/referendum-y-nueva-guyana-essequiba-maduro-distrae-n564799>

For her part, the Venezuelan presidential candidate María Corina Machado, who won the opposition primaries and who could dethrone Maduro if there is no fraud, spoke about it...and described it as a distraction from the

success of the opposition primaries. ‘It is a way to distract attention from the monumental success that the primaries were and create cohesion in the different

sectors of the ruling party around an element that awakens patriotic sentiment but that had a very low participation rate.’

Notes:

- 1 For more information and background on the manufactured crisis and Venezuela’s claims, see: Ryan C. Berg and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, “The Entirely Manufactured and Dangerous Crisis over the Essequibo,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 8 December 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/entirely-manufactured-and-dangerous-crisis-over-essequibo>
- 2 For more information on the referendum questions and the dispute itself, see: Julia Symmes Cobb, “Explainer: What is the border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana?,” *Reuters*, 6 December 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/what-is-border-dispute-between-venezuela-guyana-2023-12-06/>
- 3 For more information on troop and equipment deployments to the border with Guyana, bolstered with satellite imagery analysis, see: Christopher Hernandez-Roy et al., “Miscalculation and Escalation over the Essequibo: New Insights Into the Risks of Venezuela’s Compellence Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 9, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/miscalculation-and-escalation-over-essequibo-new-insights-risks-venezuelas-compellence>.
- 4 In response to the possibility of conflict, Brazil brought both parties to the table on the island nation of St. Vincent, negotiating the Argyle Declaration, which commits both sides to a peaceful resolution of the border dispute. However, the Maduro regime abrogates agreements frequently. For more information on the Argyle Declaration, see: “The Joint Declaration of Argyle for Dialogue and Peace between Guyana and Venezuela,” Government of Barbados, 14 December 2023. <https://www.foreign.gov.bb/the-joint-declaration-of-argyle-for-dialogue-and-peace-between-guyana-and-venezuela/>.

India Looking to Alternative Arms Suppliers Because of Delays From Russia

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the impact on the Russian defense industry's deliveries of weapons and equipment to numerous countries, including India, is well documented.¹ The accompanying excerpted article from the independent news website *The Wire* reports on a Russian-Indian joint venture failing to meet an early 2024 delivery deadline of a batch of

assault rifles for India's Armed Forces. While this marked a small item that Russia has failed to deliver to India compared to the larger systems that have been delayed, the article notes that India has already found an alternative. The article reports that the Indian Army recently acquired 73,000 SIG Sauer rifles from the United States, similar to a purchase of SIG Sauer rifles a few years ago to meet a short notice operational requirement.² The

article notes delays of a few other Russian systems, including two **S-400** surface-to-air missile systems and two guided missile frigates. India is not likely to quickly find alternatives to the S-400s or frigates, considering the cost and delivery timeline for these types of systems. However, India's purchase of SIG Sauer rifles shows that it is willing to look for alternative partners whenever possible.

“This deficit surfaced visibly in the inability of the Indo-Russian Rifles Private Limited (IRRPL) joint venture (JV), instituted in late 2021, to deliver the first batch of around 5,000 AK-203 7.62x39mm rifles to the Indian Army, by March 2024.”



▲ The next generation M4 rifle from Swiss Arms, the Sig Sauer SG 516 is a newborn assault rifle manufactured by the SIGARMS GmbH, Switzerland. The rifle is based on an American-made Colt Defense M4 Carbine but combined with gas piston/op-rod system, based on the SIG 550 series system.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SIG_SG_516_14.5%E2%80%B3.jpg; Attribution: CCA 3.0

Source: Rahul Bedi, “Russian Rifle Delays Raise Concerns Over Deliveries from Moscow,” *The Wire* (an independent English-language news website), 15 December 2023. <https://thewire.in/security/indias-assault-rifle-induction-woes-continue-with-delays-in-indigenous-ak-203-production>

Delays in the indigenous licensed manufacture of Russian Kalashnikov AK-203 assault rifles at a dedicated facility in Korwa near Amethi in Uttar Pradesh, has further raised concerns in domestic military circles over Moscow's ability to deliver

assorted contracted-for platforms and other materiel to India on time, or if at all.

Despite the sanguinity expressed periodically by Russian officials and diplomats to their Indian counterparts – over the fact that their military-

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industrial complex remained robust and was 'on stream' to vindicate its equipment delivery schedules, US-led sanctions on Moscow for invading Ukraine have, in reality severely jeopardised its capacities in this regard.

This deficit surfaced visibly in the inability of the Indo-Russian Rifles Private Limited (IRRPL) joint venture (JV), instituted in late 2021, to deliver the first batch of around 5,000 **AK-203** 7.62x39mm rifles to the Indian Army, by March 2024. Instead, at the Indian Army's prompting, the Ministry of Defence recently approved the add-on import of around 73,000 'Patrol' Sig Sauer assault rifles from the US...

No official statement on this postponement in supplying the AK-203s to the Indian Army units has been forthcoming, from either IRRPL, the Indian Army or the Ministry of Defence. But industry sources said that the economic and technological sanctions on Russia, were together responsible for deferrals in even an industrially low-end project entailing the licensed manufacture of assault rifles. The IRRPL was formed, amidst much fanfare, to manufacture some 750,000 AK-203 rifles...

Notes:

- 1 For more information on Russian military equipment delays to India since the war in Ukraine began, see: Matthew Stein, "India Takes a Step Away from the Russian Defense Industry," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 31 July 2023. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3475660/india-takes-a-step-away-from-the-russian-defense-industry/>
- 2 See: Matthew Stein, "Bypassing the "Make in India" Initiative," *OE Watch*, May 2020. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-21393-00-00-00-35-96-47/2020_2D00_05_2D00_01-Bypassing-the-_1C20_Make-in-India_1D20_-Initiative-_2800_Stein_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true

Russia's defence industrial complex seems to concur, as it recently conceded its inability in continuing to deliver military kit to its many clients, including India, as it needed to prioritise 'manufacturing and supplying products to the Russian Army'...

Meanwhile, apart from the deferred AK-203 project, India has three other major Russian platforms on order, all of which were plagued by delays, and possibly an ambiguous future.

These included the delivery of two of five Almaz-Antey S-400 Triumph self-propelled surface-to-air missile systems, acquired for the Indian Air Force (IAF) in a deal signed in October 2018 for \$5.5 billion, constructing two Project 1135.6M Admiral Grigorovich guided missile frigates worth an estimated \$950 million at Russia's Yantar Shipyard at Kaliningrad...

Between 2021 and March 2023 Russia had delivered three S-400 systems, and Rosonboronexport's Mikheyev had recently told the country's state-owned news agency TASS, that the remaining two air defence systems would arrive by end-2023, which has not happened...



▲ President Sadyr Zhaparov, Kyrgyz Republic

President Sadyr Zhaparov of the Kyrgyz Republic and President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan forged a bi-lateral agreement regarding shared disputed borders, outside the CSTO framework.

Sources: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Official_Photo_of_the_President_of_the_Kyrgyz_Republic_H.E._Mr._Sadyr_Zhaparov.jpg; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_Tajikistan_-_/media/File:2021_Moscow_Victory_Day_Parade_037_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_Tajikistan_-_/media/File:2021_Moscow_Victory_Day_Parade_037_(cropped).jpg); Attribution: Modified (combined photos) as per rights granted: CC BY SA 4.0

▼ President Emomali Rahmon, Tajikistan



Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Resolve Border Dispute

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from the independent news website Kloop reports that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan recently reached a bilateral agreement to demarcate most of their shared border separate from efforts by Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to resolve the border dispute. The CSTO is a political-military organization made up of former Soviet republics, including Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan that works to provide security in the Eurasia region. The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan dispute stems from borders that were not demarcated when the two countries became independent. The lack of clear boundaries has been a source of contention and became particularly acute after a series of clashes took place in 2022.¹ The largest and deadliest clash took place in September 2022 and threatened to undermine cooperation within the CSTO as it marked the first time relations between two member states resulted in open armed conflict.²

According to the *Kloop* article, the heads of the National Security Committees of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in December and agreed to demarcate a large section of their border. The agreement includes demarcating some of the more controversial sections of the border near the location of previous clashes. The

article also notes that the agreement is not finalized, but it will likely fulfill the promise by Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov to resolve the border issue by the spring of 2024. It remains to be seen whether this agreement will prevent any future border clashes from taking place or if they do, whether Russia or the CSTO will get involved. While the fact that neither Russia nor the CSTO were involved in the mediations is noteworthy given the regional role of Russia and the fact that the CSTO, the development is not necessarily a sign of waning Russian interest. Russia has offered to mediate following border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over the years, but nothing came of it. Also, the CSTO claims it is ready and capable of providing security in the region but could not prevent two of its member states from clashing. Instead, the agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reflects the fact that governments in the region have taken more initiative³ in regard to their own security affairs, rather than looking to outside partners.

“Chairman of the State Committee for National Security Kamchybek Tashiev said that more than 90% of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border has been agreed upon. He made this statement on December 12 after a meeting with his Tajik counterpart Saimumin Yatimov.”

Source: “Ташиев и Ятимов сообщили о согласовании более 90% кыргызско-таджикской границы (Tashiyev and Yatimov reported on the agreement of more than 90 percent of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border),” *Kloop* (independent Russian-language news website in Kyrgyzstan), 13 December 2023. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/12/13/tashiev-i-yatimov-soobshhili-o-soglasovanii-bolee-90-kyrgyzsko-tadzhikskoj-granitsy/>

Chairman of the State Committee for National Security Kamchybek Tashiev said that more than 90% of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border has been agreed upon. He made this statement on December 12 after a meeting with his Tajik counterpart Saimumin Yatimov.

Tashiev and Yatimov are the chairmen of the government delegations of the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan on the delimitation and demarcation of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border...

According to him, the sections starting from Kayragach, Kulundu, Maksat, Arki-1, Arki-2, Zhanyzher and up to Zhiydelik have been fully agreed upon. Sections from Kara-Bak, Lakko to the “junction of the point of three states” have also been agreed upon.

“That is, at the moment we have almost completed all controversial issues [on the border]. There are only a few meetings left to finally finalize the issue with the state border,” concluded the head of the State Committee for National Security...

Notes:

- 1 For background on Russian efforts following the September 2022 clashes, see (in Russian): Mirayim Almas, “«Богатый опыт»: Россия готова помочь Кыргызстану и Таджикистану в решении пограничных споров (‘Rich experience’: Russia is ready to help Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in resolving the border disputes),” *Kloop*, 15 September 2022. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/09/15/bogatyj-opyt-rossiya-gotova-pomoch-kyrgyzstanu-i-tadjikistanu-v-reshenii-pogranichnyh-sporov/>
- 2 Kyrgyzstan cancelled a CSTO exercise set to take place in October 2022 following the border clash with Tajikistan. See: Matthew Stein “Members Of Collective Security Treaty Organization Show Less Support For Russia-Led Body,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://fmsotrados.army.mil/2022/members-of-collective-security-treaty-organization-show-less-support-for-russia-led-body/>
- 3 For more on Central Asian states cooperating on security issues, see: Matthew Stein “Central Asian States Take the Initiative in Security Cooperation,” *OE Watch*, 01-2022. <https://fmsotrados.army.mil/2022/central-asian-states-take-the-initiative-in-security-cooperation/>

Earlier, President Sadyr Japarov promised that the issue of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border would be resolved before the spring of 2024.

The total length of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border is 972 kilometers. As of 2022, a total of 664 kilometers of border have been agreed upon...

Due to undefined borders, conflicts periodically arise in the territories adjacent to Tajikistan in the Batken and Osh regions...

The last large-scale conflict occurred on September 14-17, 2022. Fights and clashes took place along the entire perimeter of the state border. As a result of the conflict, 63 Kyrgyzstanis were killed and another 206 people were injured.

The Tajik authorities noted that 41 people were killed and more than 20 people were injured in that conflict...

Hungary Deepens Bilateral Ties With Chad

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

In recent years, France, the historical European power in West Africa, has been withdrawing from the region, while Russia has been reasserting its military and political influence.¹ Additionally, Hungary, a country with a foreign policy more aligned with Russia than other European Union (EU) countries, has begun expanding its footprint in West Africa. As the excerpted French-language article in the Chadian news website *alwihdainfo.com* notes, Hungary has signed military, educational, health, agricultural, and energy memoranda of understanding with Chad. Both countries have expressed the desire to strengthen their bilateral ties.

A French-language article on the website of *Radio France Internationale*, provides additional details, reporting that Hungary intends to send between

200 and 400 soldiers to Chad to focus on stopping migration, countering terrorism, and providing humanitarian assistance. The article also notes that with instability surrounding Chad, the country has become a refugee hub. This is why Hungary is setting up a permanent base in the country and why Hungary's foreign minister stated his country was determined not to let Chad collapse.

The article acknowledged the domestic policy motivations for Hungary, which, like Russia, has become antagonistic to the EU, despite Hungary being a member-state.² Further, according to the article, Hungarian media has promoted the story that the EU plans to establish "migrant ghettos" in Hungary. This represents an effort to sway Hungarian public opinion for foreign policy measures to stop migration, such as the new measures in Chad.

It also appears Hungary is aligning its foreign policy in Africa with Russia's. Russia is over-extended in Africa because of its Ukraine operations and can only deploy a few thousand former Wagner fighters to Africa, seemingly in the context of the Africa Corps. However, in countries where former Wagner troops are not operational, Hungary can step in and support juntas or other authoritarian regimes, such as Chad, which is seeing diminishing Western support. The emerging "coup belt" countries in West Africa will be empowered and less likely to restore civilian rule like the juntas had originally promised now that Russia and seemingly Hungary are backing them.

"Prime Minister Viktor Orban has decided to deploy a military contingent to Chad for two years before March 2024 to assist the country economically, prevent illegal immigration, and help combat terrorism."



◀ Trigger time at Flintlock 20, USAFRICOM from Stuttgart, Germany.
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trigger_time_at_Flintlock_20_\(50111204252\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trigger_time_at_Flintlock_20_(50111204252).jpg); Attribution: CC x 2.0

Source: “Coopération: Le Tchad et la Hongrie renforcent leur coopération dans plusieurs domaines (Cooperation: Chad and Hungary strengthen their cooperation in several domains),” *alwihdainfo.com* (Privately owned French-language Chadian website noted for being critical of the government), 8 December 2023. alwihdainfo.com/Cooperation-Le-Tchad-et-la-Hongrie-renforcent-leur-cooperation-dans-plusieurs-domaines_a128541.html

During a joint press conference, the two diplomats highlighted the advantages and objectives of the agreements, emphasizing their importance in strengthening the new and strengthened cooperation while respecting the interests of each country.... They expressed their confidence in strengthening ties between Chad and Hungary, and stressed

that the bilateral cooperation will benefit both peoples and contribute to regional stability. According to Ndjamená, the agreements signed on December 7, 2023 create a pathway for productive collaboration between Chad and Hungary and offere new opportunities for economic growth, social development, and scientific progress.

Source: “La Hongrie compte envoyer des militaires au Tchad pour lutter contre «les migrations» (Hungary plans to send soldiers to Chad to fight against “migration),” *rfi.fr* (French state-owned radio news website reporting on international affairs), 19 November 2023. rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231118-la-hongrie-compte-envoyer-des-militaires-au-tchad-pour-lutter-contre-les-migrations

As Budapest is strongly opposed to the European refugee acceptance policy, it continues to claim that it is necessary to “support the management of problems where they begin and not transfer them to Europe”, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has decided to deploy a military contingent to Chad for two years before March 2024 to assist the country economically, prevent illegal immigration, and help combat terrorism. Instead of welcoming refugees to Hungary, Viktor Orbán’s government prefers to support the

African people there. Hungary will send between 200 and 400 soldiers to Chad.

The government continues to generate fear of migration in the run-up to the 2024 European elections. The Hungarian Post began sending a government questionnaire to all Hungarians, which was published on the Internet. It has questions such as “Brussels wants to install migrant ghettos in Hungary. Do you agree?” which is a totally false statement.

Notes:

- 1 The French withdrawal from West Africa was a major trend in 2023. The year concluded with the French Embassy in Niger announcing that it was ending its diplomatic presence in the country. France also withdrew its 4,500-troop Operation Barkhane force from Mali in August 2022 and withdrew its troops from Burkina Faso in February 2023. These events have all occurred after coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in May 2021, January 2022, and July 2023, respectively, which France and the West denounced. Russia, in contrast, has backed the post-coup military regimes. For more on Burkina Faso’s role as a bellwether of Russian and France in West Africa, see Jason Warner, “Burkina Faso: A Bellwether on Russian and French Presence,” *OE Watch*, 11-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/burkina-faso-a-bellwether-on-russian-and-french-presence/>
- 2 Since Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister in 2010, Hungary has passed several illiberal legislative bills, with strict anti-migrant legislation as a core policy. Hungary also has embraced the authoritarian leaders in Russia and China and helped to deepen their political and economic influence throughout Central Europe. Although little existing research has discussed Hungary coordinating or aligning its foreign policy with that of Russia, Hungary’s cultivating security ties specifically with Chad—whose authoritarian leader since 2021, Mahamat Déby, succeeded his father, who ruled for three decades—notably comes at a time when Russia is supporting other military-authoritarian regimes in West Africa as well, which border Chad, including in Sudan, Libya, Central African Republic, Mali, and Niger. For an assessment of Russian influence on Hungary, see Dr. Péter Krekó, “ING2 Committee Hearing on Russian interference in the EU: the distinct cases of Hungary and Spain,” European Parliament, 27 October 2022. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/256493/OJ%20item%204_peter_kreko_ing2_hearing_20221027_speaking_points.pdf.