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The Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is part of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command G-2, whose mission is to Understand, Describe, Deliver, and Assess the conditions of the Operational Environment. For over 30 years, FMSO has conducted open source research on foreign perspectives of defense and security issues, emphasizing those topics that are understudied or unconsidered. Operational Environment Watch provides translated selections with background from a diverse range of foreign media that our analysts and expert contributors believe will give security professionals an added dimension to their critical thinking about the Operational Environment.

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China's South China Sea Strategy Complemented by Civilian Infrastructure

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

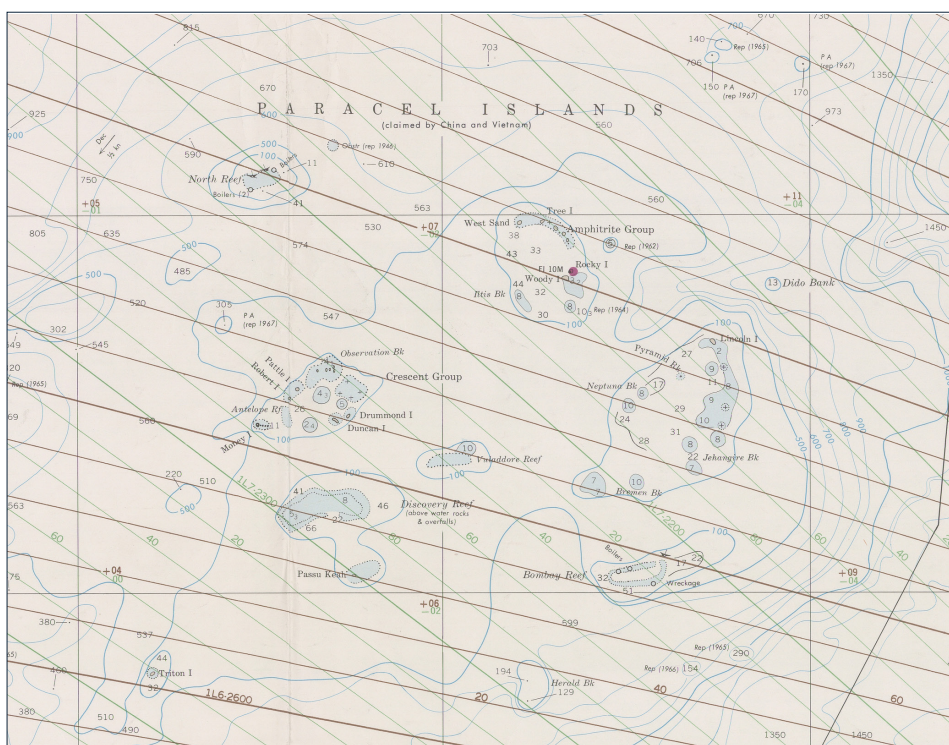
Building civilian infrastructure and populating the newly built islands of the South China Sea is part of a cycle of building, populating, and defending that population and infrastructure that China is growing throughout the disputed islands. A recent article in Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) focused on a strategic but otherwise mundane-seeming event—the opening of Xinyi Hardware Store on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.¹ According to the SCMP article, the opening of the hardware store reflects the growing number of civilians and civilian enterprises China is moving to its newly created territories in the South China Sea. The article

notes that the hardware store serves both Chinese military and civilians in Shansha City, which was established in 2012 to be the administrative center of Chinese efforts to control the islands and features of the South China Sea. Shansha City is also focal point of Chinese naval and coast guard assets in

the region. Today Shansha City boasts a population of more than 2,300 civilians, an undisclosed number of military personnel, a civil-military airport, a 5,000-ton wharf, a post office, banks, schools, library, parks, hospitals, and power plant—all the trappings of a modern city.²

“China has opened a hardware store on a disputed South China Sea island, according to the local government, as Beijing ramps up efforts to expand civilian facilities and cement claims in the strategically important waterway.”

The move has also encouraged other nations with claims in the South China Sea to follow suit. Vietnam is building up its presence in the Paracel Islands and has increased its efforts to solidify its position on Barque Canada Reef, a narrow, 18-mile atoll on the southern end of the Spratlys. Vietnam has doubled the size of the Barque Canada Reef to 492 acres since November 2023.³ Chinese and Vietnamese efforts to populate the islands within their control do not change the operational environment—they *create* the operational environment—and should be recognized as tactics used to gain legitimacy for claims to control parts of the South China Sea.



Nautical chart of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea, with Woody Island highlighted in yellow.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paracel_Islands_-_media/File:Asia_-_South_China_Sea_-_Mui_Da_Nang_to_Shen-Chuan_Chang_including_Hai-Nan_Tao_and_Paracel_Islands_\(Paracel_Islands_cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paracel_Islands_-_media/File:Asia_-_South_China_Sea_-_Mui_Da_Nang_to_Shen-Chuan_Chang_including_Hai-Nan_Tao_and_Paracel_Islands_(Paracel_Islands_cropped).jpg)

Source: “South China Sea: Beijing opens hardware store on disputed Woody Island,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong-based English language media outlet), 3 August 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3273082/south-china-sea-beijing-opens-hardware-store-disputed-woody-island>

China has opened a hardware store on a disputed South China Sea island, according to the local government, as Beijing ramps up efforts to expand civilian facilities and cement claims in the strategically important waterway.

Covering an area of about 100 square metres (1,076 square feet), the Xinyi Hardware Store is located on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands, a contested archipelago known in Chinese as the Xisha Islands and in Vietnamese as the Hoang Sa Islands.

The store, situated next to the cargo terminal of the Sansha Yongxing Airport, opened for business on Thursday, according to the government of Sansha city, which oversees the Paracels as well as the

Macclesfield Bank and the Spratly Islands – another disputed archipelago known as the Nansha Islands in Chinese.

Located about 300km (186 miles) from the southern Chinese island province of Hainan, Woody Island – known as Yongxing Island in China – is the largest outcrop among the 30 or so islands that make up the Paracels. The archipelago is controlled by Beijing but also claimed by Taipei and Hanoi.

To assert its claims to the resource-rich waters, Beijing in 2012 announced the establishment of Sansha city on Woody Island to administer the disputed South China Sea islands and features.

Notes:

- 1 Like most of the features of the South China Sea, the Paracel Islands are jointly claimed. The Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and China each claims jurisdiction and hold on to shoals and islands under their respective control. All nations with a claim are building out infrastructure to cement control over territory held.
- 2 The opening of the hardware store on Shansha city is the most recent in a number of media publicized opennings. In April 2023 China opened the Kuanzhai Xiangzi hotpot restaurant in Shansha City on Woody Island. See: “South China Sea: Beijing opens hotpot restaurant on Woody Island in disputed Paracels chain,” *South China Morning Post*, 30 April 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3218912/south-china-sea-beijing-opens-hotpot-restaurant-woody-island-disputed-paracels-chain?module=inline&pgtype=article>
- 3 For a recent U.S. media perspective on Vietnam’s herculean effort to dredge the sea floor, fill in land, fortify barriers and erect new structures on Barque Canada Reef, see: “Vietnam accelerates island building to challenge China’s maritime claims,” *The Washington Post*, 9 August 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2024/vietnam-south-china-sea-islands-growth/>

China's Southern Theater Command Strained by Growing Operational Requirements

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Multiple press reports emanating from Southeast Asia suggest China's Southern Theater Command is being stretched to its operational limits.¹ According to the excerpted article from India media aggregator *First Post*, instability on the China-Myanmar border due to the on-going internal conflict in Myanmar between government and insurgent forces, and continued tension in the South China Sea, could push the command to the brink of its operational capabilities. The *First Post* article was published on the heels of China's announcement that it would conduct three days of live fire drills and patrols on the border with Myanmar beginning on 27 August and ending 29 August. The military exercises took place across a small portion of China's roughly 1,240-mile-long border with Myanmar and are the latest military operations by the PLA on the Myanmar border. According to the *First Post* article, the military exercises were conducted to "maintain the safety and stability of the border areas." According to the second excerpted article from Singapore-based *Central News Asia* (CNA), China justified the frontier training exercises and patrols in the wake of recent battles between Myanmar's military and non-government forces spilling over onto Chinese territory

and the conflict generally threatening Chinese infrastructure projects on its frontier.

“With instability on the Myanmar border and rising tensions in the South China Sea, the PLA Southern Theatre Command is stretched to the limit.”

To the east, the PLA Navy's Southern Fleet and accompanying air assets, operating under the Southern Theater Command, is tasked with

carrying out China's many interests in the South China Sea as China battles a variety of counterclaims on the features of the area.²

The third excerpted article from *Xinhau* and published on Chinese military-focused news aggregator *Chinamilitary.com* noted that in addition to border security and continued operations in the South China Sea, the Southern Theater Command is frequently tasked to help with natural disasters such as the participation of 700 PLA Army personal to assist in the response to flooding in central China's Hunan Province in July.



Map of China's five Theater Commands. The Southern Theater Command has responsibility for the borders all countries and coastline touched by its jurisdiction.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theater_command_\(China\)-/media/File:Map_of_Theatres_of_PLA_en.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theater_command_(China)-/media/File:Map_of_Theatres_of_PLA_en.svg)

None of the excerpted articles suggest the operational tempo of the Southern Theater Command would threaten the viability of the command itself, nor that China would be unable

to reinforce the command from the other four theater commands if necessary. Still, the articles highlight a myriad of flashpoints within the jurisdiction of the Southern Theater

Command that show no sign of abating as natural disasters, the conflict in Myanmar, and challenges to Chinese claims in the South China Sea are sure to continue.

Source: “Myanmar crisis to South China Sea tensions: Is PLA’s Southern Theatre Command stretched?,” *First Post* (India-based news service covering the region), 26 August 2024. <https://www.firstpost.com/world/myanmar-instability-to-south-china-sea-tensions-is-plas-southern-theatre-command-stretched-13808289.html> - goog_rewarded

With instability on the Myanmar border and rising tensions in the South China Sea, the PLA Southern Theatre Command is stretched to the limit.

China’s People’s Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command is facing an unprecedented strain as it prepares for a three-day live-fire drill on the Chinese side of the China-Myanmar border. This drill, set to commence on Tuesday, is a critical test of the command’s capabilities as it grapples with the increasing instability in Myanmar, which poses a significant threat to China’s border security and strategic interests.

The Yunnan provincial government announced that the drill would take place in several key locations including Ruili city near the townships of Huyi and Wanting, Zhenkang county near Mengdui township and the autonomous county of Gengma Dai and Wa near Mengding town. These areas are close to the nearly 2,000-kilometre border that Yunnan shares with Myanmar making them particularly vulnerable to the spillover effects of the ongoing civil war in Myanmar.

The Southern Theatre Command of the People’s Liberation Army is unique in that it must manage operations across multiple domains simultaneously. This includes land-based operations along the Myanmar border, maritime security in the South China Sea and air operations that support both naval

and land operations.

The PLA Navy’s Southern Fleet, operating under the Southern Theatre Command, is tasked with a wide array of missions from routine patrols to potential conflict scenarios with foreign navies. The fleet must also be prepared to enforce China’s maritime claims often involving standoffs with vessels from other nations including the United States. The PLA Air Force units under the Southern Theatre Command are similarly stretched. They must conduct regular reconnaissance missions enforce airspace control over contested areas and provide rapid response capabilities in case of escalation...

This includes protecting Chinese investments in Myanmar, ensuring the security of critical infrastructure projects and supporting China’s strategic ambitions in the region.

China’s investments in Myanmar, particularly those related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are of strategic importance. The Southern Theatre Command is tasked with ensuring the security of these projects, which include pipelines, roads and ports that are critical to China’s access to the Indian Ocean. Protecting these assets from potential threats, whether from internal conflict in Myanmar or external interference, adds another layer of responsibility to the command’s already heavy workload.

Source: “China’s military to conduct armed patrols, live-fire exercises near Myanmar border,” *Channel News Asia* (Singapore-based media service), 26 August 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/chinas-military-conduct-armed-patrols-live-fire-exercises-near-myanmar-border-4567376>

China’s military said on Monday (26 Aug) it had organised army units and joint air-ground police patrols near its border with Myanmar to maintain security and stability as fighting between Myanmar’s ruling junta and rebel forces escalates.

The patrols will focus on areas around Ruili, Zhenkang and other frontline sections in China, the military said in a statement.

Major fighting has occurred in northern Kachin and Shan states in Myanmar, with artillery shells injuring people and damaging property on the Chinese side, and also threatening infrastructure projects in China.

The Southern Theatre of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army is organising army units to test troops’ ability to “quickly move, block and control, and strike

together, and maintain security and stability in the border areas”, the military said.

A unit of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army is also scheduled to organise live-fire exercises on the Chinese side of the China-Myanmar border from Aug 27-29, according to a separate statement from China’s military.

Exercises will be held in areas located south of Ruili, and in other areas around Zhenkang county and Gengma Dai and Va autonomous county in west Yunnan province, the military said.

China said the conflict was having a negative effect on stability and social order on the China-Myanmar border.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi also said recently that China would continue “its commitment to restore peace and stability in Myanmar”.

Source: “Over 700 officers, soldiers of PLA Southern Theater Command head for flood-hit region,” 7 July, 2024. *Chinamilitary.com* (Chinese military-focused news aggregator) http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/ARMEDFORCES/SouthernTheaterCommand/News_209144/16322315.html

More than 700 officers and soldiers from the airforce of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command departed for Yueyang, central China’s Hunan Province, on Sunday to undertake flood relief and rescue operations.

Carrying 46 vehicles, they are scheduled to arrive at designated areas before midnight on Sunday, with the tasks of inspecting dikes, reinforcing embankments

Notes:

- 1 China’s Theater Commands can be likened to the U.S. Combatant Commands but rather than a global focus, their areas of responsibility (AOR) are officially within China itself and the international borders respective to the individual command. China’s Southern Theater Command’s AOR borders Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam (Mainland Southeast Asia) and the South China Sea, and as such the Southern Theater Command has responsibility for this long frontier. It is also anticipated that the Southern Theater Command would support the Eastern Theater Command in any major amphibious operation against Taiwan.
- 2 The Southern Military Command’s air assets also engage in air interdiction missions. See: PLA Southern Theater Command drives away Philippine aircraft illegally intruding into China’s Huangyan Dao, *China Military Online*, 10 August 2024. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16330462.html

and assisting in the restoration of local production and daily life.

Heavy and prolonged rainfall has resulted in flooding in various regions of China, notably causing a breach in the dike of Dongting Lake, the country’s second-largest freshwater lake, located in a county administered by the city of Yueyang.

China Conducts Joint South China Sea Combat Patrol Near Huangyan Island

By Kevin Kusumoto
OE Watch Commentary

On 7 August, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Southern Theater Command conducted a joint combat patrol in the South China Sea near Huangyan Island. The patrol coincided with a four-nation military exercise conducted by the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Philippines in the same region and aimed to "test the theater troops' reconnaissance and early warning, rapid mobility, and joint strike capabilities."¹

The first excerpted article, published by the *Global Times*, a Chinese nationalistic tabloid, features Colonel Zhang Junshe, from the Naval Military Academic Research Institute, and Dr. Ding Duo, Deputy Director from China's Institute of South China Sea Studies.² In the article, Colonel Zhang emphasizes two points. Firstly, the joint combat patrol confidently showcases procedures to include quick threat detection, rapid deployment, control of both sea and air through joint strikes, seize the initiative, and launch further strike operations. Secondly, Colonel Zhang criticizes the coinciding four-nation military exercise as merely symbolic due to the limited number of participating ships.³ Colonel Zhang emphasizes that the Philippines involves non-regional countries in the South China Sea to embolden themselves to undertake more "provocative" actions.

Dr. Ding Duo continues the rhetoric, accusing the United States of being the biggest external factor disrupting regional stability. He asserts that future multinational exercises will only serve to strengthen China's determination and commitment to its interest in the region.

The second excerpt, published by *Direct News*, a news agency controlled by the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party, features Shi Hong, a frequent special commentator. Shi Hong also places the blame for escalating tensions on the Philippines and the United States.⁴ He strongly advocates the PLA to intensify "countermeasures" against the Philippines as its military continues to participate in joint exercises. The Philippines has emerged as a primary contender against China in the South China Sea, with both sides engaging in multiple hostile confrontations.⁵ While China has traditionally used its coast guard to assert its claims in the region, the recent PLA joint combat patrol signals a potentially more aggressive approach aimed at intimidating and demonstrating strength. The timing of this joint combat patrol is clearly intended to send a message of discontent. The trend of patrols may become more frequent, signaling China's dissatisfaction with the Philippines' growing collaboration with its allies and partners.⁶

"If we do not strengthen our countermeasures against the Marcos government, the Philippines, relying on support of countries outside the region, will only become more arrogant in stirring up trouble."

Source: “南部战区位黄岩岛附近海空域组织联合战巡，军事专家：消息中的“三种能力”内涵丰富 (The Southern Theater Command organized a joint combat patrol in the sea and air near Huangyan Island, military experts say the “three capabilities” in the report are rich in meaning),” *Global Times* (a Chinese tabloid known for reporting international issues from a nationalistic perspective), 7 August 2024. <https://hqttime.huanqiu.com/article/4IvXI4qwGPn>

The People’s Liberation Army Southern Theater Command announced on the 7th that they conducted a joint combat patrol near Huangyan Island in the South China Sea. This patrol aimed to test the theater troops’ reconnaissance and early warning, rapid mobility, and joint strike capabilities. Experts interviewed by the Global Times noted that these three capabilities demonstrate the PLA’s ability to implement targeted countermeasures against provocative actions.

Colonel Zhang Junshe, a researcher at the Naval Military Academic Research Institute, stated that the PLA’s three key capabilities—reconnaissance and early warning, rapid mobility, and joint strikes—are part of its combat procedures designed to defend national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. He explained that these procedures enable the PLA to quickly detect threats, maneuver rapidly, and conduct joint strikes against acts of aggression. This approach allows the PLA to maintain control of sea and air, seize the initiative, and launch further strike operations.

Coincidentally, the Philippines, the United States, Canada, and Australia began a two-day multilateral maritime exercise on the 7th, which was reported as the first joint exercise among these four countries. This marks the third exercise that the Philippines has conducted with non-regional countries within ten days; On July 31st, the Philippine and US navies held a joint maritime exercise in the South China Sea, and on August 2nd, the Philippines and Japan conducted a joint military exercise in the same region.

Dr. Ding Duo, Deputy Director of the Institute of

Marine Law and Policy at the China Institute of South China Sea Studies, stated that the Philippines’ continual attempts to involve non-regional countries in joint exercises have only emboldened their confidence for provocative actions in the South China Sea. Dr. Ding Duo firmly believes that not only is the Philippines bringing danger upon itself, but it is also destabilizing ASEAN’s regional stability.

Dr. Ding Duo asserts that the United States is the biggest external factor disrupting regional stability. He criticizes the U.S. for promoting multilateral mechanisms and exhibiting a Cold War mentality against China. Dr. Ding Duo states, ‘The United States does not have many means to intervene in South China Sea affairs. It can only demonstrate deterrence through joint patrols and joint military exercises. However, history and reality have shown that this approach will not affect China; instead, it will only strengthen China’s determination to safeguard its sovereignty, security, and development interests in the South China Sea.’”

Furthermore, public reports indicate that the exercises conducted by the Philippines with non-regional countries in the South China Sea are mostly symbolic. In the most recent exercises, very few ships and aircraft were involved. From the Philippines’ perspective, its ships and systems are far behind those of friendly and allied countries, making it unable to effectively carry out its own joint operations. The Philippines hopes that through these multinational exercises, the United States and its allies will support it and increase its confidence in continuing provocative actions. Colonel Zhang Junshe

continue on 12

criticizes this approach, stating, “the United States and Japan are capable of lending a helping hand to the Philippines, but neither of them is willing enough.

They just want the Philippines to charge into battle, and they will not participate in it themselves.”

Source: “解放军联合战巡南海 这一次在黄岩岛附近 (The PLA South China Sea joint patrol is near the Huangyan Island),” *Direct News* (news agency controlled by the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party), 7 August 2024. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1806726604086346646&wfr=spider&for=pc>

On August 7th, the Southern Theater Command of the People’s Liberation Army organized a joint combat patrol in the sea and airspace near Huangyan Island in the South China Sea to test the theater troops’ reconnaissance and early warning, rapid mobility, and joint strike capabilities. The Southern Theater Command stated that “all military activities that disrupt the South China Sea, create hotspots, and undermine regional peace and stability are under control.”

Shi Hong, a special commentator for Zhi News (Direct News), states that this joint combat patrol serves as a deterrent signal. He notes that the Philippines is frequently disrupting regional stability in the South China Sea and has actively involved non-regional countries to further destabilize the region. The four-

nation exercise involving the Philippines, the United States, Canada, and Australia is the Philippines’ third naval exercise with non-regional countries in ten days.

“If we do not intensify our countermeasures against the Marcos government of the Philippines, the Philippines, relying on support from non-regional countries, will become more arrogant in destabilizing the region,” Shi Hong said. “Now the PLA Southern Theater Command is organizing its own joint patrols near Huangyan Island in the South China Sea, which serves as a strong warning to the Philippines and its allies. If they interfere in the South China Sea and challenge China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the PLA is fully capable of defeating all provocations.”

Notes:

- 1 To read the official statement on the joint combat patrol released by China’s Southern Theater Command, see their official Weibo post, *Weibo*, 7 August 2024. <https://m.weibo.cn/u/7468777622?jumpfrom=weibocom>
- 2 To watch the Global Times report on the joint combat patrol, see Global Times’ official Baidu post, *Baidu*, 8 August 2024. <https://haokan.baidu.com/v?vid=10881733893047848551>
- 3 The four-nation exercise involving the US, Australia, Canada, and the Philippines included only four ships, with Australia contributing a single Boeing Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft, *Asian News Network* (news coalition organization headquartered in Singapore), 8 August 2024. <https://asianews.network/philippines-starts-4-nation-naval-drills-with-us-australia-canada/>
- 4 To watch a clip of special commentator Shi Hong briefly outlining his points, see *Direct News*’ video post, *Direct News*, 08 August 2024. https://haokan.baidu.com/v?vid=2234121559770488262&collection_id=
- 5 Nectar Gan and Kathleen Magramo “‘Only pirates do this’: Philippines accuses China of using bladed weapons in major South China Sea escalation,” *CNN*, 20 June 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/20/asia/philippines-footage-south-china-sea-clash-china-intl-hnk/index.html>
- 6 Agence France-Presse, “China launches air, sea patrols near flashpoint reef as US holds joint drills,” *VOA*, 7 August 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-launches-air-sea-patrols-near-flashpoint-scarborough-shoal/7733012.html>

China Introduces New Unmanned Systems in Combat Exercises



▲ China's **DJI Mavic Air 2** drone in flight.

Source: Data derived from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DJI_-_Drohne_Mavic_Air_2.JPG

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

China introduced and employed some of its unmanned systems during recent combat exercises, highlighting how it plans to dominate the future battlefield. In the exercise, “Peace Unity-2024,” Chinese participants worked closely with Tanzanian military personnel on new drone combat techniques.¹ According to the article excerpt, published by the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology’s official newspaper *Science and Technology Daily*, the exercise involved combatting a group of (imaginary) armed terrorists infiltrating town blocks to carry out attacks and take hostages. Reconnaissance, armored personnel, special warfare, artillery, and other combat units from both China and Tanzania worked together, while relying on infantry fighting vehicles, assault vehicles, and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft to locate and eliminate the “terrorists.” The article explains that once

the drones took off, the Chinese reconnaissance team was able to transmit intelligence to the joint command post for Tanzanian and Chinese commanders to analyze and determine the battlefield situation. A Tanzanian reconnaissance team guided Chinese special forces in from the sea undetected. Once on station, blockading the perimeter, they used a “multi-channel concentric attack” approach to attack the terrorists at multiple points, expelling and eliminating them.

In a previous exercise, “Golden Dragon-2024,” which took place with Cambodia in May, the PLA featured a combat robot dog. Equipped with an automatic rifle, these battery-operated robot dogs could one day replace soldiers. A video published by the Chinese majority state-owned television network *Phoenix News Media*, shows the combat robot dog entering a building with soldiers. As described in the video transcript, the robot dog

“In many exercises during the second half of this year, there will be more intelligent AI armaments unveiled.”

can reportedly navigate obstacles and fire at targets. Another video² claims that the combat robot dog can even plan routes, approach targets, and avoid obstacles, making it ideal for urban combat operations. The first video also showcased an unmanned combat vehicle. The combat vehicle is said to have the same type of rifle and machine gun weapon stations as the robot dog.³ It also reportedly can be equipped with grenade launchers, bomb disposal arms and other mission-related features. A heavy-lift drone can airdrop it to the enemy’s rear, where it can work in coordination with the combat robot dog. While the robot dog is responsible for clearing buildings and alleys, able to go up and down stairs, the combat vehicle would be responsible for outdoor operations.⁴

While these systems can now be used for remote surveillance and attack, in the future, China envisions using unmanned systems to develop and deploy logistics, transporting supplies, and other items. In short, as the CCTV video explains, we can expect to see unmanned weapons

systems appear more and more in future Chinese combat exercise scenarios.

Source: Zhang Qiang et al., “‘平团结-2024’联合演习——东非演兵场打出联合反恐‘组合拳’ (Peace Unity 2024 Joint Exercise: Joint Anti-Terrorism ‘Combination Punch’ Launched on the East African Military Training Ground),” *Keji Ribao* (Official newspaper of the PRC’s Ministry of Science and Technology), 20 August 2024. https://www.stdaily.com/web/gdxw/2024-08/20/content_216923.html

During the operation and training phase of reconnaissance equipment, the Chinese participants demonstrated different drone combat and reconnaissance operations... and worked closely with Tanzanian officers and soldiers on new drone combat operations...

During the “Peace and Unity-2024” joint exercise... Chinese participants displayed a lot of the new equipment.

As the drones took off, the Chinese reconnaissance team took the lead and sent intelligence back to the command post. In the joint command center, Chinese and Tanzanian commanders jointly analyzed and assessed the battlefield situation and ordered the joint combat group to advance quickly from the left and right sides, using “ground assault, elite troops,

information blocking” and other means to attack the imaginary enemy. At the same time, Chinese special forces took the approach of infiltrating from the sea to engage the enemy covertly. Guided by the Tanzanian reconnaissance team, they effectively located and identified suspicious targets. After completing the joint reconnaissance and perimeter blockade, participating troops from both sides collaborated to adopt a “multi-channel concentric attack” approach, attacking the [imaginary] “terrorists” stationed at multiple points and the eliminating them.

“This joint exercise has a large amount of a wide variety of equipment, including some new domains of equipment such as unmanned and special warfare equipment, which is a distinct feature.”

Source: “解放军8月持续实弹演习 凸显人工智能军事化 (The PLA’s continued live-fire exercises in August highlight the militarization of artificial intelligence),” *Phoenix News Media* (a majority state-owned television network that serves mainland China, Honk Kong, Macau, and other Chinese-language viewers), 17 August 2024. <https://mil.ifeng.com/c/8c41qSICUbG>

The [“Peace and Unit-2024”] joint exercise between China and Tanzania focused on exploring Chinese and foreign joint performances...(they called it) A new model of joint training...

In many exercises during the second half of this year, there will more intelligent AI armaments unveiled. According to Hong Kong Sing Tao Daily, a variety

of unmanned equipment developed by China has been put into actual combat exercise. For example, equipped with an automatic rifle, the assault robot dog is able to accurately snipe targets...

In the future, the PLA will use unmanned equipment in field search and rescue operations. According to Hong Kong South China Morning Post the PLA

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is exploring integrating unmanned equipment into combat operations. A greatly improved special operations team will have battlefield awareness and fire-strike capabilities.

In May of this year, China's PLA unveiled the intelligent unmanned combat robot dog during the joint Cambodian "Golden Dragon-2024" Exercise, which attracted much attention... some analysts pointed out that a robot dog equipped with automatic rifle in military drills demonstrates that China is

changing its traditional battlefield rules... The four-legged robot dog... conducted reconnaissance first and fired upon discovering the enemy. He is a new member of our offensive and defensive operations. In the future, (unmanned systems might) develop and deploy logistics to treat the wounded, transport supplies and other items, even be directly linked to satellites. Integrated AI armaments for remote surveillance and attack might appear in future PLA combat exercises.

Notes:

- 1 Peace Unity-2024," was a joint exercise with Mozambique and Tanzania that took place late-July through mid-August 2024.
- 2 Mikhaila Friela, "China's Latest Weapon of War is a Gun-Toting Robot Dog," *Business Insider*, 28 May 2024. <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-weapon-war-machine-gun-toting-robot-dog-military-drills-2024-5>
- 3 "前方高能！国产新型战斗无人车曝光 演示视频发布！搭载战斗机器狗同型步枪 可由无人机空投至“敌”后方！（High Energy Ahead! New Domestic Unmanned Vehicle Exposed, Released Video Demonstration! Equipped With the Same Type of Rifle as the Combat Robot Dog, It Can Be Airdropped by a Drone to the Enemy Rear, Military Fans World)," *CCTV Youtube* channel (Chinese Government News Network), 12 July 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poHfVmg0QAg>
- 4 See also *CCTV Youtube* video, 12 July 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poHfVmg0QAg>

Russia Creating New Officer Academies to Support Armed Forces Expansion

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

In December 2022, Russia announced that it would increase the number of uniformed personnel in the Ministry of Defense from approximately 1 million to 1.5 million personnel at a Collegium of the Russian Ministry of Defense, attended by President Putin, former Minister of Defense General Shoigu, and Chief of the General Staff General Gerasimov.¹ At this event, and by way of subsequent pronouncements, Russia has made it clear that it will not revert back to its previous end strength when its *special military operation* ends.² Although Russia has had to resort to partial mobilization to fill its ranks for the ongoing war in Ukraine, permanently raising the end-strength to 1.5 million will almost certainly entail recruiting more contract personnel and increasing the standard one-year conscription period to two years. It will also involve adding additional officers.

In the Soviet/Russian system, inducting and training enlisted personnel can be done relatively quickly, but officer accessions are a different matter. Officers are typically only trained at specialized 4-to-5-year academies making the officer creation pipeline a long one. This is problematic for Russia, as it shuttered many officer academies during major reforms in the early 2010s, so it does not

“Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed an order to establish the Saratov Higher Artillery Command School.”

have institutional training capacity to train the necessary number of officers for a 1.5 million personnel force. The accompanying excerpted article from

Russian newspaper Izvestiya, discusses how Russia is reopening military officer academies to support an expansion of the force that will likely not be fully implemented until well after the *special military operation* ends.



Saratov Higher Artillery Command School.

Source: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Саратовское_высшее_военное_командно-инженерное_училище_ракетных_войск#/media/Файл:Артиллерийская_ул_2_Саратов.jpg

Source: “Мишустин поручил создать Саратовское высшее артиллерийское командное училище (Mishustin orders creation of Saratov Higher Artillery Command School),” *Izvestiya* (daily Russian newspaper), 8 July 2024. <https://iz.ru/1724553/2024-07-08/mishustin-poruchil-sozdat-saratovskoe-vysshee-artilleriiskoe-komandnoe-uchilishche>

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed an order to establish the Saratov Higher Artillery Command School. The document was signed on July 6 and published on the official legal information portal on July 8.

“To create a federal state military educational institution of higher education, the Saratov Higher Artillery Command School, of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation,” the document states.

The staffing level of military and civilian personnel at the school should be 6,000 personnel...

Several more military academies may be created in Ulyanovsk. As Governor Alexey Russsikh reported on social networks in February, the issue has already been discussed with representatives of the Ministry of Defense. Thus, an inter-university military training center may be created in the city. Its base may be the former educational building of the Suvorov School in Krasnoznamenny Lane. In addition, a higher school of military transport aviation is planned to be located in Ulyanovsk on the basis of a former technical school.

Notes:

- 1 “Изменение призывного возраста и увеличение армии. Путин и Шойгу выступили в Минобороны (Changing the conscription age and increasing the size of the Army: Putin and Shoigu spoke at the Ministry of Defense),” TASS, 21 December 2022. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/16655079>
- 2 Moscow uses the term spetsial’naya voyennaya operatsiya (“special military operation”) or spetsoperatsiya (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.

Russian Security Forces Face Rise of Domestic Terrorism Threats



By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

Russia's Investigative Committee and the Federal Security Service (FSB) announced in early August it had foiled a plot by two Russian religious preachers to recruit fighters of the Islamic State (formerly ISIS) to carry out terrorist attacks inside the country. The plan was to enlist 19 Russian nationals living in the Tyumen region to join a jihadi movement in Syria. According to the excerpted article in the pro-Kremlin Russian news site *RT*, one of the suspects made public statements condoning terrorism and they urged Russians to send donations to ISIS, which violates Russian laws on material support of terrorism.

This comes amid a new report by the Interior Ministry of the highest number of terrorist crimes in Russia recorded in over two decades, as reported in the second excerpted article, also published by *RT*. Between

Russian Ministry of Emergency fire fighters standing outside Moscow's Crocus City Hall, site of a March 2024 terrorism attack. ▲

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2024_Crocus_City_Hall_terrorist_attack_5.jpg; Attribution: П ресс-служба Губернатора Московской области

January and June of 2024, some 1,651 crimes were reported, a nearly 40 percent spike over the same period the previous year. In June the director of the FSB, Aleksandr Bortnikov, announced that his agency had foiled 134 acts of terrorism or sabotage this year in central Russia alone, as well as 32 international terrorist cells operating in the country. Even a youth wrestling coach born in Tajikistan was arrested in July for suspicion of abetting terrorist groups.¹ The following

month, Ukrainian forces launched an incursion into Russia's Kursk region, what constituted, according to Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "acts of terrorism."² Prior to that, last March, one of the deadliest terror attacks in Russia's history occurred, after four gunmen shot up a concert venue outside Moscow, killing 145, before setting the building on fire. The gunmen were linked to a terrorist outfit known as Islamic State-Khorasan.

In June, the FSB's director, Aleksandr Bortnikov, revealed that the agency had prevented a total of 134 acts of terrorism and sabotage in central Russia alone since the outbreak of the conflict between Moscow and Kiev in February 2022. The country's security agencies have also dismantled 32 international terrorist cells operating in the country over this period, he stated.

The rise in jihadi attacks is due to several factors, including an overextension of Russia's roughly 360,000-strong Rosgvardiya, or Russian National Guard, a number of

whom were carrying out rear-guard missions in Ukraine even before the latest incursion into Kursk.³ The ability to respond to Ukrainian operations and simultaneously address Islamist

extremist groups will stretch the Rosgvardiya and Russia's domestic intelligence services even further.

Source: "ISIS recruiters arrested in Russia – security officials," RT (formerly Russia Today, a Kremlin-back news outlet), 5 August 2024. <https://www.rt.com/russia/602155-isis-recruiters-arrested-siberia/>

The arrest warrants were executed in Tyumen Region in Western Siberia, Russia's Investigative Committee and the Federal Security Service (FSB) jointly reported. The two individuals are accused of committing crimes between February 2015 and November 2022.

According to investigators, the pair convinced 19 people living in the region to join jihadists in Syria. One of the suspects allegedly made public statements condoning terrorism. Both urged people to send donations to IS, which amounted to material support of terrorism under Russian law, the statements claimed. Footage released by the FSB indicated that the suspects did not resist arrest. Neither agency has

named them.

IS originated from radical Islamist forces in Iraq and came to international prominence after gaining strength in 2014, when it capitalized on the lack of security in the country as well as the turmoil in neighboring Syria. The jihadists' lightning offensive that year allowed them to capture Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, as well as large swathes of territory in Syria.

The group has since been largely defeated militarily and fractured under local and international pressure, though some splinters remain active, particularly in Afghanistan. Terrorist cells affiliated with IS remain a threat in southern parts of Russia.

Source: "Russia reports record level of terrorism," RT, (formerly Russia Today, a Kremlin-back news outlet), 3 August 2024. <https://www.rt.com/russia/602085-russia-terrorism-crimes-surge/>

According to a document posted to the ministry's official website earlier this week, 1,651 crimes classified as terrorism were recorded in the country in January-June 2024, a nearly 40% increase over the same period in 2023. The ministry noted that for the same period from 2006 to 2023, the figure did not reach 1,400. The previous record high was registered in the first half of 2022, when 1,332 terrorism-linked crimes were recorded.

Crimes associated with extremist activities have also reached a record high. From January to June, 819

such crimes were registered, a nearly 12% increase year-on-year. This figure had not surpassed 800 since 2018.

Crimes designated as terror-linked in Russia include making preparations for carrying out a terrorist attack, public calls for terrorism and justification of terrorism, as well as hostage-taking. Extremist crimes include those committed on the basis of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred, or enmity towards any social group.

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Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) routinely makes public information on foiled terror plots, often describing the suspects as people linked with either Islamist terrorist groups or Ukrainian nationalists or collaborators.

In June, the FSB's director, Aleksandr Bortnikov, revealed that the agency had prevented a total of 134 acts of terrorism and sabotage in central Russia alone since the outbreak of the conflict between Moscow and Kiev in February 2022. The country's security agencies have also dismantled 32 international terrorist cells operating in the country

over this period, he stated.

Russia saw one of the deadliest terror attacks in its history this past March, when four gunmen went on a shooting rampage at the Crocus City Hall concert venue outside Moscow. The attackers shot everyone in sight before setting the building on fire. The tragedy left 145 people dead and over 500 injured. A terrorist organization known as Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the attack, but the FSB has alleged that Kiev was behind the massacre, possibly using Islamists as proxies.

Notes:

- 1 "Russian youth wrestling coach charged with terrorism offenses," *RT*, 4 July 2024. <https://www.rt.com/russia/600432-russian-wrestling-coach-terrorism/>
- 2 "Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova's comment on events around Ukraine," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 14 August 2024. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1965546/
- 3 Mark Galeotti, "In Moscow's Shadows," Episode 153: Geopolitics, Nepotism, Terrorism, and Sabotage, 30 June 2024. <https://inmoscowsshadows.buzzsprout.com/1026985/15334481-in-moscow-s-shadows-153-geopolitics-nepotism-terror-and-assassination-all-the-nice-things>

China and Russia Expand Agreement for Arctic Strategic Resource Development



By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Russia has signed an agreement with China to partner in the development of a major lithium field in Russia's far north according to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*. It is likely that Russia would like to mine its lithium fields on its own, but the contract demonstrates Russia's need for a partner. China has already partnered with Russia for Arctic development of oil, LNG, and other resources. The agreement gives China some lati-

Russian nuclear-powered icebreaker, the Sabir, in Arctic waters. The **Sabir** is operated by Rosatom, which was appointed administrative control of the Northern Sea Route infrastructure in 2018. ▲

Source: <https://c4.wallpaperflare.com/wallpaper/645/918/543/the-ocean-sea-icebreaker-the-ship-wallpaper-preview.jpg>

tude to exploit territory it would not otherwise have access. At the same time, Russia would be hard-pressed to develop the lithium field without outside capital investment that only China can provide at this time. The partnership agreement also comes at a time when China has shown it is eager to expand its presence in the Arctic and gain access to unexploited Arctic resources.¹

“The Chinese company will be a main partner in the development of the major lithium field located in the far northern Russian region.”

Source: Atle Staalesen and Denis Zagore, “Chinese Developers come to mine lithium in Murmansk,” *The Barents Observer*, (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 1 August 2024. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2024/08/chinese-developers-come-lithium-mine-murmansk>

The company MCC International Incorporation Ltd will join the development of the Kolmozerskoye lithium resources in the Kola Peninsula. The Chinese company will be a main partner in the development of the major lithium field located in the far northern Russian region. The company will take part in exploration of resources, development of technology, as well as production, the Russian license holder stated. The accompanying Nornickel Telegram photo is captioned “Hun Ventao, Vice President of Chinese company MCC International Incorporation Ltd signs deal with Igor Demidov, head of the Polar Lithium.”

The Russian edition of the Barents Observer reports that the Kolmozerskoye field is owned by Polar Lithium, a company controlled by Nornickel and Rosatom’s ore mining division. Nornickel’s Telegram channel stated that “The MCC International knows how to project mine processing plants, it possesses

its own ore enrichment and lithium production technology.”

The Chinese company will reportedly also take part in the development of battery production. “The experienced Chinese partner will help us more quickly create a high-tech battery industry in Russia,” according to Nornickel.

According to the developers, the new mine and processing plant are planned to be ready for production in year 2030. It is to be able to annually process up to 2 million tons of ore and produce 45,000 tons of lithium hydroxide and carbonate.

Nornickel is running the major nickel and copper mines and metallurgical plants in and around Monchegorsk, Kola Peninsula. The joint venture with Rosatom’s ore mining division was established in 2021.

Notes:

- 1 See: Les Grau, “Chinese Icebreaker Sails to The Arctic,” *OE Watch*, 09-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/chinese-icebreaker-sails-to-the-arctic/>

Iranian Military Equipment Integrating Artificial Intelligence

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

As the international community enters the world of artificial intelligence (AI) warfare, Iran is integrating and developing this technology into its military equipment.¹ As reported by Iranian state broadcaster *IRIB*, Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) said during a ceremony in the southwestern port city of Bandar Abbas on 9 August, “Artificial intelligence technology has been utilized in the new equipment, and we are currently witnessing its results.” Tangsiri claims 2,654 new missile systems, drones, and other equipment have been integrated with AI to enhance precision, acquisition, and capabilities in its military hardware—demonstrating Tehran’s top focus is AI.

In January, General Hossein Salami, commander of the IRGC, made similar claims about the country’s drone fleet.² Progress appears to be limited, as little public information is available on the subject, except for comments from high-ranking officials in the military apparatus. It’s also worth noting that Tehran has a history of making outlandish claims to boast its abilities. Nevertheless, Iran is thinking about how to further integrate and develop this technology by investing in training on how to integrate AI into its array of military equipment.³



According to the *IRIB* article, RADM Tangsiri noted: “In the equipment and facilities that we put into operation today, we paid special attention to innovation and technical creativity.” He explained that AI has been a top priority and applied to systems used by the defense ministry and the specialized missile sites of the IRGC-N.

Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri speaks. ▲
Source: <https://snn.ir/fa/news/1160582>

“Artificial intelligence technology has been utilized in the new equipment, and we are currently witnessing its results.”

Not only does AI improve Tehran’s capabilities and support its top priority of regime preservation, the integration into its military hardware is a selling point on the arms market as Iran becomes a global exporter to Russia, Ethiopia, Venezuela, Sudan, and other countries.⁴

Source:

(Use of artificial intelligence in the new IRGC equipment),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 9 August 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/4p399rp3>

استفاده از هوش مصنوعی در تجهیزات جدید سپاه

According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri stated during the ceremony for adding new equipment to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Navy (IRGC-NV): “210 systems out of 2,654 products in the field today were showcased, demonstrating every wave of new equipment joining the arsenal is large and meaningful.”

The commander of the IRGC-N added: “In terms of the equipment intelligence and countering electronic warfare, systems were introduced in this ceremony that were practically handed over to the forces by the IRGC’s top commander.”

Commander Tangsiri said: “In the equipment and facilities that we put into operation today, we paid special attention to innovation and technical creativity.”

The commander of the IRGC-N emphasized that:

“In these added equipment and systems, we saw an increase in accuracy, aim, and targeting, which increased the confidence of using these weapons in the electronic warfare environment, adding to the capabilities of the equipment.”

Rear Admiral Tangsiri also stressed that the application of artificial intelligence in developing these systems has been a priority, both in the Defense Ministry and the specialized missile centers of the IRGC-N, and the results of these efforts are now evident.

Commander Tangsiri stressed the importance of using artificial intelligence in the construction of equipment, whether in the Defense Ministry or the specialized missile center of the IRGC, saying: “Artificial intelligence technology has been utilized in the new equipment, and we are currently witnessing its results.”

Notes:

- 1 Mahmoud Javadi, “Heavy Thunder, No Rain: Defense AI in Iran,” *The Very Long Game. Contributions to Security and Defense Studies*, 19 July 2024. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-58649-1_19
- 2 See: Michael Rubin, “Iran Announces Integration Of Artificial Intelligence Into Drone Fleet,” *OE Watch*, 10-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/iran-announces-integration-of-artificial-intelligence-into-drone-fleet/>
- 3 Mahmoud Javadi, “Heavy Thunder, No Rain: Defense AI in Iran,” *The Very Long Game. Contributions to Security and Defense Studies*, 19 July 2024. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-58649-1_19
- 4 Danny Citrinowicz. “Iran is on its way to replacing Russia as a leading arms exporter. The US needs a strategy to counter this trend,” *IranSource*, Atlantic Council, 2 February 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-drone-uavs-russia/>

Belarus and Iran Broaden Military Cooperation



Commander of the Iranian army, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi, shakes hands with the commander of the Belarusian Air Force, Major General Andrei Yulianovich Lukyanovich, in Tehran.

Source: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2024/08/07/3135937/generals-urge-promotion-of-iran-belarus-ties>

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

A meeting between Iranian and Belarusian military officials underscores the strengthening of ties between the two internationally isolated countries. In the excerpted article by state broadcaster *IRIB*, the commander of the Iranian Army, MAJ GEN Mousavi, said “The political, military, and defense officials of the two countries are determined to develop and deepen cooperation.” During the 7 August meeting in Tehran, his counterpart, GEN Lukanovich, echoed this sentiment, noting “We also seek to expand and deepen military relations and exchange and benefit from the valuable experiences of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” The visit highlights Tehran and

Minsk’s intent to bolster their strategic partnership.

“The political, military, and defense officials of the two countries are determined to develop and deepen cooperation.”

Just months prior, in March, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko visited Iran for the first time in seventeen years.¹ Since the Ukraine War began in February 2022, Iran has expanded its ties with Russia through an impending defense pact that already includes selling its Shahed drones and, most recently, ballistic missiles to Moscow.² It’s only natural

that Belarus, a top Russian ally and shares a border with Ukraine, would also want to deepen its ties with Tehran. As MAJ GEN Mousavi pointed out during his discussion with his counterpart, Iran and Belarus have “common threats and interests” as the two countries are under Western sanctions.

In the meeting cited in the *IRIB* article, the Iranian Army commander also said, “Belarus holds a strategic and special position and is a strong barrier against NATO expansion. We, along with regional countries, are also opposed to NATO’s expansion.”

During his March visit, the Belarusian dictator met with then-President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and signed seven memorandums of understanding, including one in trade and transportation, with a target of \$100 million in trade.³ MAJ GEN Lukyanovich’s August visit appears to be an extension of that bilateral cooperation, which includes economic as well as military ties.

With Iran isolated by the United States and the West, the strengthening of relations with other internationally isolated countries like Belarus is a mutually beneficial opportunity for Tehran in the realms of trade and military cooperation to survive economic pressure via sanctions.

Source:

(The readiness of the army air defense to develop cooperation with Belarus),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 7 August 2024. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00I3RX>.

آمادگی نیروی پدافند هوایی ارتش برای توسعه همکاری‌ها با بلاروس

According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Major General Andrei Yulianovich Lukyanovich, commander of the air force and air defense of the Republic of Belarus, met and held discussions with Major General [Abdolrahim] Mousavi at the General Staff Headquarters of the Armed Forces.

In this meeting, the army commander described Iran and Belarus as two countries with common threats and interests, under the unjust sanctions of America and the West, and possessing independence and non-dependence.

General Mousavi, while appreciating Belarus’ chivalrous and independent stance on the issue of the assassination of [Hamass political chief] martyr Ismail Haniyeh, stated: “Belarus holds a strategic and special position and is a strong barrier against NATO expansion. We, along with regional countries, are also opposed to NATO’s expansion.”

Referring to the unilateral sanctions imposed by global arrogance against Iran since the victory of the

Islamic Revolution [referring to the West], the army commander added: “We have tried to make the most of this threat and not make our country’s defense dependent on external powers...”

The army commander emphasized: “The political, military, and defense officials of the two countries are determined to develop and deepen cooperation, and a clear example of this is the visit of the president of Belarus, Mr. [Aleksandr] Lukashenko, to Iran and his meeting with the late dear martyr President [Ebrahim] Raisi, which laid the foundation for relations and joint commissions...”

General Lukanovich said: “We also seek to expand and deepen military relations and exchange and benefit from the valuable experiences of the Islamic Republic of Iran...”

Referring to Iran’s defensive capabilities to defend against enemy threats, General Lukanovich invited the army commander to visit Belarus and observe the country’s capabilities.

Notes:

- 1 “Iran, Belarus Vow To “Strengthen Cooperation” During Lukashenko’s Visit,” *IranWire*, 13 March 2024. <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/114738-iran-belarus-vow-to-strengthen-cooperation-during-lukashenkos-visit/>
- 2 Natasha Bertrand and Kylie Atwood, “Iran transfers ballistic missiles to Russia, sources say,” *CNN*, 7 September 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/06/politics/iran-transfers-ballistic-missiles-russia/index.html>
- 3 Maziar Motamedi, “Iran and Belarus sign cooperation roadmap in Lukashenko visit,” *Al Jazeera*, 13 March 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/13/iran-and-belarus-sign-cooperation-roadmap-in-lukashenko-visit>

Iran Increasing Lithium Battery Production

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

The Iranian government appears to be doubling down on investment and production of lithium batteries. According to a report published by *Young Journalist Club*, on 8-9 July, Iran University of Science and Technology in Tehran hosted a conference to highlight local developments in the lithium battery field. Press reports suggest the conference was attended by academic and commercial representatives, but also military officers and politicians. In fact, both Iranian politicians and military personnel appear increasingly engaged in Iran's lithium and battery industry. In March 2024, Reza Shojaei, the deputy head of the Iranian Defense Ministry's Department of Energy Resources, claimed Iran had the technology to build electric vehicle batteries and said that the Defense Ministry would increase production by 35 percent to preclude the need to import lithium batteries. Defense officials attending the conference told Iranian journalists that they would not only commercialize electric vehicles, but also expand research laboratories and invest in lithium mining.¹

The significance of the report is not so much a continuing emphasis on the development of electric vehicles, an item the Iranian press began reporting upon in November 2021,²



The Yuz, Iran's domestically-manufactured electric vehicle, unveiled in November 2021.
Source: https://media.farsnews.ir/Uploaded/Files/Images/1400/08/11/14000811000831_Test_PhotoN.jpg

but rather to show the supremacy of the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics if not the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on the development of new and cutting-edge technology.³ University professors and research centers subordinate themselves to the Iranian military. This reality has ramifications as many Iranians seeking degrees in the West focus their studies on science and technology and may come under pressure if they return to Iran to work directly or indirectly for sanctioned entities.

“We must make progress to make up for this backwardness.”

Domestic lithium production and an indigenous lithium industry can also have a profound impact on the operational environment. If the IRGC controls its mining, it would like profit disproportionately from its sale

to foreign partners such as China. Advanced military technology also increasingly integrates lithium batteries into drones and both terrestrial and submarine robots. Given Iran's proliferation of new weaponry to its proxies, an increased battery production capability could enable the Houthis and Hezbollah to upgrade their own weaponry and capabilities in the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.

Source:

(Developing the Lithium Field Will Require Dedication),” *Young Journalist Club* (an official center established by the political affairs bureau of the official Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting to train journalists), 9 July 2024. <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/amp/news/8774326>

“توسعه حوزه لیتیوم نیازمند توجه و همکاری‌های چندگانه”

Yesterday [8 July 2024], the Iran University of Science and Technology hosted the first international conference and the second national conference on lithium batteries, representing a big step in the development of the battery industry. Shojaei Fard, Director of the Automotive Research Institute of Tehran University of Science and Technology and Secretary of the conference, highlighted the dependence of the automobile industry on the field and how initially, we were working on batteries but lithium batteries were also a new thing. “We launched the lithium battery research and innovation center, and from there the project to examine the future of lithium batteries and technology and challenges began. Despite the fact that this conference is so specialized, we had over 180 papers submitted, though we rejected a few. We also have a training workshop today that a Chinese instructor will teach, a four more workshops tomorrow. During the program, we will review top articles. We will also announce the result of a review into which is the industry-leading lithium battery... We

will have four parallel meetings over two days so we can review 80 articles.”

Naderi Sharif, the chief of the Energy Resources Development Organization, stated that there are two approaches to the development of battery technology. Some favor and some oppose.

Opponents of the development of lithium battery cell technology cite reasons such as the need for heavy investment, rapid changes in cell technology and diversity in cell products. Proponents of lithium battery development also believe that lithium batteries are a strategic technology and product and that the development of the energy sector depends on this product. Cheap fossil fuel has led to the backwardness of energy supply and production and related technologies.

Naderi Sharif emphasized, “We shouldn’t just watch the world’s progress in this field, we must make progress to make up for this backwardness.”

Notes:

- 1 Iran’s lithium industry has developed significantly over the past two years. In March 2023, Iranian officials announced discovery of 8.5 million tons of lithium deposits inside Iran near the Western city of Hamedan. If true, this would be the second largest lithium find after a 9.2 million ton reserve in the salt flats of Chile. Rumors also swirl in Iran that the Iranian government is both purposely allowing Lake Urmia in the West Azerbaijan province to evaporate in order to extract lithium and that it works with China to do so. The Iranian government has denied both rumors in the Persian press.
- 2 For a Persian language discussion of Iran’s domestic Yuz electric vehicle, see: “نارهت یاه‌ن‌اب‌ای‌خ رد زوی (Yuz on the streets of Tehran)” *Fars News Agency*, 2 November 2021. <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14000811000836>
- 3 The same pattern exists with Iran’s satellite program. For a previous discussion of the involvement of universities in Iran’s satellite program, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: Preparing for Zafar III Satellite Launch,” *OE Watch*, July 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/284140/download>

Report Highlights North Korea's Fixation on Information Control

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

Reports from inside North Korea of increasingly harsh prison sentences and mass executions for viewing foreign language materials underscore that the Regime assesses information control as vital to the continued existence of the North Korean state. According to a 27 June report from South Korea's semi-official news agency *Yonhap News*, South Korea's Ministry of Unification, responsible for managing Seoul's relations with the North, issued its second human rights report highlighting defector accounts of public executions carried out in the country.¹ Defectors testified that many of these executions were in response to convictions for sharing South Korea dramas or music, wearing sunglasses, or for wearing white at a wedding, among other violations.² This is the second such human rights

“The Kim Jong-un regime has in earnest executed those who were caught after watching South Korean dramas, calling them traitors.”

report and is based on interviews with 141 defectors since 2023.³ According to a 27 June press release by the Unification Ministry announcing the report, “North Korean authorities actively enforce laws including the Law on Rejecting Reactionary Thought and Culture (2020), the Youth Education Guarantee Law (2021) and the Law on Protecting the Pyongyang Cultural Language (2023) aimed at suppressing its residents.”

The report underscores that the North Korean government views information control as critical to its survival. North Korean state media routinely characterizes South Korea

as a feral wasteland of dystopian anarcho-capitalism. The upbeat messages and spectacle of K-pop and the fictionalized daily life of wildly popular Korean dramas strike at the very heart of a message North Korea's state propagandists have taken great pains to create. This also explains why North Korea reacts so angrily, and sometimes violently, to the balloons that South Korea-based NGOs release into the North that carry thumb drives and other media. In the author's own interviews and conversations with North Korean defectors, some report that the North Korean authorities respond as if to a chemical spill by cordoning off the area and thoroughly searching the homes of anyone nearby.⁴



◀ North Korean students receive classroom instruction under the watchful eye of a camera and portrait of Kim Jong Un (2018).

Source: <http://ellsworth.ca/dprk/2018-08/608.jpg>

Source: KIM Soo-yeon, “N. Korea ramps up public executions of people distributing S. Korean movies: unification ministry,” *Yonhap* (semiofficial South Korean news agency), 27 June 2024. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240627002651315?section=search>

The ministry made public a report on the North’s human rights situation for the second straight year in 2024, with this year’s documents mainly based on additional testimonies from 141 North Korean defectors in 2023.

For the first time, the report included an example of a public execution for violating the law adopted in 2020 on the rejection of “the reactionary ideology and culture.”

“The Kim Jong-un regime has in earnest executed those who were caught after watching South Korean dramas, calling them traitors,” she told reporters.

The law calls for a sentence of up to 10 years of hard labor for people who bring and spread outside culture and information. Punishment is known to be tougher in the case of those watching and disseminating South Korean dramas, movies and music. The North

views such behaviors as anti-socialist acts that could threaten the very existence of the regime.

A defector who fled North Korea last year said he witnessed the public execution of a 22-year-old in South Hwanghae Province in 2022 for listening to 70 South Korean songs, watching three South Korean movies, and distributing them to seven people.

“Since the law took effect, a person could be sent to a prison camp just because of watching (South Korean movies). The person who initially brought them in will face the most severe punishment — being shot by a firing squad,” the defector was quoted as saying in the report.

Wearing a white wedding dress as a bride, a groom carrying the bride on his back, and wearing sunglasses are also stated as examples of violating the anti-reactionary ideology law, it said.

Source: Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, “Ministry of Unification releases the 2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights,” *Ministry of Unification* (official government site), 27 June 2024. https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/news/releases/

On June 27, 2024, the Ministry of Unification released the 2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights, featuring a case involving a 22-year-old man from South Hwanghae Province who was publicly executed for listening to 70 South Korean songs, watching three movies and distributing them to others.

The report draws on various testimonies from North Korean defectors, underscoring how North Korean authorities actively enforce laws including the Law on Rejecting Reactionary Thought and Culture (2020), the Youth Education Guarantee Law (2021) and the Law on Protecting the Pyongyang Cultural Language (2023) aimed at suppressing its residents.

Furthermore, North Korea has intensified its social education and punishments under these three laws, which were designed to restrict residents’ access to outside information, particularly targeting the youth.

Authorities frequently inspect residents’ mobile phones, checking for contacts and any usage of South Korean language styles or expressions, such as nicknames or abbreviations.

In particular, any non-socialist style is deemed “reactionary ideology,” leading to severe punishments, including brides wearing white dresses, grooms carrying brides at weddings, and the wearing of sunglasses.

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Notes:

- 1 Official South Korean government reports on North Korean human rights were apparently discouraged during the presidency of Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) because they interfered with Moon's focus on improving diplomatic and economic ties with the North. That likely explains why this Unification Ministry report, which has been required by law since 2018, is only the second one to be made public.
- 2 It is possible that the North Korean authorities' standard for punishment is any North Korean who does something they more likely than not learned from a Korean drama specifically or outside information generally. North Korea likely views wearing white at weddings as an imported Western, and therefore counter-revolutionary, concept. Formal white attire has a strong association with death or mourning in China, Japan, and the Koreas, so would be suspect if worn at a wedding. Another associated concept is bride carrying, which is a common tradition in South Korea that is apparently less so in the north.
- 3 See Lee Minji, "S. Korea publishes hard copies of English report on N. Korea's human rights," *Yonhap* (semiofficial South Korean news agency), 7 July 2023. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230707003500325>
- 4 Defector reports must be carefully evaluated because defectors from North Korea are, by their very nature, a self-selecting group. Moreover, they may be motivated to embellish the scale and scope of the atrocities they have witnessed because the defectors may believe it is what South Korean authorities and the media want to hear. In coverage of North Korea-related issues, salaciousness is often as important as fact for foreign media sources.

North Korea Previews Hypothetical Negotiating Strategy

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

North Korea previewed its negotiating strategy in a hypothetical future Trump Administration via a recent high-level commentary in its main state-run party newspaper. The commentary both dismissed Pyongyang's interest in negotiating with the United States and refuted former U.S. President Trump's statement that his personal relationship with Kim Jong Un would make future negotiations easier. North Korea's *Korea Central News Agency* (KCNA) on 23 July addressed statements made by former U.S. President Donald Trump in his speech accepting the nomination for president.¹ After recounting the litany of grievances the North attaches to the United States, the commentary briefly acknowledges the "special personal relations" between former President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un before dismissing it with the phrase "we do not care about [Kim Jong Un's personal relationship or affinity to former President Trump]." The KCNA piece argues that "personal feelings" between leaders and the affairs of state must be separate. The commentary goes on to make veiled threats against the United States and states the U.S. is responsible for correcting the relationship through action.

This commentary offers clues as to how it will approach negotiations

with a potential future Trump Administration. A common North Korean negotiating tactic is to portray itself as indifferent to talks and resigned to potential conflict. Pyongyang wants to be seen as "doing you a favor" by agreeing to talk and subsequently rewarded for its magnanimity. This tactic encourages the other party to negotiate with itself over concessions to get North Korea to the bargaining table and keep it there. This tactic is tried-and-true, and the referenced commentary should be interpreted in light of that pattern.

"The foreign policy of a state and personal feelings must be strictly distinguished."

As the U.S. election approaches, North Korea is likely to issue messages from increasingly authoritative sources within the party's hierarchy, such as Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jung or ultimately Kim Jong Un himself. As a rule, the more authoritative the source, the less ambiguity in the North's course of action and the more likely that the statement represents Pyongyang's preferences or plans. Although it will be somewhat flexible on the scale, before agreeing to even sit down with the United States, Pyongyang, at minimum, is likely to



North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un meets U.S. President Trump in the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarized Zone (2019).

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Trump_Meets_with_Chairman_Kim_Jong_Un_\(48162628746\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Trump_Meets_with_Chairman_Kim_Jong_Un_(48162628746).jpg)

demand unilateral sanctions relief and cessation of military exercises. North Korea's ultimate negotiating position is U.S. acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state toward the ultimate objective of ending Washington's alliance with South Korea.

Source: “조미대결의 초침이 미치는 미국의 행동여하에 달려있다 조선중앙통신사 론평 (Whether Second Hand of DPRK-U.S. Confrontation Stops or Not Depends on U.S. Act: KCNA Commentary),” *Korea Central News Agency* (official North Korean propaganda agency), 23 July 2024. <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/389b4b6d4d92a66d210125543c87c1d6502d45160a9c295724db5424054b5cfc.kcmsf>

Amid the full-dress presidential election race in the U.S., Trump, who has been officially confirmed as a candidate for the Republican Party, said in his speech of acceptance for candidate that “I got along with them and it is nice to get along with someone who has a lot of nuclear weapons and otherwise”, thus buoying a lingering desire for the prospects of the DPRK-U.S. relations. Even if any administration takes office in the U.S., the political climate, which is confused by the infighting of the two parties, does not change and, accordingly, we do not care about this.

It is true that Trump, when he was president, tried to reflect the special personal relations between the heads of states in the relations between states, but he did not bring about any substantial positive change.

Notes:

- 1 An unsigned KCNA commentary is the lowest level of authoritative statement made in DPRK propaganda. It is designed to show an external audience that North Korea is aware of and discussing a particular issue, but either has not yet decided upon a course of action or is not yet ready to reveal it.

He that puts on a public gown must put off a private person. The foreign policy of a state and personal feelings must be strictly distinguished.

For nearly 80 years since the founding of the DPRK, the U.S. has pursued the most vicious and persistent hostile policy toward it.

The DPRK has bolstered up its self-defensive capabilities to safeguard its ideology, social system, dignity and life and is fully ready for all-out confrontation with the U.S.

Due to the serious strategic mistakes of the successive administrations, the era has come when the U.S. should really worry about its security.

The Failure To Deter Houthi Vessel Attacks May Deepen Saudi-China Security Ties

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Arabic-language media analysts and commentators widely agree that the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian—formed in December 2023 to address Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea—has not effectively deterred Yemen’s Houthis from targeting commercial maritime traffic.¹ However, they are divided on whether this failure is due to deliberate strategic choices or poor planning.² Some commentators suggest that the real target of the operation is China, not the Houthis. They argue that the United States may be intentionally allowing Houthi attacks to weaken China economically and justify military presence in a region with increasing Chinese naval activity. The first excerpt, from the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, reflects this view, with several Yemeni political analysts indicating that the United States is colluding with the Houthis for a broader strategic aim.³ This perspective, however, is not universally accepted across the region. Pro-Houthi media outlets, for example, attribute the lack of deterrence to Yemeni strength and U.S. shortcomings. The second excerpt, from the Houthi news website *al-Masirah*, illustrates the Houthi narrative on Prosperity Guardian, whereby Yemeni forces have shattered U.S. military prestige



The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Mason (DDG 87), sails in the Red Sea in support of Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG) 31 January 2024.

Source: <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/8254865/operation-prosperity-guardian>

and effectively deterred U.S. forces in the region. The third excerpt, from the Qatari daily *al-Sharq*, offers a more mainstream explanation, attributing the operation’s deterrent failure to poor planning and misjudgments about the Houthis. According to the author, effectively securing trade routes in the area will require patience and the involvement of more acceptable mediators, such as China.

Prosperity Guardian’s ineffective deterrence—regardless of the reasons—may be leading Saudi Arabia to seek help from China. Saudi Arabian leadership opted against joining Prosperity Guardian due to their interest in pursuing a negotiated settlement with the Houthis.⁴ In mid-June 2024, Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman and top

“Some have gone so far as to assert that there is American collusion with the [Houthis], as Washington does not intentionally target the group’s main command centers in Yemen, nor its main leaders. The reason for the collusion is to harm Chinese trade in the Red Sea...”

Saudi military officials visited Beijing for discussions that reportedly included a request for Chinese assistance to contain Yemeni attacks.⁵ Whatever the ultimate reasons behind Pros-

perity Guardian’s ineffectiveness, one of its consequences—presumably unintended—could be deepening

Saudi-Chinese security coordination in the Red Sea.

Source:

“After 8 months of escalation... Why did the US intervention not deter Houthi attacks?” *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (Saudi daily), 18 July 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/2x5bwsm9>

بعد ٨ أشهر من التصعيد... لماذا لم يردع التدخل الأميركي هجمات الحوثيين؟

Despite the passage of eight months since the start of the Houthi attacks on ships under the pretext of supporting the Palestinians in Gaza, the American intervention under the name of the “Prosperity Guardian” has not succeeded in putting an end to the threat of the Iranian-backed group...

[Yemeni researcher and political analyst Abdul Sattar Al-Shamiri] claims in his interview with Asharq Al-Awsat that the continuation of the navigation crisis in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden does not affect

America and Israel economically, but rather affects China the most in the long term...

This part related to China is consistent with what Tawfiq al-Jund, a Yemeni researcher at the Sana’a Center for Studies, told Asharq Al-Awsat... “The American military presence in the Red Sea needs justification before world powers, and the Houthi threat to maritime navigation is a strong justification for that, and it must remain for a period of time,” Al-Jund continues...

Source: “Futile restoration attempts...they end in the collapse of Zionism,” *al-Masirah* (Houthi news outlet), 5 August 2024. <https://www.almasirahnews.com/136216/>

It was only a few days until the “Prosperity Alliance” found itself in a major predicament, as it was unable to provide protection for the ships of the Zionist entity and ships heading to the ports of the occupied territories. The scope of targeting for our country’s naval forces expanded to include commercial ships of the so-called “Prosperity Guardian” alliance, especially American and British ships, and the bottom of the sea became a stable for a number of them.. Under the pretext of redeployment to carry out other missions in other areas, the (Eisenhower) was withdrawn away from the danger zone, after our

national army expanded the geographical scope of its naval military operations to include the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and later the Mediterranean Sea.

Instead of imposing a supposed deterrent against our people and revolutionary leadership, the picture was reversed, and the forces called the Prosperity Alliance were deterred. As a result, the reputation of the US administration collapsed, its prestige fell, and its deterrent image, which its presence in the Middle East aimed to restore, was shattered.

Source:

“Why did the Prosperity Alliance fail to defeat the Houthis?” *al-Sharq* (Qatari daily), 30 July 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/mpn2wu4k>

لماذا فشل تحالف الازدهار في هزيمة الحوثيين؟

Perhaps the main source of confusion or astonishment in Washington as well is that it does not imagine that defeating the Houthis would be this difficult. As a result, some have gone so far as to assert that there is American collusion with the group, as Washington does not intentionally target the group’s main command centers in Yemen, nor its main leaders. The reason for the collusion is to harm Chinese trade in the Red Sea.

The issue of American collusion with the Houthis or Iran, their main supporter, can basically be ruled out simply when considering the huge amount of spending on the operation, which has reached an estimated \$30 billion dollars so far, without any result, in addition to the development of the group’s threat to Israel, the American red line.

There are many interconnected reasons for the failure of the campaign against the Houthis. The

first and most important is the American-Western miscalculation of the group’s true strength. So in principle, the Prosperity Coalition should have adopted more robust and rigorous plans in its war against the Houthis, and the Pentagon acknowledged this by saying that defeating the Houthis requires a more robust and rigorous strategy... It can be said that defeating an ideological group like the Houthis, operating in a complex mountainous terrain, is next to impossible... Therefore, betting on neutralizing these groups and undermining their threats should be primarily a political bet. It should address the roots of the crisis, not its symptoms. The solution must start from within Yemen itself by intensifying efforts for a comprehensive reconciliation in which the Houthis are recognized as an authentic political and social component. This requires patience and the intervention of more acceptable mediators, led by China.

Notes:

- 1 As of July 2024, Houthi attacks had not ceased. See: William Clough, “Military and Security, *The Yemen Review Quarterly*, April-June 2024,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 15 July 2024. <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/april-june-2024/22886>
- 2 The stated goal of Operation Prosperity Guardian is “ensuring freedom of navigation for all countries and bolstering regional security and prosperity.” See: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/>
- 3 This perspective is most widespread among anti-Houthi factions in Yemen, particularly among members and supporters of the Saudi-based Internationally Recognized Government.
- 4 For more see: Lucas Winter, “Gaza War’s Impact On The Middle East Strategic Landscape,” *FMSO Foreign Perspectives Brief*, June 2024, page 9, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/gaza-wars-impact-on-the-middle-east-strategic-landscape-lucas-winterjune-2024/>
- 5 For more details see: Adam Lucente, “Saudi defense chief in China in bid for help with Houthis, boost military ties,” *Al Monitor*, 25 June 2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/06/saudi-defense-chief-china-bid-help-houthis-boost-military-ties>; The Saudi delegation included Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Fayyad bin Hamid Al-Ruwaili, Saudi Ambassador to China Abdulrahman bin Ahmed Al-Harbi; Commander of the Strategic Missile Force Lt. Gen. Jarallah bin Mohammed Al-Alweet, Director

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General of the Office of the Minister of Defense Hisham bin Abdulaziz bin Saif, head of the Armed Forces Operations Authority Maj. Gen. Misfer Al-Ghanem, and Military Attaché at the Saudi Embassy in Beijing Commodore Salem bin Saleh Al-Maliki. The Chinese delegation included Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Central Military Commission Lt. Gen. Jing Jianfeng, Director of the Office of International Military Cooperation at the Central Military Commission Maj. Gen. Li Bin, and several other senior officials. See: “Chinese and Saudi Defense Ministers Discuss Bilateral Relations,” *Saudi Press Agency*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2128876>

Sahelian States Sever Ties with Ukraine

By Christopher Betts
OE Watch Commentary

Allegations of an “African Front” being opened in Russia’s war on Ukraine have caused multiple nations in the Sahel to sever diplomatic relations with Ukraine as African and Russian leaders accuse Ukraine of supporting terrorist organizations. According to the first excerpted article from French daily *Le Monde*, Niger and Mali ceased diplomatic relations with Ukraine on 7 August 2024. The decision was made in response to separatist and jihadist fighters in Mali killing dozens of Africa Corps (formerly Wagner Group) and Malian military personnel fighting in northeastern Mali. In the wake of the battle, Andriy Yusov, the press representative of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, stated: “The fact that the rebels received the necessary data that allowed them to successfully carry out an operation against Russian war criminals has already been observed by the whole world. Of course, we will not disclose the details.”¹ While this is not a direct admission of Ukrainian involvement in the Sahel, Moscow has unsurprisingly sided with Niger and Mali, condemning Kyiv.

Recent actions by Mali and Niger have sparked discussion that a proxy war could be starting in Africa between Russian-backed militaries and separatist groups accused of

being backed by Ukraine. According to the second excerpted article from the Africa-based think tank, *Institute for Security Studies* (ISS), there are likely far more significant geopolitical implications for Africa than regional conflicts between warring tribes and jihadist groups. Russia’s information campaigns in numerous nations have been widely reported on. However, recently, Ukraine’s special envoy for Africa and the Middle East, Maksym Subkh, announced new embassies throughout Africa to help combat the influence of Russia’s Africa Corps. Ukrainian intervention against Russia, indirectly through support or through kinetic operations, would not be unheard of. ISS also reported that Ukrainian special forces were deployed to operate in Sudan to support the Sudanese Armed Forces fighting against Africa Corps mercenaries and allied Rapid Support Forces.



Mali, Niger, and several other nations in the Sahel have faced complex security issues stemming from armed rebellion to radical jihadism and foreign influence for several

“The government of the Republic of Niger, in total solidarity with the government and people of Mali, has decided in all sovereignty to sever diplomatic relations between the Republic of Niger and Ukraine with immediate effect.”

years. The possible expansion of the Russia-Ukraine war to other portions of the globe, such as Africa, has received mixed reactions. The Economic Community of West African States, a political and economic union of fifteen African nations, including Burkina Faso, Benin, Mali, and Niger, condemned any foreign influence and the expansion of geopolitical events to Africa.² Others may view any attempt to combat Russian expansion and aggression as a net positive. However, if Ukraine does become openly involved in attempting to subvert Russian expansion in Africa, it will undoubtedly cause a shift in the momentum of ongoing armed conflicts in the region. Though, with multiple armed groups active in Sahelian states with varying motivations and allegiances, it would be difficult to limit the extent of foreign aid and influence to exclude all jihadist groups.

◀ Flag of the Special Operations Forces of Ukraine.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Special_Operations_Forces_of_Ukraine.svg

Source: “Le Niger rompt « avec effet immédiat » ses relations diplomatiques avec l’Ukraine, deux jours après le Mali (Niger breaks off diplomatic relations with Ukraine “with immediate effect”, two days after Mali),” *Le Monde*, 7 August 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/08/07/le-niger-rompt-avec-effet-immediat-ses-relations-diplomatiques-avec-l-ukraine-deux-jours-apres-le-mali_6270883_3212.html

Niger announced on Tuesday, August 6, that it was breaking off diplomatic relations with Ukraine “with immediate effect,” two days after Mali accused Kyiv of “supporting” “terrorist groups” after a heavy defeat of the Malian army at the end of July during fighting with separatists and jihadists.

“The government of the Republic of Niger, in total solidarity with the government and people of Mali, has decided in all sovereignty (...) to sever diplomatic relations between the Republic of Niger and Ukraine with immediate effect,” declared the spokesman for the Niger government, Colonel-Major Amadou Abdramane, in a statement read on public television.

At the end of July, separatists and jihadists claimed to have killed dozens of members of the Russian paramilitary group Wagner and Malian soldiers during fighting in Tin Zaouatine (north-east Mali). This defeat is the heaviest suffered in a battle by the Wagner Group in Africa, analysts agree.

A Ukrainian military intelligence official, Andri Yusov, had implied that Kiev had provided information to the rebels so they could carry out their attack. “The

government of the Republic of Niger learned with great shock and deep indignation about the subversive and unacceptable remarks of Mr. Andri Yusov, spokesman for the Ukrainian military intelligence agency,” Abdramane said on Tuesday...

“The fact that the rebels received the necessary data that allowed them to successfully carry out an operation against Russian war criminals has already been observed by the whole world. Of course, we will not disclose the details. More information to come here too,” Yusov told Ukrainian television. The video of his statement was relayed by the Ukrainian ambassador to Senegal.

Following these statements, Mali announced the severance of its relations with Ukraine, which on Monday rejected the accusations and regretted the decision, which it considered “hasty” . The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry affirmed that Kyiv “unconditionally adheres to the norms of international law” and “reserves the right to take all necessary political and diplomatic measures in response to unfriendly actions.”

Source: Peter Fabricius, “La guerre de la Russie contre l’Ukraine s’étend-elle à l’Afrique? (Is Russia’s War on Ukraine Spreading to Africa?),” *Institute for Security Studies* (pan-African think tank), 9 August 2024. <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/la-guerre-de-la-russie-contre-l-ukraine-s-etend-elle-a-l-afrique>.

Russia appears to be stepping up its multi-pronged offensive to increase its influence in Africa, while Ukraine is fighting back, threatening to turn the continent into a major proxy battlefield.

Russia appears to be stepping up its multi-pronged

offensive to increase its influence in Africa, while Ukraine is fighting back, threatening to turn the continent into a major proxy battlefield. Military skirmishes erupted last week in Africa, when Moscow’s Wagner force (now Africa Corps) suffered heavy losses in a battle against Tuareg separatists

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and jihadists in Tinzawatene, Mali. The setback marks a major blow to the Kremlin, which appeared to be expanding its presence or at least countering Western efforts to regain ground.

After last week's intense battle in Tinzawatene, in which Tuareg separatists claim to have killed 84 Wagner fighters and 47 Malian soldiers, officer Andriy Yusov, a spokesman for Ukraine's intelligence agency, said Malian rebels had received the "necessary" information to carry out the attack, hinting at possible Ukrainian involvement. In response, Mali's military junta severed diplomatic relations with Ukraine, accusing it of supporting "international terrorism." Ukraine denied the accusation, saying Mali acted hastily, without investigating the incident or providing evidence of its involvement. The military junta of Mali's neighbor Niger has also severed diplomatic ties with Kiev. Russia has accused Ukraine of opening a new front in Africa, an accusation tinged with irony.

The consequences of the war between Russia and Ukraine could be serious for Africa. The Economic Community of West African States condemned

"foreign interference in the region [...] and any attempt to drag the region into the current geopolitical confrontations." The African Union did not respond. This development may not be entirely new in Africa. For Ramani, if Ukraine did indeed contribute to Wagner's defeat in Mali, it is part of his two-pronged strategy in Africa. On the one hand, diplomatic openness with the establishment of new embassies and, on the other, "discreet special operations like those observed against the RSF in Sudan."

The "RSF" refers to the Rapid Support Forces, which are engaged in a violent conflict with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). It is well known that Russia, including Wagner, supports the RSF. In February, the Kyiv Post reported that Ukrainian special forces were operating in Sudan, supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces against Wagner's forces, allied with the RSF. For Ramani, Wagner's defeat in Mali will lead to introspection. Wagner's forces will likely be more controlled by the state, "like the process going on in Libya."

Notes:

- 1 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine responded to Niger's decision in a press release, denying support for terrorist organizations. Located here: "Statement by the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry regarding the decision of the authorities of the Republic of Niger to sever diplomatic relations with Ukraine," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 8 August 2024. <https://mfa.gov.ua/fr/news/zayava-mzs-ukrayini-shchodo-rishennya-vladi-respubliki-niger-rozirvati-diplomatichni-vidnosini-z-ukrayinoyu>
- 2 ECOWAS has a long-standing history in Africa, founded in 1975, and contributes to many social and economic projects including election monitoring, clean water initiatives, human development, regional security, and more. For more information on ECOWAS visit: "About ECOWAS," ECOWAS, Updated 2024. <https://www.ecowas.int/about-ecowas/>

Russia's Africa Corps Personnel Redeploy From the Sahel to Kursk

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 28 July, Tuareg rebels in the Coordination of Azawad Movements, a mostly secular Tuareg ethnonationalist militant and political coalition, together with the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), massacred dozens of Africa Corps fighters (formerly the Wagner Group) and Malian soldiers in northern Mali near the Algerian border.¹ This was the most severe loss of life in a battle for Africa Corps since the mercenary contingent increased its presence on the continent in 2020. It would be politically untenable for



Russian Wagner fighters have been active along the border of Belarus since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2021, but now they are operating along the border with Ukraine, including some who reportedly returned to Russia from Africa.

Source: Информационное агентство БелТА, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PMC_wagner_in_belarus_3.png

Russia to reveal weakness and pressure Africa Corps to fully cut and run from its mission in Mali. However, this disaster in northern Mali and the simultaneous difficulties Russia is facing in responding to the Ukrainian offensive in Kursk on Russian territory could lead to the redeployment of Africa Corps fighters from Mali and the Sahel region to Kursk. This, in turn, could result in a reduction of Russian counter-insurgency support to Mali and Sahelian states, which are already being engulfed by JNIM and its rival Islamic State in Greater Sahara.

This possibility is furthered in the pro-Russian government Russian-language website *gazeta.ru*, which reported that the Ukrainian offensive into Russia's Kursk oblast is requiring Russia to call for assistance from Africa Corps. The article notes that Wagner Group, forces are returning from missions abroad to Ukraine and highlights how many Africa Corps fighters died in the ambush by Tuareg rebels and JNIM in Mali on 28 July. It further implies, based on a message from a prominent Russian Telegram user, that Africa Corps fighters who participated in conflicts in Africa would be among those transferred to Kursk.

While details about this transfer are scant in the *gazeta.ru* article, such reports have also emerged from Russian-language websites critical of

“He emphasized that the Wagner fighters are returning to Russia, which means that they are being transferred from foreign missions.”

the Russian government. The second excerpted article in the *Moscow Times* also claims that Africa Corps fighters are being transferred from Africa to Kursk. The article emphasized that Africa Corps forces were previously sent to “distant” African countries, including Mali, where the junta leader extended the group's contract. However, after the Russian Army's encirclement in Kursk, those same forces are needed on the Russian home front. It remains unclear how this massacre and the fighting in Kursk will ultimately affect Africa Corps, but it is likely Africa Corps' presence—and certainly its confidence—is less sustainable now than at any time in the recent past.

Source: “Бойцы «ЧВК Вагнер» прибыли в Курскую область. Что происходит в регионе на четвертые сутки боев? (Wagner ‘PMC fighters’ arrived in Kursk Oblast. What is happening in the region on the fourth day of fighting?),” *www.gazeta.ru* (Russian-language website that tends to be pro-Russian government but with a focus on social issues often more than politics) 9 August 2024. <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2024/08/09/19545865.shtml>

Wagner PMC fighters and Akhmat special forces arrived in Kursk Oblast to join the battles against the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The situation in the region is tense: a State of Emergency was declared, and border area residents were evacuated. President Putin ordered that help be provided to the population.

Wagner PMC fighters arrived in Kursk Oblast and entered into battles against the Ukrainian Armed Forces near Sudzha, the SHOT Telegram channel reported. The total number of fighters sent to the combat zone was not specified. According to the channel, brigades of the Ministry of Defense’s

volunteer corps are also joining in the fighting.

Military correspondent Yegor Guzenko, who publishes under the pseudonym Thirteenth, also reported that fighters from Wagner PMC were sent to the Kursk region. He emphasized that the fighters are returning to Russia, which means that they are being transferred from foreign missions. Recently, Wagner PMC fighters participated in African conflicts, and especially fought against the Tuaregs in Mali. As a result of these battles, the PMC endured losses, which numbered several dozen people.

Source: В Курскую область начали перебрасывать бойцов «Вагнера» из Африки (Wagner fighters from Africa began being transferred to Kursk region), *Moscow Times* (independent Russian bi-lingual on-line newspaper previously located in Russia, but since relocated to Amsterdam to avoid government censorship), 8 August 2024. <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2024/08/08/vkurskuyu-oblast-nachali-perebrasivat-boitsov-vagnera-izafriki-a138964>

Russia is transferring Wagner PMC fighters from Africa to the Kursk region amid a successful offensive by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the region, Z-blogger and the Telegram channel “Novorossiya Militia Reports” claim.

At the end of July in Mali, a contingent of government

troops and Russian Wagner fighters near the border with Algeria were ambushed by Tuareg rebels. During the battle, Wagner and government troops were destroyed, and the losses of the Russian PMCs alone, according to various sources, may have reached 80 people.

Notes:

- 1 Both al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM and the Tuareg rebel group Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) claimed the massacre of Wagner and Malian army fighters. However, both groups denied any cooperation with each other due to their conflicting Islamist and secular ethno-nationalist ideologies, respectively, if not also the CMA’s desire to receive international support for its cause, which would be jeopardized by any association with an al-Qaeda affiliate. See “Au Mali, le lourd revers des mercenaires russes de Wagner (In Mali, a large setback for Wagner’s Russian mercenaries),” *Le Figaro*, 29 July 2024. [lefigaro.fr/international/au-mali-le-lourd-revers-des-mercenaires-russes-de-wagner-20240729](https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/au-mali-le-lourd-revers-des-mercenaires-russes-de-wagner-20240729)

Armenia Continuing Its Move Away From Russian Reliance

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Armenia continues taking steps away from Russia by working with other partners. The majority of Armenia's weapons inventory is made up of Russian systems, leaving the Armenian government largely reliant on Russia. However, the accompanying excerpted articles report that Armenia reached a military-technical cooperation agreement with France in June 2024. The first excerpted article from the independent Russian-language news website *Eurasia Daily* reports that Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan signed a military-technical cooperation agreement with the French company KNDS during his visit to France in June. The article notes that Papikyan also met with his

French counterpart during his visit, but the details of their meeting were not disclosed. It is also mentioned that Armenia purchased French armored personnel carriers and radar systems in the past year, with negotiations still underway for Armenia to acquire the **Mistral 3** short-range air defense system.

The second excerpted article from the independent news website *Kavkazskiy Uzel* reports that the meeting between the defense ministers of Armenia and France resulted in an agreement for Armenia to purchase an unknown number of French CAESAR 155mm self-propelled artillery systems. The article also includes a statement from Secretary of the Armenian Security Council Armen

Grigoryan that Armenia has significantly reduced its military-technical cooperation with Russia since 2020.¹ Overall, Armenia's recent acquisition of the French CAESAR 155mm artillery provides another system of non-Russian origin for the country's inventory in the short-term, while the military-technical agreement with France could provide additional systems over the next several years. Both will help Armenia rely less on Russia going forward.²

“Yerevan and Paris signed a contract for the supply of Caesar self-propelled artillery units, French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said.”



French Caesar self-propelled howitzer fires into the Middle Euphrates River Valley, 2 December 2018.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_Caesar_self-propelled_howitzzer_in_Iraq.jpg

Source: “Армения и Франция достигли новых договорённостей в сфере BTC (Armenia and France reached a new agreement on military-technical cooperation),” *Eurasia Daily* (an independent Russian-language news website), 18 June 2024. <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2024/06/18/armeniya-i-franciya-dostigli-novyh-dogovoryonostey-v-sfere-vts>

As part of a working visit of Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan to France, an agreement on military-technical cooperation (MTC) was signed between the Ministry of Defense of the Armenia and the military-industrial company KNDS on 17 June...

Before that, Suren Papikyan met with his French counterpart Sebastien Lecornu...The parties noted the importance of military-technical cooperation, around which new agreements were reached, the Armenian Defense Ministry reported, without

disclosing their content...

*In October 2023, in Paris, the Ministers of Defense of Armenia and France signed agreements on the supply of weapons to Armenia. France has already supplied Armenia with 24 **Bastion** armored personnel carriers, with another 26 combat vehicles in the production stage. Yerevan has also placed an order for three GM200 radars, and negotiations are underway on the supply of Mistral 3 portable anti-aircraft missile systems...*

Source: “Армения договорилась с Францией о поставке самоходок Caesar (Armenia reached an agreement with France on the delivery of the self-propelled Caesar),” *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (independent news website reporting on the Caucasus), 18 June 2024. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/401043>

*Yerevan and Paris signed a contract for the supply of **Caesar** self-propelled artillery units, French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said. The document was signed during the visit of Armenian Defense Minister Suren Papikyan to France...*

The Caesar self-propelled artillery unit is equipped

with a 155-mm cannon and is capable of hitting targets at a distance of 40 kilometers...

In March, Secretary of the Armenian Security Council Armen Grigoryan noted that since 2020, Russia’s share in military-technical cooperation has decreased from 96% to less than 10%...

Notes

- 1 In the years since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in November 2020, the government of Armenia stated that it will reduce the number of weapon systems it acquires from Russia, because it does not believe Russia has been a reliable partner.
- 2 Armenia has acquired a few weapon systems from India in the years since, but these were not part of a long-term agreement with India. The systems from India included counter battery radar, multiple rocket launchers, and towed 155mm artillery. For more information on Armenia’s acquisitions of new weapon systems from India, see: Matthew Stein, “Armenia Takes Another Step Away From Russia,” *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/armenia-takes-another-step-away-from-russia/>

Nigerian Security Services Crackdown on Russian Flag Protesters

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Russian influence in Francophone West African countries that have experienced military coups in the last few years is a clear trendline. One of the most notable examples of this influence has been the expansion of the Wagner Group—or Africa Corps as the company is now known—in the region. However, the excerpted *punch.ng* report about Russian

“The nationwide protests against hardship and hunger took a dangerous dimension, with protesters in some Northern states waving the Russian flag....”

flags being seen at anti-government protests in northern Nigeria is a new and unexpected development, and a possible indication that Russian information operations are contributing to a positive image of Russia in parts of Nigeria. This is despite Russia’s dubious counter-insurgency record in the Sahel and its support for anti-democratic military juntas in West Africa.¹

According to the article, certain northern elite politicians provided Russian flags to #EndBadGovernance protesters, who are disappointed with the government’s inability to address hunger and hardship in the country. The article further suggests that these elites seek to remove the current Nigerian president, Bola Tinubu, from

power. The Russian flags served as a threat to Tinubu’s administration that what happened to leaders deposed in coups in Francophone West Africa could occur in Nigeria as well. According to the article, the response of the Nigerian military to these Russian flags could lead to an excessive reaction towards the flag holders and their alleged sponsors. The military has a history of cracking down on dissent with excessive violence.² The article quotes top military officials as stating the protesters holding the Russian flags are treasonous could indicate harsh action will be taken against them, including at least 10 protesters and flag makers who have already been arrested.

Protests against the corruption of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in Lagos in the past resemble the current protests across Nigeria over hardship and hunger, but the sight of Russian flags as an anti-government symbol in the north is a radically new development.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Protest_against_the_Special_Anti-Robbery_Squad_\(SARS\)_in_Lagos,_Nigeria.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Protest_against_the_Special_Anti-Robbery_Squad_(SARS)_in_Lagos,_Nigeria.jpg)



Source: “Russian flag: FG probes four northern political bigwigs,” *punch.ng* (Lagos-based publication with a southern Nigerian perspective often critical of the government and northern Nigerian powerbrokers) 7 August 2024. <https://punchng.com/russian-flag-fg-probes-four-northern-political-bigwigs/>

The nationwide protests against hardship and hunger took a dangerous dimension, with protesters in some Northern states waving the Russian flag as they chanted “Tinubu must go.” Russia, an Eastern power currently mired in a cold war with the West, has been blamed for several unconstitutional changes of government in West African countries such as Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, and among others. The Nigerian military said persons flying the Russian

flag were committing treason and will, therefore, be “prosecuted.”

This act not only disrespects our national symbols but also commits treasonable felony and related offences. Hence, 10 suspects were arrested flying Russian flags,” Public Relations Officer ASP Buhari Abdullahi stated while parading the suspects.

Notes:

- 1 See, for example, Human Rights Watch, “Mali: Army, Wagner Group Atrocities Against Civilians,” 28 March 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians>
- 2 Just five years ago, in 2019, for example, the Nigerian military cracked down on the Shia Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) and killed several dozen of its members who had been protesting in the streets and nearly killed their leader, Ibrahim al-Zakaky. He was forced to recover from his injuries while under long-term house arrest. See Faiza Mawani, “Persecution of the Shia Islamic Movement of Nigeria,” October 19, 2020, UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog. <https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/2020/10/19/persecution-of-the-shia-islamic-movement-of-nigeria/>

Electoral Fraud in Venezuela Assists Axis of Authoritarians

By Ryan C. Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Venezuela's recent presidential election has been the subject of significant criticism from election observers and the international community.¹ In addition to the electoral irregularities and uneven playing field before election day, the Maduro regime delayed the announcement of election results due to an alleged cyber-attack from North Macedonia. When the regime's National Electoral Council, an institution it firmly controls, eventually announced the results, voters immediately knew the numbers were fabricated.² The

first excerpted article from *Excelsior*, Mexico's second-oldest daily newspaper, reports that much of Latin America sees the situation similarly, and many countries have decided to withhold their recognition of the election results until the National Electoral Council shows the vote tallies proving Maduro's win. Thus far, the outlet reports, the regime has provided incredible excuses for why it cannot provide them—first, the purported cyber-attack, followed by the claim of a hack by Elon Musk.³ In response, the outlet says Maduro decided to break diplomatic relations with seven Latin American countries that criticized

Venezuela's electoral process and lack of transparency.

Contrary to much of Latin America's criticism, Venezuela's authoritarian allies were quick to recognize Maduro's victory. The second excerpted article from Argentine media outlet *Infobae*, recounts how China, Russia, and Iran immediately recognized Maduro's "victory" given the importance of their alliance. Russia, the outlet states, went beyond recognition and pledged further military support for Caracas. Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Honduras have also recognized Maduro's claim of victory.

"The governments of China, Russia, and Iran, close to the regime of Nicolás Maduro and with major economic and military interests in Venezuela, congratulated the Venezuelan dictator for the electoral victory that he has claimed for himself amid accusations of fraud."



◀ Venezuela's National Electoral Council, which announced fabricated numbers on election night.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Consejo_Nacional_Electoral_Cne_Fachada_Posterior.JPG

Maduro's inability to produce vote tabulations proving his victory will further isolate him from the West and send him deeper into the arms of his fellow authoritarians. This is nota-

ble given the months preceding the election featured regional diplomatic engagement to keep the elections on track. Conversely, China, Russia, and Iran have an interest in keeping

Maduro in power because his regime thumbs its nose at the United States and continues to provide them with a strong foothold in Latin America.

Source: "Venezuela rompe relaciones diplomáticas con 7 países latinoamericanos (Venezuela breaks diplomatic relations with 7 Latin American countries)," *Excelsior* (Mexico's second-oldest daily newspaper), 29 July 2024. <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/global/venezuela-maduro-rompe-relaciones-diplomaticas-siete-paises-latinoamericanos/1665230>

Venezuela decided...to withdraw all its diplomatic personnel from its missions in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay, hours after these countries demanded 'a complete review of the results' of the elections with the presence of independent observers...The result sparked a wave of protests in Venezuelan territory and condemnation, as well as calls for

transparency from the international community. In response to the request of Latin American countries, the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry said it decided to 'withdraw all diplomatic personnel from the missions in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay, while demanding that those governments immediately withdraw their representatives from Venezuelan territory.'

Source: "China, Rusia e Irán felicitaron a Nicolás Maduro tras el fraude electoral en Venezuela (China, Russia and Iran congratulate Nicolas Maduro after electoral fraud in Venezuela)," *Infobae* (an Argentine outlet with excellent regional coverage), 29 July 2024. <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/07/29/china-rusia-e-iran-felicitaron-a-nicolas-maduro-tras-el-fraude-electoral-en-venezuela/>

The governments of China, Russia, and Iran, close to the regime of Nicolás Maduro and with major economic and military interests in Venezuela, congratulated the Venezuelan dictator for the electoral victory that he has claimed for himself amid accusations of fraud...Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said at his daily press

conference that Moscow intends to continue deepening cooperation with Caracas in all areas, including 'sensitive' ones, such as military-technical cooperation. In Latin America, the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Bolivia, which are all sympathetic to the Chavista regime, also spoke in favor of Maduro.

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the fraud and how it was committed, see: Ryan C. Berg and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, "Can Maduro Pull Off the Mother of All Electoral Frauds," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 1 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-maduro-pull-mother-all-electoral-frauds>
- 2 Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, opposition leader Maria Corina Machado details how the opposition mobilized a volunteer network to collect electronic voting tabulations from voting machines, giving them proof of Maduro's fraud. See: "I Can Prove Maduro Got Trounced," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 August 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/i-can-prove-maduro-got-trounced-venezuela-election-stolen-772d66a0>
- 3 After a highly public back-and-forth with Elon Musk on X (formerly Twitter), Maduro blocked access to X in Venezuela for an initial period of 10 days. See: Vivian Sequera and Mayela Armas, "Venezuela's Maduro blocks X access in country for 10 days," *Reuters*, 9 August 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuelas-maduro-signs-decree-blocking-x-access-10-days-2024-08-08/>