

# OEWATCH

*FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT*



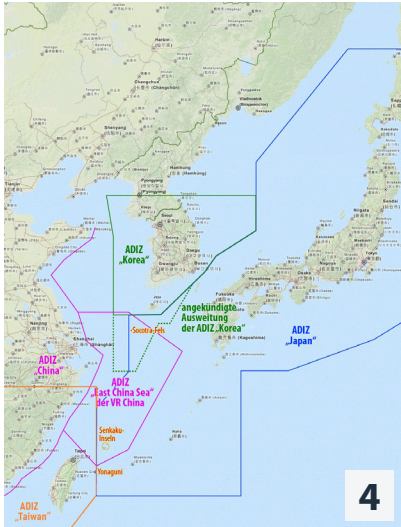
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### ON THE COVER:

Early variant of the 152mm self-propelled gun 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV on parade in Moscow, 2015. The Koalitsiya-SV is set to be fielded in 2024.

Source: Vitaly Kuzman, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2S35\\_Koalitsiya-SV\\_-\\_/media/File:9may2015Moscow-35\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2S35_Koalitsiya-SV_-_/media/File:9may2015Moscow-35_(cropped).jpg); Attribution: CCA BY-SA 4.0

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## China Increases Presence in East China Sea To Change Status Quo

By Cindy Hurst  
OE Watch Commentary

China is reportedly deploying multiple warships near the borders of its East China Sea (ECS) air defense identification zone (ADIZ) for at least the next year.<sup>1</sup> The action by the PLA Navy raises concern for nearby Japan. According to the first article excerpt published in one of Japan's leading newspapers, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japanese sources have observed a **Jiang-kai II-class** guided missile frigate and a highly capable air defense missile destroyer in the ECS.<sup>2</sup> Japan is concerned by China's operational posture within its unilaterally established ECS ADIZ. As the article explains, instead of allowing freedom of navigation in international airspace recognized in international law, China is operating

as if its ECS zone falls under their jurisdiction, often warning foreign aircraft within the ADIZ that it will take “defensive emergency measures” if they do not leave immediately.

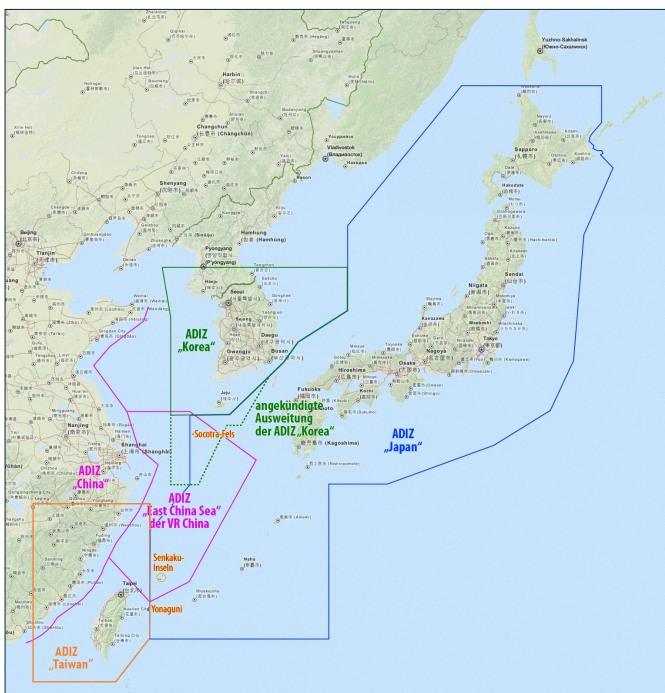
Concern surrounding the ECS ADIZ is not new. This zone differs from others as it intentionally overlaps portions of ADIZs maintained by Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.<sup>3</sup> The overlapping zones could create potential flashpoints, especially in areas in which disputed territories are involved. For example, both ADIZs maintained by China and Japan overlap the highly disputed, Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands, located adjacent to Taiwan. According to the second article excerpt, published through Tokyo-based nonprofit news

**“We can only move forward, not backward. We will never let even 1 millimeter of our territory taken.”**

**-Xi Jinping**

agency *Kyodo News*, China's Coast Guard drafted a plan to maintain its presence around the Senkakus, (also known as Diaoyu in China) throughout 2024. This decision came after Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out the need for China to “constantly strengthen” its efforts to safeguard the sovereignty of the islands.

The last excerpted article, also published in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, points out that China is strengthening its anti-access/area denial strategy while also exerting military pressure on Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> The article describes China having four ships deployed around the clock, working closely with fighters, and increasing military activities. It adds that China will likely aim to block U.S. and Japan Self Defense Forces aircraft from entering the airspace in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. Meanwhile, an expert cited in the article points out that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan could include a concurrent “Senkaku contingency” because China claims the Senkakus are part of Taiwan.



East China Sea. The pink line represents both the regular Chinese ADIZ and the ECS ADIZ.

Source: Maximilian Dörrbecker (Chumwa), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air\\_Defense\\_Identification\\_Zone\\_\(East\\_China\\_Sea\)#/media/File:JADIZ\\_and\\_CADIZ\\_and\\_KADIZ\\_in\\_East\\_China\\_Sea.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Defense_Identification_Zone_(East_China_Sea)#/media/File:JADIZ_and_CADIZ_and_KADIZ_in_East_China_Sea.jpg);  
Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0



**Sources:** “China Deploys Multiple Warships Around Self-Claimed ADIZ,” *Yomiuri Shimbun* (one of Japan’s five major newspapers), 28 January 2024. <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20240128-165250/>

*China is deploying multiple warships around the clock in waters near the borders of the air defense identification zone that it has unilaterally established, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned.*

*China is operating the zone on the premise that it is Chinese airspace. Aircraft that fly within its ADIZ are told to immediately leave.*

*Contrary to international custom, China unilaterally demands that aircraft flying in the zone follow Chinese authorities’ instructions. It also claims it will take “defensive emergency measures” if an aircraft fails to do so.*

*China started deploying at least three navy warships around the clock in waters around its claimed ADIZ, according to Japanese government sources. The three include an air defense missile destroyer, which is the Chinese version of an Aegis-equipped destroyer, and*

*a frigate warship. Equipped with high-performance radar, air defense missile destroyers are highly capable of shooting down aircraft. The Chinese military aircraft repeatedly scramble in response to SDF aircraft, according to the sources. The Chinese military is believed to be strengthening its monitoring of SDF and U.S. military aircraft and warships in the East China Sea.*

*China’s monitoring capabilities were initially believed to be low, and it was thought that its establishment of the ADIZ would have no substantial impact. However, some observers are warning that China will have its warships, which are deployed around the clock, and fighters work together and increase its military activities. “It’s intended to block the SDF and U.S. military aircraft [from entering the airspace] in the event of contingencies in the Taiwan Strait,” said an SDF source.*

**Source:** “China Plans To Keep Ships Near Senkakus 365 Days in 2024,” *Kyodo News* (Tokyo-based non-profit news agency), 30 December 2024. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/12/eb55266c4a9f-china-plans-to-keep-ships-near-senkakus-365-days-in-2024.html?phrase=Senkaku&words=Senkakus,Senkaku>

*China plans to keep its ships near the Japan-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea for 365 days in 2024 as leader Xi Jinping has called for bolstering Beijing’s sovereignty claim over the islets, sources familiar with the matter said Saturday.*

*During a rare visit by Xi on Nov. 29 to the command office for the East China Sea area of the China Coast Guard in Shanghai, the president pointed out the need for Beijing to “constantly strengthen” its efforts to safeguard the sovereignty of the islands, which China calls Diaoyu, the sources said.*

*Xi, who also heads the Central Military Commission, the highest national defense organization, commented on a bilateral row over the Senkaku Islands, saying, “We can only move forward, not backward. We will never let even 1 millimeter of our territory taken,” the sources added.*

*The coast guard has subsequently drafted a plan to keep the presence of its ships near the islets every day next year and conduct inspections of Japanese fishing boats in the sea area, if necessary, to boost Beijing’s sovereignty claim, they said.*

*continue on 6*

**Source:** “4 Chinese Warships Deployed Around Taiwan, Sources Say; Believe Ships Will Collaborate with Other Warships in East China Sea,” *Yomiuri Shimbun* (one of Japan’s five major newspapers), 30 January 2024. <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/defense-security/20240130-165702/>

*China is believed to be using the ships to exert military pressure on Taiwan. If China and Taiwan enter an armed conflict with each other, an envisaged situation known as a Taiwan contingency, China likely will aim to block U.S. and other forces by using the ships in conjunction with other warships nearby. These warships are continually being deployed near the border of China’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ), which China has unilaterally declared over an area of the East China Sea.*

*China is strengthening its anti-access/ area denial (A2/AD) strategy, which restricts the military activities*

*of other countries in its vicinity. The strategy aims to prevent U.S. forces from entering the first island chain that connects the Nansei Islands and the Philippines. The Chinese warships deployed near the ADIZ and around Taiwan are said to be almost in line with the island chain.*

*“There’s a good chance that China will use force to make a move on the Senkakus in the future if Japan lets its guard down,” former Self-Defense Fleet Commander in Chief Yoji Koda said. “Japan needs to be fully prepared.”*

Notes:

- 1 A buffer zone set up by a country outside its sovereign airspace is intended to help prevent incursions. China’s zones can be broken down into the “China ADIZ” and the “ECS ADIZ,” the latter of which is contested. For more information on China’s ECS Air Defense Identification Zone, see: “East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zones: A Primer,” *Center for International Maritime Security*, 10 November 2022. <https://cimsec.org/east-china-sea-air-defense-identification-zones-a-primer/>
- 2 While the article does not identify the exact destroyer type, it refers to it as “The Chinese version of an Aegis-equipped destroyer,” which is likely the Type 052D. The Type 052D is equipped with an advanced active electronically scanned array radar system and a 64-cell missile vertical launch system capable of firing surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles. Liu Xuanzun, “China Launches Two New Type 052D Destroyers: Media,” *Global Times*, 12 March 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1287149.shtml>
- 3 Japan established its ADIZ in 1969, while the United States established Taiwan’s after WWII and South Korea’s during the Korean War. Ibid.
- 4 For additional information on China’s position regarding Taiwan, see: Dodge Billingsley, “Chinese Officials Justify Reaction to Western Presence In Taiwan Strait,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/chinese-officials-justify-reaction-to-western-presence-in-taiwan-strait-2/>



## China Claims Philippine Navy Seeks External Intervention in South China Sea



A Chinese Coast Guard ship allegedly obstructs the Philippine Coast Guard vessel **Malabrigo** as it provides support during a Philippine Navy operation near Second Thomas Shoal in the disputed South China Sea, 30 June 2023.

Source: Philippine Coast Guard, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:June\\_30,\\_2023\\_PCG\\_CCG\\_encounter\\_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:June_30,_2023_PCG_CCG_encounter_1.jpg);  
Attribution: CCx2.0

By Jacob Zenn  
OE Watch Commentary

On 5 January, an anonymous Chinese analyst published the accompanying excerpted Chinese-language article analyzing the ongoing clashes in the South China Sea between China and the Philippines. The article contends that Philippine warships were illegally resting on the Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>1</sup> The author claims the Philippines was attempting to send repair materials to those ships, escalating tensions with China. Further, the tensions provided excuses for external forces (specifically the United States and Japan) to intervene on the Philippine side. The author also suggests that the Philippine strategy was to benefit from foreign assistance

**“China has firmly gained actual control of Second Thomas Shoal and its adjacent waters, ...China and the Philippines are in a stalemate.”**

to establish full control of the Second Thomas Shoal.

The author’s outlook mimics the Chinese government’s official position. To that end, the author asserts that China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea, to include the Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>2</sup> While the author acknowledges that China and the Philippines are in a stalemate over control of the shoal,

the author claims the Philippines will also try to provoke China into an action that would undermine its legitimate claims to the shoal. The author claims the Philippine strategy began with the new Marcos administration, which took office in June 2022.<sup>3</sup> China contends the Philippine government should have removed the broken ships from the shoal instead of trying to repair them. In conclusion, the author insists that dialogue is the best way to manage differences in the South China Sea. However, as the author sees it, there appears to be little prospect for a resolution through dialogue due to the Marcos administration’s provocations.

**Source:** “非法“坐滩”军舰即将解体，菲律宾又想了个馊主意 (The illegal “Grounded” warships will soon be ruined, and the Philippines has another bad idea),” *sohu.com* (Beijing-based internet company providing information on diverse aspects of contemporary Chinese affairs), 5 January 2024. [https://www.sohu.com/a/748698907\\_137871](https://www.sohu.com/a/748698907_137871).

*In the past year, the Philippines has frequently provoked troubles in the South China Sea, and China has decisively counterattacked. In the end, the Philippines failed to obtain any benefits. However, the Philippines will obviously not surrender because its warships illegally on the Second Thomas Shoal beachside are about to be ruined. This is among the main reasons why the Philippines desperately breaks into the Second Thomas Shoal to transport repair materials. In addition, the Philippines intends to escalate tensions in the South China Sea and create*

*excuses for external forces such as the United States and Japan to interfere in the situation in the South China Sea.*

*The current dispute over Second Thomas Shoal is not over sovereignty, but a battle over control. The Philippines has been attempting to occupy the Shoal long-term by reinforcing and maintaining illegal “grounded” warships. However, China has firmly gained actual control of Second Thomas Shoal and its adjacent waters and China and the Philippines are in a stalemate.*

Notes:

- 1 The Second Thomas Shoal is an atoll in the Spratly Island chain and has been a flashpoint between China and the Philippines, among their other broader disputes in the South China Sea. The Philippines has deployed marines to a broken down navy ship, which was grounded on the shoal in 1999 while attempting to protect Philippine maritime claims. In 2013, China began to increase its presence near the shoal to weaken the Philippines’ control of it. China also claims that former Philippines president, Joseph Estrada (1998-2001), had promised to remove the Philippine Navy ship, but the current Marcos government denies this. “China-Philippines Tensions in the South China Sea,” Congressional Research Service, *In Focus*, 13 December 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12550/2>
- 2 For additional information on the China-Philippines dispute over the Second Thomas Shoal, see: Dodge Billingsley, “China and Philippines Spar Over Grounded Ship in Spratly Islands,” *OE Watch*, 08-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/china-and-philippines-spar-over-grounded-ship-in-spratly-islands/>
- 3 In 2020 and 2021, the Duterte administration began to express concerns about Chinese island reclamation in the South China Sea. Since coming to power in 2022, geopolitical factors have moved the Marcos administration even closer to the United States and farther from China. One reason for this is China’s increasing efforts to terraform islands in the South China Sea, which enables China to assert a greater territorial presence in the sea. Another reason is that the Chinese “fishing militia” has amassed at Whitsun Reef, which demonstrates China’s intent to seize it from Philippine control. Alvina Cambria, “From Aquino to Marcos: political survival and Philippine foreign policy towards China,” *China, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 6 November 2023. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24761028.2023.2281165>



## Sri Lanka Suspends Chinese Research Vessel Visits

By Matthew Stein  
OE Watch Commentary

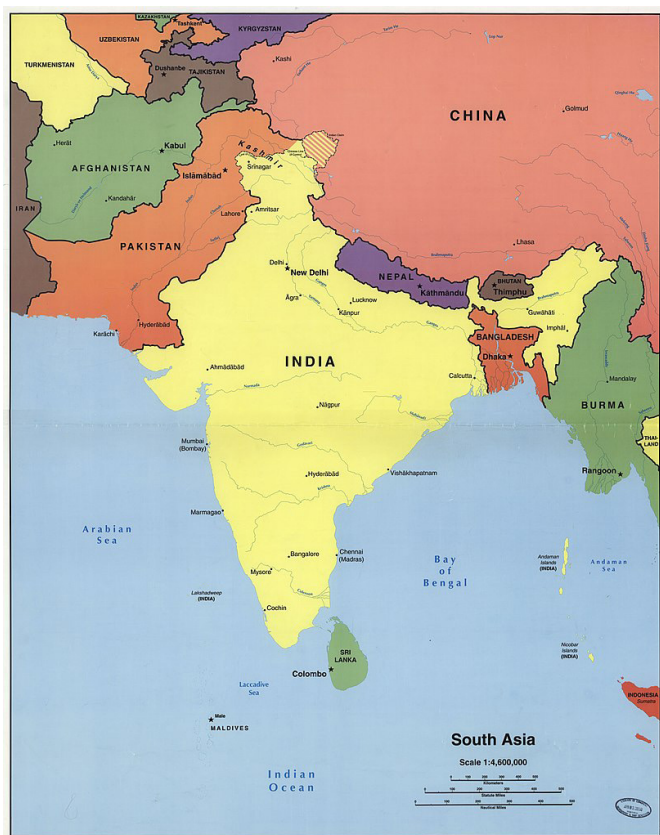
India has been wary of Chinese research vessels docking in Sri Lankan ports and has pushed Sri Lanka to prevent these port calls. China claims the vessels are only for scientific purposes, but the Chinese ships that have docked in Sri Lanka are known to have dual scientific and intelligence-gathering purposes.<sup>1</sup> The accompanying excerpted articles report on Sri Lanka's recent decision for a one-year moratorium on foreign research vessels docking in the country's ports beginning 1 January 2024, and demonstrate how Sri Lanka continues to be a focal point in tensions between India and China.

The first excerpted article from India's independent think tank *Observer Research Foundation* states that Sri Lanka's moratorium is an attempt to appease India by not allowing Chinese ships to carry out intelligence gathering activities so close to India under the guise of scientific research. While Sri Lanka has become more economically tied with China over the past several years, it still relies on India as an economic and political partner. Sri Lanka's ties with India, while strained at times, go back further than its ties with China. An immediate impact of the moratorium resulted in the Chinese ship *Xiang Yang Hong 3* being prohibited from docking in Sri Lanka in early

***“In the immediate (time frame), it means that China’s third ‘research/spy vessel’ Xiang Yang Hong 3 is not welcome in the first week of the New Year.”***

January. The author mentions that China sought permission from both Sri Lanka and the Maldives to dock the *Xiang Yang Hong 3* late last year.

The second excerpted article from India's English-language daily *Deccan Herald* reports that in light of the Sri Lankan moratorium, the Maldives is allowing the *Xiang Yang Hong 3* docking rights. The purpose of the Chinese visit is for the rotation of personnel and replenishment for the ship, and not for research, according to the article. Nevertheless, the decision by the Maldives enables China a port visit close to India. The article also mentions that there will likely be some political fallout between India and the Maldives over this authorization, though it is unclear how this will play out. Overall, Sri Lanka's one year moratorium on foreign ships reflects India's influence in Sri Lanka. However, the docking of the *Xiang Yang Hong 3* in the Maldives likewise demonstrates that India's ability to influence only extends so far, allowing China to still project power and maintain a presence near India.



Map of South Asia, India featured.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South\\_Asia\\_-\\_LOC\\_2001622357.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South_Asia_-_LOC_2001622357.jpg);  
Attribution: Public domain

**Source:** N. Sathiya Moorthy, “Decoding Sri Lanka’s moratorium on foreign research vessels,” *Observer Research Foundation* (independent think-tank in India), 8 January 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/decoding-sri-lanka-s-moratorium-on-foreign-research-vessels>

*On the face of it, the recent Sri Lankan government’s decision to ‘declare a pause’ on foreign research vessels for one year beginning 1 January 2024 is an attempt to buy peace with the large-hearted Indian neighbour, and also the United States...*

*In the immediate, it means that China’s third ‘research/spy vessel’ Xiang Yang Hong 3 is not welcome in the first week of the New Year...*

*“The arrival of these ships creates serious diplomatic tensions, and it (2024) is an election year,” Foreign Minister Ali Sabry said, by way of explanation. “Such ship visits can be highly disruptive for the region and Sri Lanka, because of the pressure the government may come under...” he added...*

*For instance, Shi Yan 6 was not the first Chinese research/survey ship, otherwise considered a ‘spy ship’, to visit Sri Lanka...A year earlier in 2022, Yuan Wang 5 had berthed at the Chinese-controlled Hambantota Port in the south, unlike Shi Yan 6, which docked at the capital Colombo...*

*In the case of the new vessel, Xiang Yang Hong 3, China had sought permission from both Sri Lanka and neighbouring Maldives, to dock it in these waters from 5 January to the end of May, a long five-month haul. As the intention was to map the ocean in these parts, the long stay should be a cause for concern for the larger Indian neighbour.*

*It should be equally so for the US, whose Diego Garcia military base is situated 700 km away...*

**Source:** Anirban Bhaumik, “India wary as Maldives allows China ‘research vessel’ to dock at port,” *Deccan Herald* (English-language daily newspaper in India), 23 January 2024. <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/india-wary-as-maldives-allows-china-research-vessel-to-dock-at-port-2861168>

*...President Mohamed Muizzu’s government on Tuesday stated that it had decided to allow Chinese PLAN’s ‘research vessel’ Xiang Yang Hong 3 to dock at Malé, the main port of the Maldives. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the government of the Maldives stated that the decision to allow the ship to make the port call followed a diplomatic request from Beijing. It, however, claimed that Xiang Yang Hong 3 would dock at Malé only for the rotation of personnel and*

*replenishment and would not conduct any research as long as it would remain in the territorial waters of the Maldives.*

*New Delhi, however, is not convinced and, according to the sources, would soon convey its concerns to Malé through diplomatic channels. A source in New Delhi told DH that India would use its assets to keep watch on the Xiang Yang Hong 3 during its port call in the Maldives...*

Notes:

- 1 For background on India pressuring Sri Lanka to prevent Chinese vessels docking in Sri Lankan ports, see: Matthew Stein “India Works To Maintain Sri Lankan Foothold Amid Growing China Presence,” *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://fms.tradoc.army.mil/2022/india-works-to-maintain-sri-lankan-foothold-amid-growing-china-presence/>



## Uzbekistan and China Sign Strategic Partnership Agreement



Official portrait of Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shavkat\\_Mirziyoyev\\_official\\_portrait\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shavkat_Mirziyoyev_official_portrait_(cropped).jpg); Attribution: CCA 4.0

By Matthew Stein  
OE Watch Commentary

Uzbekistan conducts bilateral cooperation across political, economic, or security spheres with several different partners, including Russia, China, and the United States, but rarely engages too closely with any one partner. Despite precedent, the accompanying excerpted article from the independent Russian-language news website *Fergana Agency* reports that China and Uzbekistan signed an “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership” in late January 2024 during President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s visit to China. The article includes a quote from President Xi Jinping, who stated that China supports Uzbekistan’s “national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and in choosing its own development path.” In turn, Mirziyoyev

stated that Uzbekistan supports the “one China principle.” Uzbekistan has previously stated it supports the one China principle, but Mirziyoyev went on to note that Uzbekistan now firmly supports Beijing on its core interests, including Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> He also noted that Uzbekistan will cooperate with China in the fight against the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Uzbekistan already cooperates with China on “three evils” through the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but this could be a sign of deeper cooperation in this area and might include an increase in bilateral security cooperation. China has already signed similar comprehensive agreements with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the most recent agreement with Uzbekistan strengthens China’s position in the region.

**“According to Xi, the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway should be started as soon as possible and help transform Uzbekistan from a landlocked country into a country connected by land routes.”**

**Source:** “Узбекистан и Китай повысили отношения до всепогодного всестороннего партнерства (Uzbekistan and China have increased relations to an all-weather comprehensive partnership),” *Fergana Agency* (independent Russian-language news website focusing on Central Asia), 25 January 2024. <https://fergana.agency/news/132723/>

*Uzbekistan and China have increased relations to an “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era.” The corresponding joint statement was signed by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the President of the People’s Republic of China Xi Jinping following negotiations in Beijing on January 24...*

*Xi Jinping noted that 32 years ago, Uzbekistan became the first Central Asian country to establish diplomatic relations with China... “In particular, over the past seven-plus years, we have been working together to establish healthy and prosperous bilateral cooperation in various fields,” the Chinese President said.*

*continue on 12*

*China firmly supports Uzbekistan in defending its national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and in choosing its own development path, Xi emphasized...*

*According to Xi, the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway should be started as soon as possible and help transform Uzbekistan from a landlocked country into a country connected by land routes...*

*Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted the symbolic significance of choosing China as the first country he visited this year...*

*Mirziyoyev stated that Uzbekistan:*

- *firmly adheres to the “one China principle”*
- *resolutely opposes the interference of external forces in the internal affairs of the PRC*
- *[is] ready to firmly support Beijing on issues related to its core interests, including Taiwan, Xinjiang, human rights*
- *[will] cooperate with the PRC in the fight*

*against the “three evil forces” (terrorism, separatism and extremism) and ensuring security in both countries and the region as a whole.*

*The parties welcomed the launch of a pilot project to introduce the Lu Ban Workshop, the Chinese vocational education system, in Uzbekistan. During the negotiations, it was noted that by the end of 2023, mutual trade between the two countries had reached \$14 billion. The leaders expressed the opinion that in the near future trade turnover could be increased to \$20 billion.*

*Mirziyoyev called on Chinese partners to actively participate in the processes of privatization of state-owned enterprises and banks in Uzbekistan.*

*As a result of the negotiations, over 15 cooperation documents were signed regarding the joint construction of the Belt and Road, economic and technological cooperation, interconnectedness, environmental protection, new energy sources, science and culture...*

Notes:

- 1 For additional information on China’s position regarding Taiwan being a “core interest,” see: Dodge Billingsley, “Chinese Officials Justify Reaction to Western Presence in Taiwan Strait,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/chinese-officials-justify-reaction-to-western-presence-in-taiwan-strait-2/>
- 2 The separate agreements between China and individual Central Asian states exemplify China’s preference for bilateral relations over regional frameworks. For background on China and Tajikistan’s security cooperation agreement, see: Matthew Stein and Peter Wood, “Chinese-Tajikistani Security Cooperation Gaining Momentum,” *FMSO Foreign Perspective Brief*, January 2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/chinese-tajikistani-security-cooperation-gaining-momentum-stein-wood/>



## China Reinigorates Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia

By CPT Yunyi Zhou  
OE Watch Commentary

China seeks to strengthen its security cooperation with Central Asian countries to safeguard its core interests in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to the first excerpted article from the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, *People's Daily*, Chinese President Xi Jinping met his Uzbek counterpart, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in Beijing and pledged an “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership” with Uzbekistan. This places Uzbekistan at the highest ranking of China’s foreign relations alongside Pakistan, Belarus, and Venezuela. These elevated diplomatic ties not only pave the way for the advancement of strategic BRI projects but also signal to the BRI stakeholders the urgency of security cooperation in the current turbulent international environment.

To this end, Mirziyoyev places significant emphasis on the One-China principle and strictly opposes external interference in China’s internal affairs, especially with regard to Beijing’s crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province in the name of deradicalization. Xinjiang is home to the Muslim Uyghur minority and borders the former Soviet states of Central Asia, serving as the geopolitical linchpin in the success of the rejuvenation of the Silk Road. Mirziyoyev firmly supports China stabilizing Xinjiang by taking repressive measures to eradicate extremism, terrorism, and separatism.

This state visit indicates a growing China-Central Asia alliance in security cooperation and soft power development. The day before Mirziyoyev’s visit, China’s State Council Information Office released a white paper, cited in the second excerpted article. This white paper articulates

**“China firmly supports Uzbekistan in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and firmly supports Uzbekistan in choosing its own development path.”**

the legal basis for countering “The Three Evils,”<sup>1</sup> operation and supervision mechanisms, and China’s vision of security cooperation on a regional and global scale.<sup>2</sup> With the growing “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership” in the region, Beijing is undertaking a more direct engagement in Central Asia’s security and defense capabilities. Overall, China’s multifaceted BRI strategies are likely to intensify the growing Great Power competition in the region.



◀ Kyrgyz Highway A363 towards Chinese border-Xinjiang.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kyrgyzstan\\_\(6052094329\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kyrgyzstan_(6052094329).jpg);  
Attribution: CC BY 2.0

**Source:** Yijun Yang, “习近平同乌兹别克斯坦总统米尔济约耶夫会谈 (Xi Jinping holds talks with President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan),” *People’s Daily* (official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee), 25 January 2024. [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2024-01/25/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20240125\\_1-01.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2024-01/25/nw.D110000renmrb_20240125_1-01.htm)

*On January 24, President Xi Jinping hosted President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan at the Great Hall of the People. The two heads of state announced that China and Uzbekistan have decided to develop an all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership, symbolizing an era of a more meaningful and dynamic China-Uzbekistan relationship.*

*Facing the current complex international situation, the two sides pledged to build a solid foundation for mutual trust and continue with high-quality joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China firmly supports Uzbekistan in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and firmly supports Uzbekistan in choosing*

*its own development path.*

*Mirziyoyev said that he looks forward to the opportunity to further consolidate and deepen mutual trust and expand all-round cooperation under the BRI, including agriculture, green energy, and tourism. Uzbekistan firmly abides by the One-China principle, resolutely opposes external forces interfering in China’s internal affairs, and is willing to firmly support China on issues involving Taiwan, Xinjiang, human rights, and other matters related to China’s core interests. Furthermore, Uzbekistan is ready to work with China to combat the “Three Evils” and safeguard their respective and regional security.*

**Source:** “中国的反恐怖主义法律制度体系与实践 (China’s Legal Framework and Measures for Counterterrorism),” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 23 January 2024. [http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2024-01/23/content\\_116958678.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2024-01/23/content_116958678.htm)

*Terrorism poses a persistent and asymmetric threat to international peace and security. China has found a path of law-based counterterrorism that conforms to its realities by establishing a sound legal framework, promoting strict, impartial, procedure-based law enforcement, and ensuring impartial administration of justice and effective protection of human rights...*

*Relying on more than 40 years of experience, China has gradually developed a counterterrorism legal framework based on the Constitution. The Counterterrorism Law, in concert with the criminal*

*laws and National Security Law, covers administrative regulations, judicial interpretations, local regulations, and departmental and local government rules...*

*Upholding the vision of a global community of shared future, China is willing to work closely with other countries to push forward counterterrorism cause as part of global governance. On the basis of equality and respect, China will engage in extensive exchanges, cooperation, and mutual learning to facilitate the global effort to counter terrorism.*

Notes:

- 1 The “Three Evils” (三股恶势力) is a political slogan referencing extremism, terrorism, and separatism.
- 2 Released by China’s State Council Information Office, the white paper consists of chapters such as “An Improving Legal Framework for Counterterrorism,” “Clear Provisions for the Determination and Punishment of Terrorist Activities,” “Standardized Exercise of Power in Fighting Terrorism,” “Protection of Human Rights in Counterterrorism Practices,” and “Effective Protection of People’s Safety and National Security.”



## Russia Increases Defense Spending for 2024

By Dodge Billingsley  
OE Watch Commentary

According to the 10 January excerpted article from the Russian state-owned domestic news outlet *RIA Novosti*, Russia will increase its defense spending in keeping with the release of Russia's federal budget in October 2023 that dedicated “almost 11 trillion rubles” (\$117 billion) to the armed forces.<sup>1</sup> The article notes plans to grow the armed forces by nearly half a million men, while most of the funds will be earmarked for weapons and equipment, whose procurement is informed by lessons learned in Ukraine. The emphasis is on ground forces but includes new spending on air and naval assets. As it articulates: “In recent decades, the ground forces of many countries have been financed on a residual basis—the United States relied on the Air Force and Navy. Russia was no exception in

this regard, but the Ukrainian conflict put everything in place.”

Increasing the quantity and quality of its armor, tanks, and artillery is a primary focus, according to the article. Russia will ramp up production of improved variants of the **T-90M Proryv**, **T-72B3M**, and **T-80BVM** main battle tanks. Artillery is also being updated with the introduction of the upgraded 152-mm **Msta-S** self-propelled gun<sup>2</sup> and the latest **Malva**-wheeled howitzer, which entered service in late 2023.<sup>3</sup> Russia's newest artillery system, the **2S35 Koalitsiya-SV**, is projected to be fielded in 2024. The weapon systems and upgrades reflect immediate application of lessons learned from the Ukrainian battlefield. Ukraine seemed to have an edge when NATO-manufactured long-range weapons arrived on the battlefield and Russian units were forced to

move their command and logistic lines farther from the front lines. The article notes that the **Koalitsiya-SV** “will become the longest-range weapon in the Russian Army, able to fire a “high-explosive fragmentation projectile at a range of 40 kilometers, and a guided projectile at 70 kilometers...more than enough [distance] for effective counter-battery warfare.”

Drones are also featured in Russia's defense plans for this year.<sup>4</sup> The “long-awaited **Izdeliye-53**, another version of the **Lancet** kamikaze drone,” is projected to be fielded in 2024. Like long-range artillery, the **Izdeliye-53** could have an immediate battlefield impact as it is said to have a range of more than 60 kilometers. The much-publicized increase in Russian defense spending, and the types of weapons Russia will field, based on lessons learned in Ukraine, could put additional pressure on Ukraine and its Western partners just to maintain the status quo.



Early variant of the 152mm self-propelled gun 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV on parade in Moscow, 2015. The Koalitsiya-SV is set to be fielded in 2024.

Source: Vitaly Kuzman, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2S35\\_Koalitsiya-SV#/media/File:9may2015Moscow-35\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2S35_Koalitsiya-SV#/media/File:9may2015Moscow-35_(cropped).jpg); Attribution: CCA BY-SA 4.0

***“It became clear that a large-scale war requires a lot of equipment. It needs to be constantly improved, adapting to new weapons that the enemy has, damaged vehicles need to be repaired somewhere. And the priority in rearmament shifted towards the army.”***

**Source:** Andrey Kots, “Приоритеты на будущее. Чем вооружат армию России в 2024-м (Priorities for the future. What will the Russian army be armed with in 2024?)” *RIA Novosti* (Russian state-owned domestic news outlet), 9 January 2024. <https://ria.ru/20240109/perevooruzhenie-1917044593.html?in=t>

*... Earlier, back in January 2023, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced an increase in the size of the army to one and a half million people by 2026....*

*At the end of October, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov announced the total amount of defense spending in 2024 - almost 11 trillion rubles. The lion's share will go to the purchase of military equipment. The domestic defense industry has to work hard: it is necessary to saturate not only new units, but also units on the front line with everything necessary.*

*“Taking into account additional budgetary allocations in 2024, the volume of purchases and repairs of weapons and military equipment will increase,” Sergei Shoigu said at the end of November. “In the current conditions, it is necessary to ensure an advanced supply of weapons, military and special equipment to the troops, as well as to increase the production capabilities of enterprises military-industrial complex for the production and repair of the most popular models.”*

*In recent decades, the ground forces of many countries have been financed on a residual basis - the United States relied on the Air Force and Navy. Russia was no exception in this regard, but the Ukrainian conflict put everything in place. It became clear that a large-scale war requires a lot of equipment. It needs to be constantly improved, adapting to new weapons that the enemy has, damaged vehicles need to be*

*repaired somewhere. And the priority in rearmament shifted towards the army.*

*The Ground Forces will continue to receive modern main battle tanks. First of all, the T-90M Proryv, T-72B3M and T-80BVM, which have proven themselves well in combat. New tanks are significantly different from pre-war ones. They received additional armor, equipment to suppress UAVs, and modern communications equipment. Many are equipped with a factory “visor” - a lattice superstructure over the turret with dynamic protection modules for defense against “roof-killing ATGMs” and kamikaze drones.*

*Motorized rifle units will receive vehicles, **BTR-82A** armored personnel carriers, **BMP-3** infantry fighting vehicles and modernized **BMP-2M**. The latter began to enter the troops only in 2020. Their difference from the early “twos” is the Berezhok combat module, equipped with a 30-mm automatic cannon, an automatic grenade launcher, a machine gun and four Kornet ATGMs. The vehicle has an updated fire control system, ensuring round-the-clock use, automatic target tracking and increased shooting accuracy.*

*The artillerymen will receive 152-mm **Msta-S** self-propelled guns and the latest Malva wheeled howitzers, which first entered service with the troops in the fall of 2023. What's even more important: next year, the promising self-propelled gun “Coalition-*

*continue on 17*



*SV,” which the troops have been waiting for a long time, will go into serial production. It will become the longest-range weapon in the Russian army... .*

*In 2024, the long-awaited Izdeliye-53, another version*

*of the famous Lancet kamikaze drone, should go into service with the troops. All that is known about the new UAV is that its range is over 60 kilometers and it will be designed to operate in a “flock.”*

Notes:

- 1 For more information regarding defense spending within Russia’s new federal budget, see: Dodge Billingsley, “Russia’s Federal Budget Puts Economy on War Footing,” *OE Watch*, 01-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/russias-federal-budget-puts-economy-on-war-footing/>
- 2 For a look back at Russian efforts to increase the effective firing range of the Msta, see: Charles Bartles, “New Artillery Rounds Will Extend Russian Artillery Range,” *OE Watch*, January 2018. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/294224>
- 3 The Msta-S is an old system introduced in 1989. For information on recent modifications and upgrades, see: “Artillery of the future: modernization of the ACS 2S19 “Msta-S” and its prospects,” *Military Review*, 16 December 2023. <https://military-review.com/12479016-artillery-of-the-future-modernization-of-the-ac-s-2s19-msta-s-and-its-prospects>; the 2S43 Malva wheeled artillery is also a legacy system but previous Russian claims refer to the new variant as the Russian HYMARS, although the effective range has been disputed. See: Ellie Cook, “What Is 2S43 Malva? Soviet Self-Propelled Howitzer Dubbed ‘Russian HYMARS,’” *Newsweek*, 17 August 2023. <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-military-2s43-malva-howitzer-ukraine-himars-artillery-1820411>
- 4 Drones, or UAVs, have become ubiquitous in the war in Ukraine at every level. For additional insight on Russia’s use of drones, see: Charles Bartles, “Russia Plans To Add Remote Mining UAV Platoons To Engineer Units,” *OE Watch*, 09-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/russia-plans-to-add-remote-mining-uav-platoons-to-engineer-units/>; see also, Dodge Billingsley, “Russia Details Plan To Overcome Military Drone Deficiencies,” *OE Watch*, 01-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/russia-details-plan-to-overcome-military-drone-deficiencies/>

## Russian Engineer Troops Gain Assault Combat Mission

By Chuck Bartles  
OE Watch Commentary

In most militaries, engineer units are combat enablers (support units) for maneuver units (infantry, armor, etc). Due to Russia's combat experience in Ukraine, this may be changing, as Russia is envisioning engineer units assuming a combat role, capable of accomplishing independent

assault operations in addition to typical engineer missions. The accompanying excerpted article from the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* attributes this change to the fact that Russian troops have frequently had to assault heavily fortified areas. The article also delves into how this reform will be implemented, to include organizational changes such as forming “as-

sault detachments” in engineer units and engineer reconnaissance-assault brigades in combined arms armies, as well as the addition of new types of equipment such as the universal armored engineer vehicle. If this effort is perceived as a success, it is possible other militaries will consider emulating such reforms.

***“The engineer troops are being transformed from a support role into an independent strike force capable of participating in a modern war.”***



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Universal Armored Engineer Vehicle (UBIM).

Source: <https://www.vitalykuzmin.net/Military/ARMY-2021-Static-part-3/i-PfWbh5c/A>; Attribution: Vitaly Kuzmin, CC BY-SA 4.0

**Source:** Alexey Mikhailov, Yulia Leonova, Andrey Fedorov, “В дело с техникой: инженерные войска переориентируют на штурмовые действия: Их оснащают боевыми машинами для разведки и разрушения долговременных укреплений (In business with technology: The engineer troops are reoriented to assault operations:), *Izvestiya* (major Russian daily newspaper), 23 January 2024. <https://iz.ru/1638123/aleksei-mikhailov-iuliia-leonova-andrei-fedorov/v-delo-s-tekhnikoi-inzhenernye-voiska-pereorientiruiut-na-shturmovye-deistviia>

*The Russian Ministry of Defense has approved a program to increase the combat capabilities of engineer regiments and brigades - this year they will get new units equipped with specialized assault and reconnaissance equipment...We are talking about universal armored engineer vehicles (UBIM) [Универсальная бронированная инженерная машина (УБИМ)]*

*From the first months of the special military operation, Russian troops were faced with the need to regularly storm fortified areas of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup> Particularly strong field fortifications were encountered in the Donbass that were erected over the course of eight years. This required Russian troops to adapt to new conditions and change tactics. Specialized assault detachments were formed with*

*weapons and equipment to break through enemy defenses. Since last year, the military department decided to scale up this experience and create [engineer] reconnaissance-assault brigades in combined arms armies.*

*In recent years, the Ministry of Defense has been carrying out a large-scale reform of the engineer troops. The engineer troops are being transformed from a support role into an independent strike force capable of participating in a modern war. The actions of the engineers are no longer limited to the construction of field fortifications, route clearance, and bridge building — now they also storm fortified areas, covertly place mines, and quickly conduct explosive ordinance disposal.*

Notes:

- 1 Moscow uses the term spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya (“special military operation”) or spetsoperatsiya (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.



## Russia Developing Sixth-Generation Combat Aircraft



Rendition of BAE Systems Tempest 6th generation fighter.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BAE\\_Systems\\_Tempest#/media/File:Team\\_tempest.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BAE_Systems_Tempest#/media/File:Team_tempest.jpg);  
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By Lionel Beehner  
OE Watch Commentary

Russia hopes to have a sixth-generation combat aircraft prototype by 2050, according to the excerpted analysis of a report written by Evgeny Fedosov of the Russian Academy of Sciences published by state news agency TASS. Sixth-generation aircraft, still in their early phase of development, are expected to have advanced digital features like artificial intelligence (AI) integration and data fusion, as well as other enhanced command, control, and communication (C3) capabilities. The aircraft would be similar to fifth-generation combat aircraft—designed for greater air-to-air capability, battlefield survivability in anti-access/area denial

environments, and ground support—but with greater focus on enhanced integration of AI systems and less focus on close-in dogfighting, which is a less common feature of current and future war scenarios. This is not the first time that the Russians have announced plans to develop a sixth-generation combat aircraft. TASS first reported these developments in 2017<sup>1</sup> and the article touts Russia's Su-57 Felon as “almost” possessing capabilities or easy upgradable features to become a sixth-generation aircraft. These capabilities include supercruise (i.e. sustained supersonic flight without use of an afterburner) and advanced avionics (i.e. an air-

craft's communications, navigation, and flight control systems).

The second excerpted article, taken from the privately owned digital news site, *Eurasia Times*, which specializes in defense and global news, offers a commentary on Fedosov's report. It notes that AI technology will provide the aircraft with advanced digital and C3 capabilities, as well as data fusion and remote or autonomous piloting. Fedosov expects the pilot to be integrated into the airframe, with cockpits and helmet-mounted displays allowing for 360-degree vision similar to the F-35. Stealth, as before, will continue to play a huge role in sixth-generation aircraft capabilities. Several other nations have announced plans to develop sixth-generation combat aircraft to include Turkey<sup>2</sup> as well as the UK, Italy, and Japan, which announced a joint plan to develop a similarly advanced fighter.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian military's development of advanced combat aircraft has been notorious for delays, cost overruns, and faulty features evident in the deployment of its fifth-generation Su-57 aircraft. Discussing the aircraft,

**“Currently, we are thinking about the concept of a sixth-generation aircraft, conducting search research, exchanging views with military specialists. Such an aircraft should appear sometime by 2050, but already now it is necessary to understand what the armed conflicts of the future will be like.”**

**- Evgeny Fedosov, Scientific Director of the State Research Institute of Aviation Systems.**

Fedosov acknowledged the complication of designing future combat aircraft as they become larger, heavier, and costlier to make. The TASS article suggests that the U.S. Air Force's Next Generation Air Dominance plan to roll out a sixth-generation combat aircraft to replace its F-22 Raptor fighters by

2030 is unlikely to be eclipsed by the Russians anytime soon.<sup>4</sup> The report further highlights divisions among the engineers, strategists, and aviators of Russia's Ministry of Defense, over which capabilities to emphasize. The main divide is whether to focus on producing fighters designed for

beyond visual range engagement or models (not unlike its previous Sukhoi or Mikoyan versions) capable of close-range dogfights, but there is also major disagreement over whether future models should be manned or unmanned.<sup>5</sup>

**Source:** “Боевой самолет шестого поколения может появиться в России к 2050 году (A Sixth-Generation Combat Aircraft may Appear in Russia by 2050),” TASS (Russian state news agency), 25 February 2024. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/20081017>

*A sixth-generation combat aircraft may appear in Russia by 2050, now there is an exchange of views with the military regarding its concept. This is written in a column for TASS by the scientific director of the State Research Institute of Aviation Systems (GosNIAS), Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences Evgeny Fedosov.*

*“Currently, we are thinking about the concept of a sixth-generation aircraft, conducting exploratory research, exchanging views with military specialists. Such an aircraft should appear sometime by 2050, but already now it is necessary to understand what the armed conflicts of the future will be like,” he writes.*

*Touching upon the design of future aircraft, Fedosov*

*suggested that “to go further according to the logic of complication is a vicious practice.” He also pointed out that combat aircraft are becoming more complex from generation to generation and, as a result, becoming heavier. “And the larger and heavier the plane, the more expensive it is,” the academician concluded.*

*GosNIAS is a leading center in the development of on-board aviation systems and equipment. The founder of modeling methods for designing automatic systems of any degree of complexity. The Institute participates in the creation of aircraft at all stages: from the development of the concept of aircraft creation to modernization during operation.*

**Source:** Ashish Dangwal, “Russia’s 6th-Gen Fighter Jet to be Deployed by 2050; Will not Dump Pilots for Robots – GosNIAS,” *The EurAsian Times* (a privately owned digital news site specializing in defense and global news) 26 February 2024. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/russias-6th-gen-fighter-jet-to-be-deployed-by-2050/>

*According to state media TASS, Russia is actively setting its sights on developing a sixth-generation fighter jet that could be deployed by 2050.*

*The development was disclosed by Evgeny Fedosov, Scientific Director of the State Research Institute of Aviation Systems (GosNIAS) and a distinguished member of the Russian Academy of Sciences.*

*Fedosov outlined the initiative in a column published by TASS, shedding light on the ongoing discussions and research surrounding the conceptualization of the sixth-generation aircraft.*

*According to Fedosov, the development process involves extensive consultation and collaboration with military specialists to anticipate the demands of future*

*continue on 22*

armed conflicts.

*“Currently, we are thinking about the concept of a sixth-generation aircraft, conducting research and exchanging views with military specialists,” he said. Fedosov, however, highlighted a critical concern regarding the design complexity of next-generation combat aircraft, describing it as a potentially “vicious practice.”*

*He pointed out that with each successive iteration of military aviation, the size and weight tend to increase, inevitably impacting the cost of such equipment.*

*He also added that the sixth-generation combat aviation group will include both manned aircraft and unmanned vehicles.*

*“There is an opinion that the air group should be mixed and consist of drones and manned aircraft. Such a mixed park, in principle, can exist,” Fedosov remarked. He said that the size and speed of the drones would enable them to function as wingmen within a group.*

*Building upon the success of fifth-generation platforms, sixth-generation fighters would be designed to adapt to evolving trends in aerial warfare, where traditional dogfighting scenarios are giving way to*

*long-range engagements utilizing beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile capabilities.*

*In recent years, numerous countries have declared their intention to embark on the development of indigenous sixth-generation aircraft programs, illustrating a global push toward advancing military aviation capabilities.*

*The United States Air Force is a key player in this arena, actively advancing its efforts to develop a next-generation fighter jet through the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) stealth fighter program.*

*Multinational initiatives have also emerged, reflecting a strategic approach to leveraging shared resources and expertise while mitigating development costs....*

*China is also believed to be in the process of developing its sixth-generation fighter jet, having previously demonstrated its capabilities with the construction of the fifth-generation J-20 fighter jet.*

*On the other hand, Russia has encountered difficulties in deploying its stealth fighter jet, the Su-57, in large numbers. Moreover, discussions concerning the development of a sixth-generation fighter jet have previously faced obstacles.*

Notes:

- 1 “Russia may upgrade advanced Su-57 aircraft to 6th-generation fighter jet,” TASS, 1 November 2017. <https://tass.com/defense/973625>
- 2 Dilara Aslan Ozer, Türkiye starts works on AI-backed 6th-generation fighter jet,” *Daily Sabah*, 12 January 2024. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkiye-starts-works-on-ai-backed-6th-generation-fighter-jet>
- 3 Josh Luckenbaugh, “UK-Italy-Japan Cite Steady Progress Developing Next-Gen Jet Fighter,” *National Defense*, 30 October 2023. <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2023/10/30/uk-italy-japan-cite-steady-progress-developing-next-gen-jet-fighter>
- 4 Ryan Finnerty, “US defense spending bill could expose new details of sixth generation fighter development,” *FlightGlobal*, 19 December 2023. <https://www.flightglobal.com/fixed-wing/us-defence-spending-bill-could-expose-new-details-of-sixth-generation-fighter-development/156256.article>
- 5 Boyko Nikolov, “Su-57 Felon is a step towards the 6th-gen, but Russians are at odds,” *BulgarianMilitary.com*, 24 November 2023. <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2023/11/24/su-57-felon-is-a-step-towards-the-6th-gen-but-russians-are-at-odds/>



## Belarus Agrees To Host Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons

By Paris Gordon  
OE Watch Commentary

Belarus has agreed to allow Russian tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) to be deployed in the country, a decision that has led it to revise its national military doctrine. According to the first excerpted article from Russian state-managed *RIA News*, presidents Lukashenko and Putin confirmed the successful deployment of Russian TNWs onto Belarusian soil in December 2023. Under the agreement, Russian TNWs in Belarus would remain under Russian control.<sup>1</sup> The placement of these weapons in Belarus would put them close enough to strike NATO members.

As a result of this move, in January 2024, Belarus revised its military doctrine, which is now known as the New Military Doctrine. Belarus's newly revised military doctrine is unequivocal in declaring the West

as an aggressor actively seeking to disrupt the integrity of Belarussian national security. Notably, the New Military Doctrine states that the Russian TNWs are an acceptable means of national defense, citing a willingness to work with Moscow to deploy these weapons against perceived threats from the West. Belarus's New Military Doctrine underscores its willingness to use TNWs, citing reasons of national security and an explicit list of enemies, including the United States and NATO, with Poland and the Baltic states as its primary adversaries. The excerpted article from *Belarus Today*, a government publication closely linked to the Belarussian presidential administration, points out that the "Aggressive nature of the military policy of Western nations has ceased to be masked by formulations about the exclusively defensive orientation of their military doctrines. These

national and coalition documents establish claims to global and regional dominance. They openly name states that are hostile to them, including Belarus."

For Russia, the move to station TNWs in Belarus has expanded its strategic footprint.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as detailed in the third excerpted article, from the Belarussian state-run media organization *BELTA - News of Belarus*, Belarus has revised its doctrine to increase its defense by focusing on Belarussian military strategy in the likelihood of escalating conflicts with neighboring states such as Poland. Russia arming its ally with nuclear devices, Belarus revising its military doctrine to allow for deployment of Russian TNWs and explicitly naming enemies serves to further heighten regional tensions, especially between Poland and Belarus.<sup>3</sup>

**Source:** "Лукашенко назвал последствия появления ядерного оружия в Белоруссии (Lukashenko identifies the consequences of the appearance of nuclear weapons in Belarus)," *RIA News* (One of Russia's largest state news agencies), 19 January 2024. <https://ria.ru/20240119/belorussiya-1922400028.html>

*In March (2023) Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that Moscow and Minsk had agreed to put tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. ... In June the President of Russia communicated that in accordance with Belarussian-Russian plans the first nuclear charges had been delivered to Belarus. In December*

*(2023), Lukashenko informed journalists that all Russian tactical nuclear weapons, agreed upon by the two countries, had been delivered to the (Belarussian) Republic, and were "in place, in good condition," and that the military is training daily.*

*continue on 24*

**Source:** Nikolai Buzin, “На чем сделан акцент в проекте новой Военной доктрины Беларуси (What is the emphasis of the New Military Doctrine of Belarus),” *Belarus Today* (official government news channel), 24 January 2024. <https://www.sb.by/articles/v-mire-uvazhayut-silnykh.html>

*“As a part of the assessment of trends in the development of the military-political situation (we have) clearly named the sources of military threat to Belarus. (These are) the United States, NATO, Poland and the Baltic nations. In particular, article 9 states that the “aggressive nature of the military policy of Western nations has ceased to be masked*

*by formulations about the exclusively defensive orientation of their military doctrines. These national and coalition documents establish claims to global and regional dominance. They openly name states that are hostile to them..., which includes the Republic Belarus.”*

**Source:** “Какой будет новая Военная доктрина Беларуси. Хренин раскрыл подробности документа (What will be the new Military doctrine of Belarus. Khrenin revealed the details of the document),” *BELTA - News of Belarus* (official government news channel), 6 January 2024. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/kakoj-budet-novaja-voennaja-doktrina-belarusi-hrenin-raskryl-podrobnosti-dokumenta-610049-2024/>

*Among important innovations, (Viktor Khrenin) describes, for instance, targeting, that is, a clear indication of the sources of military threats to Belarus. At the same time, unlike NATO countries, which in their war documents explicitly name (their) enemies, listing specific countries, Belarus states likely sources of threats. “We expressly name sources of threats and from the countries which they emanate.” - explained Viktor Khrenin.*

*He also brought attention to the strengthened concepts of national security. “For existing challenges*

*of military security there is a clearly formulated line of threats.” The head of the Ministry of Defense explained. “Based on this, we have formulated measures that the state will take in case of risks, challenges, and threats. We have clearly defined what government agencies should do and what functions they will perform. As a part of the response to possible threats to the military security of our country, we clearly defined and communicated the views of Belarus on the use of the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in our territory.”*

Notes:

- 1 TNWs are designed for the battlefield and can greatly range in impact. A tactical nuclear weapon is any nuclear weapon not classified as “strategic” by U.S.-Russian arms control agreements, such as Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. For more information, see: “What are ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons?,” The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), [https://www.icanw.org/what\\_are\\_tactical\\_nuclear\\_weapons](https://www.icanw.org/what_are_tactical_nuclear_weapons); Most TNWs have a maximum range of 500km if land-based or 600km if airborne. For additional information, see: “Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW),” Nuclear Threat Initiative, 30 April 2002. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/tactical-nuclear-weapons/>
- 2 Previous reporting notes that the withdrawal of Russia’s tactical nuclear weapons would only be negotiable if the United States were to completely withdraw American nuclear arms from the European continent. See: *RIA News* (one of Russia’s largest state news agencies), 31 July 2023. <https://ria.ru/20230731/tyao-1887278977.html>
- 3 For the Polish perspective on Belarus’s tactical nuclear weapons, see: Andrej Wilk and Piotr Zochowski, “Russian nuclear weapons deployed in Belarus: the consequences,” Center for Eastern Studies (Warsaw based think tank) 6 June 2023. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-06-06/russian-nuclear-weapons-deployed-belarus-consequences>

## Iran Conducts Joint Exercises To Bolster Air Force

By Michael Rubin  
OE Watch Commentary

Iran’s Air Force traditionally lags behind its other military branches, but Iranian authorities are seeking to close the gap.<sup>1</sup> With the end of many sanctions and growing confidence, the Iranian Air Force is engaging in “defense diplomacy” with friendly regimes to improve pilot training and overall capability. While the excerpted article from a pro-regime website *Alef.ir* does not mention specific partners, there are few possibilities. Iran collaborates with the so-called “Axis of Resistance” consisting of pro-Iranian regimes or proxy groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Iranian soldiers have participated in exercises in Russia and former Soviet

states in Central Asia, many of which might also open doors to Iranian pilot training.<sup>2</sup>

Any willingness by other countries to welcome Iranian pilots for training courses or exchanges could enhance Iranian familiarity with aircraft and platforms it might encounter in conflict and enable Iranian Air Force personnel to surreptitiously learn about potential new technologies. For example, the Iraqi Air Force flies U.S.-produced F-16s that are a generation more advanced than jet fighters in Iran’s arsenal. Exchanges with Russia or China could foreshadow investment in their military markets. Air Force Commander Hamid Vahedi’s comments about “maintenance and repair of parts and airplanes” suggest

that the Iranian Air Force might use new partnerships to acquire spare parts or upgrade avionics. While Iranian leaders often embraced the rhetoric of self-sufficiency to suggest isolation and sanctions did not hurt them, the scramble for new relationships suggests the Iranian Air Force seeks to emerge from its isolation and play a greater role in Iran’s regional military calculations.

**“The Air Force has had a very good year in the field of defense diplomacy.”**



◀ Iran’s Yasin training jet unveiled on 11 March 2023.

Source: <https://cdn.isna.ir/d/2023/03/11/3/62547091.jpg?ts=1678512083735>; Attribution: Iranian Students’ News Agency



**Source:** “وسمه یاهروشک اب ش یامزر ماجنا یارب ش ترا یی اوه یورین ی گدام آب” (The Air Force is Prepared to Conduct Exercises with Allied Countries),” *Alef.ir* (website affiliated with conservative populist politician Ahmad Tavakkoli), 15 February 2024. <https://www.alef.ir/news/4021126042.html>

*Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi, commander of Iranian Army's Air Force, in a meeting of foreign military attaches in Tehran [coinciding with the 45th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution], said, “The Air Force has always been effective and decisive in every field that it has entered. The commander of the Army Air Force spoke of [recent achievements, including] “production and utilization of Yasin training light fighter bomber and purchase and acquisition of the Fajr-3 training aircraft of the Pak-130 training aircraft; production and operation of a variety of drones including Kaman-12 and Saman-22; performing long-range operations outside Iran's flight information region (FIR); manufacturing of various simulators, laser-guided bombs, anti-radar rockets, as well as the establishment of new science centers*

*including those focused on artificial intelligence.... He added, “The Air Force has had a very good year in the field of defense diplomacy, with a number of positive steps and productive instances of delegation exchanges, meetings and visits, training courses, and the dispatch of observers to exercises in other countries....”*

*He added, “The Islamic Republic of Iran [Army] Air Force is prepared to cooperate and interact as much as possible with aligned countries in various fields, including carrying out joint exercises, educational cooperation, especially the exchange of students and professors between aviation universities in various fields, cooperation in the affairs of maintenance and repair of parts and airplanes.”*

Notes:

- 1 For a moment the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps sought to develop a strike fighter, but it was unable to compete technologically with the U.S.-produced F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and upgraded F-16s, Russia's Sukhoi-35s, or their Chinese corollaries. Instead, Iran sought to jerry-rig and cannibalize its existing fleet to keep the dwindling number of its 1970s-era aircraft viable. For discussion of the state of the Iranian Air Force see: Michael Rubin, “Iranian F-14 Crash Highlights Iran's Need for New Fighter Contract,” *OE Watch*, 08-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/iranian-f-14-crash-highlights-irans-need-for-new-fighter-contract/>
- 2 For earlier Iranian participation in Russian war games, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: Revolutionary Guards Take Part in Russian Military Games,” *OE Watch*, September 2016. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195247/download>; For Iranian participation in Chinese war games, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: IRGC Training in China,” *OE Watch*, September 2017. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/205061/download>

## Iranians Using Black Market VPNs To Bypass Restrictions



Abolhassan Firouzabadi, secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace, poses in 2018.

Source: <https://www.atnnews.ir/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/bazdid-fazaye-majazi-ertebatat-8.jpg>;  
Attribution: Allameh Tabataba'i News Agency

By Michael Rubin  
OE Watch Commentary

While Iran has long sought to constrain internet access and limit the information ordinary Iranians can access, Iranians' use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass

restrictions and regime censorship is flagrantly increasing. According to the excerpted article from Iran's main financial newspaper *Donya-e Eqtesad*, almost two-thirds of Iranians now use a VPN. Among those affiliated with universities and scientific institutions, that number increases to more than 90 percent, suggesting that rhetoric about indigenous scientific prowess and a national intranet aside, Iranian researchers find no substitute for the information they gather from abroad.<sup>1</sup> It also suggests that Iranians do not accept the government's previous efforts to greenlight specific VPNs.<sup>2</sup> Iranians grumble that the regime's efforts to filter and censor the internet is rendering free VPNs worthless and is driving up the cost of paid services

that must constantly augment their products to stay ahead of regime censorship attempts.<sup>3</sup> Notably, the article also reveals that the amount Iranians spend on VPNs exceeds the combined revenue of the top two Iranian cell phone companies.

Open discussion about nominally illegal technologies in Iran reflects the widespread rejection of regime precepts by the broader Iranian population.<sup>4</sup> Such a widespread embrace of VPNs by both the general population and the educated elites suggests that Iranians are primed for change. While the government's monopoly of force can perpetuate internet restrictions regardless of popular will, the desperation by Iranians to escape the Islamic Republic's ideological bubble indicates that it would be naïve to accept regime claims of popular legitimacy.

**“Surveys show that about 64 percent of [Iranian] users use VPNs.”**

**Source:** “نایپی و هاس رازاب” (Black Market VPN), *Donya-e Eqtesad* (Iranian financial newspaper, 13 February 2024. <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/نایپی-و-هاس-رازاب-19/4045965-لالتیجی-د-رازاب-شخب>)

.... The number of users who buy VPNs is constantly increasing. Meanwhile, studies show that the price of filter breakers is getting more expensive by the day, and the volatility of the black market is also the result of inflation. People are forced to pay exorbitant prices for their natural right, i.e. free access to the Internet, to the extent that according to some statistics, in the past year, the annual gross for filter breakers reached

300 trillion rials [\$7.14 billion]... greater than the revenue of the country's two largest mobile providers.

In July-August this year, the Majlis Industry Commission published a report on the state of the Internet, in which it presented interesting statistics about the extent of people's use of VPNs. According to this report, credible surveys show that about 64

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*percent of users use VPNs, and anonymous bandwidth share on the international network was less than five percent last year but now stands at 25 percent. During the presentation of the report of the Majlis' Industries and Mines Commission, Gholamreza Nouri Ghezeljeh, the head of the independent faction in the Majlis [parliament] pointed to the statistics of 64 percent of people using filter breakers and said that some*

*scientific centers reported up to 96 percent of the use of such workarounds to filters in scientific centers.... The frequent blocking of free VPNs has forced users to buy paid VPNs. Marzieh Adham, a communications scientist and cyberspace activist, told Donya-ye Eqtesad, "The reason for the price of VPNs is that the VPNs that are designed are constantly blocked and need to be recreated and made available to users."*

Notes:

- 1 For an earlier discussion of Iranian efforts to create a national intranet, see: Michael Rubin, "Iran: Progress on National Intranet," *OE Watch*, July 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/312355>
- 2 For an earlier discussion of Iranian efforts to create state-sanctioned VPNs, see: Michael Rubin, "Iran Established Official VPN Operators," *OE Watch*, December 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/345959>
- 3 For broader discussion of Iranian efforts to censor the internet, see: Michael Rubin, "Evolution of Iranian Surveillance Strategies Toward the Internet and Social Media," *The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance*, December 2019. <https://www.aei.org/articles/evolution-of-iranian-surveillance-strategies-toward-the-internet-and-social-media/>
- 4 The current VPN battle parallels the efforts by ordinary Iranians to access satellite television in the 1990s. Iranians openly put satellite receivers on the roofs of their houses and apartment buildings. When efforts to bribe officials to look the other way failed, Iranians illegally imported ever-smaller satellite receivers they acquired in Dubai or Istanbul that they could better hide. After decades, the government effectively acknowledged defeat and stopped meaningful efforts to prevent Iranians from watching television programming from the outside world.



## Iran Warns United States Against Attacking Ships in Red Sea

By Holly Dagues  
OE Watch Commentary

Iran has warned the United States against targeting cargo ships that the United States and others believe to be Iranian support ships feeding intelligence to Houthi rebels in Yemen. “Those engaging in terrorist activities against *Behshad* or similar vessels jeopardize international maritime routes, security, and assume global responsibility for potential future international risks,” the Iranian Army declared in an English-language video recently posted on its Telegram channel *Aja Media*, clips of which are included in the first excerpted post. The *Behshad* is a cargo vessel widely believed by Western intelligence officials to be a spy ship operated by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is said to be passing electronic intelligence to Yemen’s Houthi rebels—armed with drones and ballistic missiles—to spot and target ships passing in the Red

Sea region in reaction to the ongoing Gaza war.<sup>1</sup>

In the video, the narrator describes *Behshad* and other cargo ships like it—including the *Saviz* and *Behzad*—as “floating armories” stationed in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to prevent the hijacking of Iranian ships by pirates—a problem that began in the 1980s. According to the video, 93 squadrons have been dispatched to the region and thwarted 183 piracy attempts against Iranian ships. To maintain the ship’s innocence and its respect for international law, the video goes as far as to cite the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, claiming the ships are storage and support centers offshore.<sup>2</sup>

Very little information is available on the *Behshad* and other cargo ships in Iranian state media coverage. However, as per the second excerpted article, in April 2021, the IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported

that the *Saviz* had been the target of a limpet mine attack allegedly by Israel because it was believed to be “Iran’s naval base” for the Houthi rebels.<sup>3</sup> The third excerpted article published by the Iranian daily newspaper *Hamshari* reported that the United States and UK media coverage of the cargo ships in recent weeks were adopting “more hostile positions” because the media wanted to provoke the United States into a war with Iran.

**“Those engaging in terrorist activities against *Behshad* or similar vessels jeopardize international maritime routes, security, and assume global responsibility for potential future international risks.”**



“The Story of the *Behshad*’s Mission for Maritime Security,” Telegram video screenshot.

Source: [https://t.me/aja\\_media/3797](https://t.me/aja_media/3797);  
Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

**Source:** “ایدم‌آج‘ ناریا یم‌ال‌سای‌روهم‌ج‌ش‌ترا‌هن‌اسر” (Media of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army ‘Aja Media’),” “The Story of the Behshad’s Mission for Maritime Security,” Telegram video post, 4 February 2024. [https://t.me/aja\\_media/3797](https://t.me/aja_media/3797)

*Since the late 1980s, with the rise of piracy in the Bab el-Mandeb region, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea leading to the hijacking of several Iranian ships by pirates, the Iranian military, like many other countries, decided to deploy squadrons to this area in order to protect its commercial vessels and ensure the security of its shipping crew and commercial cargo. To date, ninety-three squadrons of the Iranian*

*navy have been dispatched to this region and have prevented 183 piracy attempts against Iranian ships before the pirates could reach them... Those engaging in terrorist activities against Behshad or similar vessels jeopardize international maritime routes, security, and assume global responsibility for potential future international risks.*

**Source:** “دوب‌ه‌چ‌خرس‌ی‌ای‌رد‌رد‌زی‌واس‌یت‌ش‌کت‌تی‌روم‌ام‌ین‌ست‌ش‌رازگ؟ (Tasnim Report: What was the Saviz ship’s mission in the Red Sea?),” *Tasnim News Agency* (IRGC-affiliated news source), 7 April 2021. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/01/18/2480574/%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B2-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AE-%DA%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF>

*This ship was the Iranian ship Saviz that was in the region for a long time already, and while some sources reported that it might have been hit by a missile or torpedo, a Tasnim reporter informed that likely this scenario is because of the explosion of magnetic and sticky mines on the body of the ship.*

*After the publication of this news, there were different discussions about the Saviz ship’s mission in the Red Sea, and some incorrectly—or on purpose—considered it to be Iran’s naval base to support the resistance of Yemen.*

**Source:** “داش‌هب‌روانش‌صوص‌خ‌رد‌ناریا‌ش‌ترا‌هن‌اسر‌پ‌یل‌ک‌هب‌اک‌یرم‌ع‌اف‌د‌ت‌رازو‌ی‌وگن‌خ‌س‌ش‌ن‌کاو” (The reaction of the U.S. Defense Department spokesperson to the media clip of the Iranian Army regarding the Behshad float),” *Akharin Khabar* (News aggregator with Telegram account), 12 February 2024. <https://akharinkhabar.ir/story/9941219>

*The Pentagon spokesperson regarding the Behshad vessel: We have heard things about the mission of this vessel, but it is Iran’s right to have a vessel in the Red Sea and conduct operations. We are not looking for a naval confrontation with Iran.*

*A journalist told him during a press conference: Iran has issued a warning and told America that you are not allowed to target this ship. Iran has announced that it is an anti-piracy ship.*

*continue on 31*

**Source:** “داد رادشه اکی رما هب زی واس و داش هب یتشک هرابرد ناریا؟ (Iran warned America about Behshad and Saviz ships?)” *Hamshahri* (Iran daily newspaper), 4 February 2024. <https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/830282/%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%88-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7-%D9%87%D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF>

*Some American and British media continue to create a media space to provoke the United States to attack Iran... Iran issued a warning to the United States on Sunday about the potential targeting of two ships in the Middle East long suspected of serving as*

*operations bases for Iranian commandos... It seems that Iran’s statement about the Behshad and Saviz shows Tehran’s growing concern that the American attacks in the past days in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen that targeted militias supported by the Islamic Republic.*

Notes:

- 1 Keir Simmons, Mo Abbas, Dan De Luce, and Matthew Mulligan, “Iran goes public with stark warning over suspected spy ship as U.S. refuses to rule out more strikes,” *NBC News*, 6 February 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-goes-public-stark-warning-suspected-spy-ship-us-strikes-rcna137150>
- 2 The vessels were sanctioned by the previous U.S. Administration in 2018. See: “Non-Proliferation Designations; Iran-related Designations Updates,” Office of Foreign Assets Control, 8 June 2020. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20200608>
- 3 According to Western media reports, the attack was apparently by Israel in retaliation for Iranian strikes on a Liberian-flagged ship owned by an Israeli shipping billionaire. See: Oren Liebermann, “U.S. watching as Iran quietly replaces Red Sea spy ship damaged in April attack” *CNN*, 6 August 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/06/politics/us-monitor-iran-spy-ships/index.html>



## Mexican Truckers Protest Rise in Cartel's Cargo Theft

By Ryan Berg  
OE Watch Commentary

Since the beginning of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's presidential term in 2018, 85,000 trucks have been targeted for cargo theft by transnational criminal organizations operating in Mexico.<sup>1</sup> In protest, truckers organized a national strike blocking highways around the country. According to the first excerpted article in the business-focused daily *El Financiero*, truckers have demanded an action plan from the Ministry of Interior, as well as greater protection from Mexico's National Guard. According to the article, an average of 49 truckers per day are subject to hijacking, kidnapping, and even murder, while their trucks are seized by criminal groups, emptied for content, and stripped and

sold for parts. The second excerpted article in digital news platform *Eje Central* notes that cargo thefts now cost companies \$400,000,000 per year. With this pressure, the Mexican government has acknowledged truckers' insecurity and committed to reinforcing highway security with 2,000 new patrols, 620 National Guard

units, and 800 more Interior Ministry agents.

The rise in cargo theft and truck hijackings in Mexico displays a concerning shift in the behavior of transnational criminal organizations. Whereas previously groups exercised territorial control to dominate drug and human trafficking routes, cargo theft has become one of the rising sources of cartel income derived from the loss of territorial control by the Mexican government, especially in rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

***“49 assaults on cargo drivers in Mexico are recorded daily, situations that not only put their physical integrity at risk but, in some cases, have resulted in fatal tragedies.”***



◀ A port of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border, where most Mexican truckers are bound with their cargo.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/36205567@N07/7314437264>; Attribution: CC BY 2.0.

**Source:** “Paro Nacional de Transportistas ‘sigue en pie.’ En estas carreteras hay protestas hoy 5 de febrero (National Strike of Transporters ‘still standing.’ There are protests on these roads today, February 5),” *El Financiero* (business daily), 5 February 2024. <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/2024/02/05/paro-nacional-de-transportistas-sigue-en-pie-en-estas-carreteras-se-movilizan-hoy-5-de-febrero/>

*The drivers of heavy vehicles confirmed that their mobilization is still ‘on’ and they will concentrate in various parts of the country this Monday, February 5...about 150,000 drivers are expected to participate... the Security Ministry agreed to the installation of a dialogue to continue the conciliation work and thereby reach agreements regarding the demands of the transporters, who ask for solutions on the issue of*

*extortion and the insecurity they suffer in their daily work...According to the members of the blockade, 49 assaults on cargo drivers in Mexico are recorded daily, situations that not only put their physical integrity at risk but, in some cases, have resulted in fatal tragedies. Cargo drivers mainly demand safety guarantees to carry out their daily operations without putting their lives at risk.*

**Source:** “Transportistas levantan protesta contra inseguridad en carreteras de México (Transporters raise protest against insecurity on Mexican roads),” *Eje Central* (digital news platform), 15 February 2024. <https://www.ejecentral.com.mx/transportistas-levantan-protesta-contra-inseguridad-en-carreteras-de-mexico/>

*The union agreed with the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to increase surveillance on the main roads. The Ministry of the Interior indicated in a statement that security would be reinforced with 2,000 new patrols and 620*

*National Guard troops. In addition, he added that 800 more agents will join in July. Thefts from cargo transportation cost more than 7 billion pesos each year, according to the Confederation of Industrial Chambers of Mexico.*

Notes:

- 1 For more information on cargo thefts and their impact on Mexico’s economic performance, see: Ryan C. Berg, “Will Mexico’s Insecurity Scuttle Its Nearshoring Moment?,” in *Bringing Supply Chains Back to Mexico*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, pgs. 24-26, October 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/bringing-supply-chains-back-mexico>
- 2 For estimates on the loss of the government’s territorial control in Mexico, see: “AMLO has adopted a passive attitude towards cartels,” *The Yucatan Times*, 28 April 2021, <https://www.theyucantimes.com/2021/04/amlo-has-adopted-a-passive-attitude-towards-cartels-chris-landau/>



## Iraqi Shia Militia Attacks Create Atmosphere of Uncertainty



Photo of Al-Nujaba Movement forces (from PMF) in the Makhul Mountains of Salah al-Din province, one kilometer from the ISIL front, 6 July 2016.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harakat\\_Hezbollah\\_al-Nujaba\\_in\\_2016\\_\(24\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Harakat_Hezbollah_al-Nujaba_in_2016_(24).jpg); Attribution: Fars Media Corporation, CC BY 4.0

By Lucas Winter  
OE Watch Commentary

Strikes and counterstrikes involving U.S. forces and so-called Iraqi “Islamic Resistance” factions of Shia militias may lead militant leaders to seek cover with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in ways that would likely strain U.S.-ISF relations. The first accompanying report, from the Qatari-aligned *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, claims that Islamic Resistance factions are seeking to safeguard their weapons from U.S. strikes by transferring them to ISF bases under Iraqi Defense Ministry control. The Islamic Resistance is a branding name used by various Iran-led militant Shia Iraqi groups, most prominently Kataib Hez-

bollah (KH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HAN).<sup>1</sup> These militias exert substantial influence in Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which are an appendage of the ISF akin to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>2</sup> As PMF units, the Islamic Resistance factions are part of the Iraqi state, but their interests and actions are rarely aligned or coordinated with those of the State apparatus writ large.

Since the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel, the Islamic Resistance has conducted regular attacks on U.S. positions in Syria and Iraq. The attacks escalated in late January 2024, when an unmanned aerial vehicle attributed to KH killed three U.S. Army

soldiers stationed in Jordan. In response, U.S. forces killed Abu Baqir al-Saadi, a KH official involved in planning the attacks. The strike followed an earlier one targeting a HAN leader. Both strikes occurred in Baghdad, prompting Iraqi government officials to publicly denounce them as violations of national sovereignty. Islamic Resistance and other Iraqi Shia militias in turn intensified pressure on their government to negotiate a withdrawal of U.S. troops and launch an investigation into the targeted killings. As reported in the second accompanying article, also from *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, KH also launched an investigation aimed at identifying and rooting out U.S. collaborators within the Islamic Resistance. As noted in the third accompanying article, from the pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar*, the Islamic Resistance’s attacks and threats may be used to sow distrust between the United States and ISF partner forces. The escalatory tit-for-tat between the Islamic Resistance and U.S. forces is ushering in an atmosphere of increasing uncertainty and distrust in Iraq, further complicating what is already a tangled and potentially volatile security environment.



**“Anxiety is rising in Iraq in general... [prompting] the faction leaders to change their tactics and movements and attempt to take stricter security measures to avoid being targeted by America....”**

**Source:** يكره مألأ فصق لآ بآن جتل شيج لآ دعآوق ىل! اهت حلسأ تآع دوت سم ل قنل طغضت ةحل سم لى اصف: قآرع لآ  
“Iraq: Armed factions are pressing to transfer their weapons depots to army bases to avoid American bombing,” *al-Araby al-Jadeed* (Qatari-aligned daily), 6 January 2024. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B6%D8%BA%D8%B7-%D9%84%D9%86-%D9%82%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4>

*Today, Sunday, Iraqi security sources in Baghdad revealed to Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that the Iraqi Ministry of Defense was under pressure to transfer ammunition*

*depots belonging to armed factions to Iraqi army bases and camps to prevent them from being targeted in the future by American aircraft.*

**Source:** لآ ىت غآلآ تآى ل م ع ذى فنت ب نطن شآو عم “ن نى نواع تم” نع آث حب ةى رس تآق ى قحت: قآرع لآ  
“Iraq: Secret investigations in search of “collaborators” with Washington in carrying out the assassination operations,” *al-Araby al-Jadeed* (Qatari-aligned daily), 11 February 2024. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA>

*The source told Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, on condition that his name not be mentioned, that “the accuracy of choosing the targets and the accuracy of carrying out the assassination operations indicated the presence of a dangerous infiltration and collaborators who provided accurate information to Washington to carry out its strikes”...*

*Anxiety is rising in Iraq in general, and among the factions in particular, which fear assassinations and other strikes that may be carried out by the United States of America, whose drones roam the skies of Baghdad on an almost daily basis. This has prompted the faction leaders to change their tactics and movements and attempt to take stricter security measures to avoid being targeted by America.*

*continue on 36*

**Source:** فادهال كنب لى إ «ةرافسلا» تمضت ةمواقملا «قارتخالا» ةيشخ نيي قارعلل يكريم لزع “American isolation of the Iraqis for fear of ‘infiltration’: The resistance includes the ‘embassy’ in the target bank,” *al-Akhbar* (pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily), 9 February 2024. <https://al-akhbar.com/Palestine/374023>

*...an Iraqi military official from the security crews residing inside the Ain al-Assad base (west of Baghdad), in an interview with Al-Akhbar, recounts his observations. Since the beginning of the base being subjected to missile strikes, he said, “The American forces have dealt with us with constant caution, and have their own security protocol in terms of inspecting all those entering and leaving the base. But after the*

*recent attacks, it increased its measures in a way that we did not witness even two years ago, when Iran bombed the base with a large number of ballistic missiles”...*

*He explains that “the American side deals with the Iraqi side with suspicion in terms of exchanging information, for fear of it being leaked to parties linked to the armed factions.”*

Notes:

- 1 Of the two, HAN has been by far the most hardline and active member of the “Islamic Resistance” since 7 October. See: “Who Are Nujaba and Why Did the U.S. Just Strike Them?” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 4 January 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-are-nujaba-and-why-did-us-just-strike-them> In late January, KH vowed to suspend attacks against the United States. HAN, in contrast, vowed to continue its attacks. See: “Explaining Apparent Muqawama De-Escalation Since January 28,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 7 February 2024. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/explaining-apparent-muqawama-de-escalation-january-28>
- 2 “KH operates the state-funded 45th, 46th, and 47th Brigades of the PMF. Chain of command nominally runs through the KH-dominated Popular Mobilization Committee in the Prime Minister’s Office. In practice, KH’s PMF brigades frequently disobey the government chain of command while legally remaining organs of the Iraqi state.” See: “Profile: Kataib Hezbollah,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 1 April 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah>; For an up-to-date overview on Iraq’s militia landscape, see: “Iraq’s New Regime Change: How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State,” *CTC Sentinel*, December 2023. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/iraqs-new-regime-change-how-tehran-backed-terrorist-organizations-and-militias-captured-the-iraqi-state/>

## Ecuador Faces Reprisals for Indirect Support to Ukraine

By Ryan Berg  
OE Watch Commentary

Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Latin American and Caribbean countries have been reticent to get involved.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, they have resisted calls to send Russian military equipment stockpiles to support either side of the conflict. For this reason, Ecuador stood out when, following the recent declaration of an “internal armed conflict,” Spanish wire agency *EFE* reports that President Noboa expressed his country’s desire to trade Soviet-era military equipment for a \$200 million security package of new equipment from the United States. This security package is meant to bolster the government’s position in the current domestic security crisis.<sup>2</sup> The Soviet-era equipment, six **Mi-8** helicopters, a rocket launcher, and anti-aircraft systems,

from previous arms deals with Russia would then be transferred to Ukraine. To avoid provoking the ire of Russia by signaling overt support for Ukraine’s cause, *EFE* reports that the Noboa government has referred to this equipment, as inoperative “junk.” Nevertheless, Russia responded angrily and referred to original contracts for the equipment, which allegedly prohibit the export of this equipment to third parties. In addition, following Noboa’s announcement, according to the second excerpted article from the Argentine regional outlet Russia’s phytosanitary agency halted imports of Ecuadorian bananas, claiming an uptick in flies. The article also notes that Russia is Ecuador’s second-largest customer for banana exports, and a halt in Russia’s imports of Ecuadorian bananas will hurt Ecuador

economically and force it to quickly divert exports to other countries.

**“The decision unleashed the fury of the Kremlin, which defended the parts sold to Ecuador years ago.”**

While the quantity and types of weapons Ecuador plans to send to the United States (and eventually on to Ukraine) will not, by themselves, change Ukraine’s fortunes on the battlefield, the decision is a potential watershed moment for Latin America because its governments have generally pursued a studious policy of “non-alignment,” with several regional leaders declining to send Soviet-era equipment in their stockpiles.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that Ecuador may pave the way for the region to assist Ukraine despite the threat of economic reprisals.



◀ A Russian military Mi helicopter of the kind Ecuador was prepared to donate to Ukraine.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mil\\_Mi-8MTV-5\\_Hip\\_82\\_yellow\\_%288587491042%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mil_Mi-8MTV-5_Hip_82_yellow_%288587491042%29.jpg);  
Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED



**Source:** “EE.UU. confirma que equipos soviéticos de Ecuador irán a Ucrania para guerra contra Rusia (The US confirms that Soviet equipment from Ecuador will go to Ukraine for war against Russia),” *EFE* (Spanish wire agency), 8 February 2024. <https://es-us.finanzas.yahoo.com/noticias/ee-uu-confirma-equipos-sovi%C3%A9ticos-215123186.html>

*The president of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa, described the equipment as ‘scrap’ so his country will receive new equipment worth about 200 million dollars...the Russian government transmitted to the Ecuadorian government its position regarding these supplies,*

*‘indicating the specific points of the agreements and contracts’ linked to Russian military supplies to Ecuador that the South American nation would violate if it re-exported them.*

**Source:** “Ecuador se ve obligado a buscar nuevos mercados para sus bananas tras el cese de exportaciones a Rusia (Ecuador is forced to look for new markets for its bananas after the cessation of exports to Russia),” *Infobae* (Argentine regional outlet), 14 February 2024. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2024/02/14/ecuador-se-ve-obligado-a-buscar-nuevos-mercados-para-sus-bananas-tras-el-cese-de-exportaciones-a-rusia/>

*The decision unleashed the fury of the Kremlin, which defended the parts sold to Ecuador years ago...The measure ordered by Vladimir Putin will considerably affect Ecuadorian exporters and, consequently, the profits that the Ecuadorian government receives from bananas. Now, Noboa must*

*campaign to relocate one of its top products in the world, outside of nations that interpose their political interests on commercial ones. At the same time, the president continues with his war against gangs, launched in early January, which he hopes to promote with new equipment.*

Notes:

- 1 For greater detail on how the region has remained “non-aligned,” see: Ryan C. Berg, Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Juliana Rubio, Henry Ziemer, and Rubi Bledsoe, “A Hesitant Hemisphere: How Latin America has been Shaped by the War in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 27 February 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/hesitant-hemisphere-how-latin-america-has-been-shaped-war-ukraine>
- 2 For more, see: Ryan Berg “Rising Violence Prompts Ecuador To Declare ‘Internal Armed Conflict,’” *OE Watch*, 02-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/rising-violence-prompts-ecuador-to-declare-internal-armed-conflict/>
- 3 For more on Latin America’s response to the war in Ukraine, read: Ryan C. Berg, Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Juliana Rubio, Henry Ziemer, and Rubi Bledsoe, “Two Years Later: LAC and Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 22 February 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/two-years-later-lac-and-russias-war-ukraine>.

## Sudanese Leader Sees Rwandan Model for Post-Conflict Sudan

By Jacob Zenn  
OE Watch Commentary

On 6 January, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the leader of the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (a paramilitary force formerly overseen by the Government of Sudan which has since defected), known as “Hemedti,” wrote the excerpted post in Arabic language on X (formerly *Twitter*) about his trip to Rwanda to meet President Kagame, and visit the Genocide Memorial Museum in Kigali. Hemedti’s remarks about the trip framed his own objectives in Sudan as mirroring those he perceives Kagame has achieved in Rwanda. Hemedti stated that Rwandans faced their problems after their civil war and genocide with courage and found radical solutions, such as *gacaca*,<sup>1</sup> which Hemedti compared to *judiya*,<sup>2</sup> or traditional mediation, in Darfur, Sudan. It appears Hemedti is open to an elder council in Sudan that would oversee conflict resolution in the country but, the council would ensure Hemedti’s paramilitary faction retaining power

over the rival Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).<sup>3</sup>

**“The war our country is experiencing today must be the last war.”**

Hemedti was initially seen as the underdog in the conflict with the SAF, Sudan’s officially recognized Army. However, his fighters’ brutal guerilla warfare tactics, honed when they operated as the notorious *janjaweed* in Darfur in the 2000s, have outmaneuvered the more conventional SAF. Moreover, Hemedti’s and his fighters’ humble beginnings—at least until they began monopolizing gold and other resource-rich mines in Darfur—may have endeared them to sectors of the embattled Sudanese population, which views the SAF as hopelessly corrupt and elitist and a continuation of the now-defunct Islamist regimes of previous decades.

Hemedti added during his visit to Kigali that the ongoing Sudanese civil war must be the country’s “last war” and the experiences of

other countries, particularly Rwanda, where Kagame has remained in power since the end of the Rwandan civil war, could inform Sudan’s own next steps. Hemedti’s remarks come as the Arabic-language website of the British newspaper, *The Independent*, published the second excerpted article about the SAF’s rejection of an invitation to attend the Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s East African Summit in Uganda, which would involve mediation between the SAF and RSF. The article notes the RSF would be negotiating with the SAF from a position of strength having continuously seized territory in Sudan. This may be why Hemedti has been touring Rwanda, among other East African nations, in anticipation of the RSF’s taking control of more parts of Sudan. Further, Hemedti is seemingly planning a Rwandan-style post-conflict transitional justice system in Sudan that, like with Rwanda’s Kagame, would see Hemedti remain in power for years to come.<sup>4</sup>

**Source:** “الي اجي ك تي دن اورلا قمص احل اب تي عام جل اداب ال ل يراكذتلا فحت مل ا موي لا ترز” (Today I Visited the Genocide Memorial Museum in the Rwandan Capital, Kigali), *Twitter.com* (@GeneralDagallo) (U.S social media website allowing users to freely post text, images, and videos known as “tweets”), 6 January 2024. <https://twitter.com/GeneralDagallo/status/1743703088676897259>

*Today I visited the Genocide Memorial Museum in the Rwandan capital, Kigali. It is one of the most*

*important landmarks in human history, because it witnessed a period of suffering and tragedy.... The*

*continue on 40*

*Rwandans themselves faced their problems with courage and found radical solutions through the experience of gacaca, which is similar to judiya in Sudan. This system established the principles of transitional justice in society, realized the idea of no impunity, and changed history from division to unity.*

*We, Sudanese, must learn from Rwanda. The war our country is experience today must be the last war, and we must work to create a fair and sustainable peace for ourselves and for the future for our coming generations.*

**Source:** “كراعمل امدت حاطسو و ”داغيإ“ قطاسو قلع عي نادوسل ا” (Sudan suspends IGAD mediation amid increasing battles),” *independentarabia.com* (Arabic-language website jointly administered by Media Arabia, and The Independent, which focuses on social and humanitarian events in the Middle East) 16 January 2024. <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/538051/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%82-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83>

*The Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Sudan has suspended its dealings with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) of East African Countries, which has mediated the*

*months-long fighting between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). IGAD offered to mediate between the army commanders and the RSF.*

Notes:

- 1 “Gacaca” courts played a role in transitional justice in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide and were known for being community-based and for providing lighter sentences to perpetrators who showed remorse and repentance and sought reintegration into their communities.
- 2 “Judiya” has been the main mechanism for traditional mediation, reconciliation and justice in Darfur, Sudan, where “al-Jaweed,” or respected elders and traditional leaders, engage in third-party mediation with the approval of conflict actors. Although it is yet to be fully established in Darfur, advocates remain optimistic that it could bring a new sense of “humanitarian diplomacy” to that region, see: Yasir Elfatih Abdelrahim Elsanousi, “Traditional Judiya Leaders in Sudan as Actors of Humanitarian Diplomacy: Are They Eligible to Fulfill These Roles in the Darfur Humanitarian Crisis?,” *Journal of African Studies and Development*, Vol 3 (2), July 2017. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329100692\\_Traditional\\_Judiya\\_Leaders\\_in\\_Sudan\\_as\\_Actors\\_of\\_Humanitarian\\_Diplomacy\\_Are\\_They\\_Eligible\\_to\\_Fulfill\\_These\\_Roles\\_in\\_the\\_Darfur\\_Humanitarian\\_Crisis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329100692_Traditional_Judiya_Leaders_in_Sudan_as_Actors_of_Humanitarian_Diplomacy_Are_They_Eligible_to_Fulfill_These_Roles_in_the_Darfur_Humanitarian_Crisis)
- 3 In Sudan, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which are led by General Abd al-Fatah al-Burhan, are in conflict with Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitaries, which are led by “Hemedti.” When al-Burhan became the Sudanese leader after long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in 2019, he failed to rein in and incorporate Hemedti’s RSF into the SAF. This ultimately resulted in a power struggle when, in April 2023, al-Burhan called the RSF a “rebel” movement and formally dissolved it. The two military factions have been at war since then and have received backing from external powers, but as of early 2024, the RSF has the upper hand in the fighting. See: Andrew McGregor, “Gold, Arms, and Islam: Understanding the Conflict in Sudan,” *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 21 Issue: 9 April 2023. <https://jamestown.org/program/gold-arms-and-islam-understanding-the-conflict-in-sudan/>
- 4 Besides Rwanda, Hemedti has also met with leaders in Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Djibouti since the start of the war with the SAF in April 2023.



## Inaction on Gaza Underscores “Arab Street’s” Presumed Powerlessness

By Lucas Winter  
OE Watch Commentary

“The Arab Street”—a broad term referring to Arab civil society sentiment—is strongly and uniformly opposed to Israeli actions in Gaza, according to several reputable opinion polls.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there has been little to no domestic popular pressure on Arab governments to take meaningful steps to curtail the Israeli campaign.<sup>2</sup> The first two accompanying excerpts, from the pro-Palestinian daily *al-Quds al-Arabi* and the pro-Palestinian news website *al-Rai al-Yaum*, illustrate a

perspective that considers the Palestine issue as primarily an Arab—rather than Muslim or nationalist—affair. By this view, the lack of Arab support for Palestine is a simultaneous indictment of Arab governments and the Arab public, both of which are seen as weak and powerless. This state of affairs, one of the authors remarks, has had the effect of “[carrying] the corpse of Arabism to its final resting place.”

The assumed powerlessness of Arab citizens and their governments notwithstanding, the “Arab Street” is

**“Gaza not only exposed the failure of the Arab and Islamic regimes in its historical test, but also exposed the silent failure of their peoples, revealed their deteriorating reality, and their weak and shameful positions, and carried the corpse of Arabism to its final resting place.”**

nevertheless seething. Scenes from Gaza continue flooding traditional and social media, broadcasting what the third accompanying excerpt, also from *al-Quds al-Arabi*, describes as “a live, terrible, and heartbreaking picture.” Arab governments’ denunciations and symbolic actions against Israel have not turned the Arab public’s focus away from Gaza, which remains a topic of daily discussion. Among Arab governments, Jordan is arguably the most vulnerable to popular pressure due to its large Palestinian population and shared border with the West Bank.

The fourth accompanying article, from the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, explains in detail the balancing act played by the Jordanian govern-



◀ Jordan map showing major cities as well as parts of surrounding countries.

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

ment, which is seeking to placate popular pressure to push back against Israel without enflaming the situation or otherwise “[raising] the ambitions of the angry street.” There is no indi-

cation that Gaza will fade from the center of Arab public discourse any-time soon. The relative quiescence of Arab publics and governments vis-à-vis the conflict, therefore, should

not obscure the continued pressures that are building on both to take meaningful action as the conflict in Gaza drags on.

**Source:** *المصدر:* “The aggression against Gaza and the absence of an official Arab voice,” *al-Quds* (pro-Palestinian daily), 26 January 2024. <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1/>

*There is no significant influence of Arab activity on the aggression and other things taking place in Gaza...*

*The Arab Street does not know how this issue is being discussed between Arab leaders and officials, with their counterparts in the world or among themselves, other than what their media circulates about rejection, denunciation, and repudiations, or descriptions of*

*international impotence without holding themselves accountable for this impotence ...*

*Officially, all Arabs reject the aggression that Gaza is being subjected to, and everyone rejects the occupation's plans, from destruction to displacement to killing. However, the Palestinians have not witnessed any Arab actions to prevent these plans from occurring...*

**Source:** *المصدر:* “Gaza brings the Arab street to its final resting place,” *Rai al-Youm* (Pro-Palestinian news website), 8 December 2023. <https://www.raialyoum.com/%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A/>

*Gaza not only exposed the failure of the Arab and Islamic regimes in its historical test, but also exposed the silent failure of their peoples, revealed their*

*deteriorating reality, and their weak and shameful positions, and carried the corpse of Arabism to its final resting place.*

**Source:** *المصدر:* “Gaza represents a dilemma for the Arab regime amid the angry street restlessness and the possibilities of the return of the Islamists,” *al-Quds* (pro-Palestinian daily), 2 December 2023. <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D8%BA%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84/>

*But the greatest repercussions of the Gaza war are brewing in Arab countries whose screens have not stopped broadcasting a live, terrible and*

*heartbreaking picture of what is happening in the Gaza Strip. The plight of the Palestinians has become part of dialogues on social media platforms and*

*continue on 43*

meetings over dinner and in the workplace. This all despite the efforts made by Arab countries to denounce what Israel is doing in Gaza and show political, diplomatic and humanitarian support for the Palestinians in the form of relief convoys, field

hospitals, and tolerance for protests. However, the Arab street is seething with anger at the situation, and sometimes uses demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinians, as it has in the past, to express grievances against the ruling regimes.

**Source:** نبي ندرأل افواخم فشككي يمسرل او يب عشل ا بضع غلا “Popular and official anger reveal Jordanian fears,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (Saudi daily), 1 December 2023. <https://aawsat.com/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%82/%D8%AD%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B9/4702941-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B6%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86>

*The inevitability of the intensification of the war on Gaza, and the possibilities of expanding the scope of the current conflict in the Palestinian territories to the West Bank, are real Jordanian fears that are revealed with daily developments...*

*Indeed, analysts do not disagree that there is a sharp division among the official elites in their assessment of the situation. There are fears that the statements of Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi will raise the ambitions of the angry street, especially after he described the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty law as “a document on a shelf with dust” ...*

*On the other hand, traditional elites called for “early recognition of an imminent danger.” The statements of former representatives and ministers Mamdouh Al-Abadi and Samir Al-Habashna and academic Sabri Rabiha received wide popular acceptance when they called on various occasions to “arm the Jordanian people” and prepare public opinion “for a possible military confrontation with Israel, which does not adhere to the values of the peace treaty with Jordan, and is even trying to tamper with it” ...*

*An unknown future awaits Amman on its western border with the occupying state...*

Notes:

- 1 These polls also generally express strong disapproval of U.S. support for Israel and general approval of the actions of Iran-backed “Resistance Axis” members in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. The polls include: “Wide public support for Hamas’ offensive on October the 7th, but the vast majority denies that Hamas has committed atrocities against Israeli civilians,” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 13 December 2023. <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/963>; “How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views,” *Arab Barometer*, 14 December 2023. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/media-news/how-the-israel-hamas-war-in-gaza-is-changing-arab-views/>; “New Poll Sheds Light on Saudi Views of Israel-Hamas War,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 December 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-sheds-light-saudi-views-israel-hamas-war/>; “Arab Public Opinion about the Israeli War on Gaza,” *Doha Institute*, 10 January 2024. <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/arab-opinion-war-on-gaza-press-release-en.pdf>
- 2 Some protests have occurred in Arabic-speaking countries, but none has been significant or created any meaningful pressures on governments. For Palestinian support in North Africa see: Jason Warner, “North African Wave of Support for Palestinians at Onset of Israel-Hamas War,” *OE Watch*, 01-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/north-african-wave-of-support-for-palestinians-at-onset-of-israel-hamas-war/>