

Foreign Military Studies Office

OEWATCH



Issue 8
2025

FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

China and Russia Conduct Joint Sea-2025 Exercise

10

Iranian Intelligence Asserts Domestic Control Despite 12-Day War Losses

30

Israel's Regional Operations Prompt Concerns About Broader Hybrid Warfare Ambitions

47

Source: <https://defenceagenda.com/joint-sea%E2%80%912025-naval-drills/>

CHINA

China's Army Newspaper Stresses Loyalty to Political Party

5

A recent Army Day editorial in the PLA Daily underscores the ever-important role of party loyalty to China.

Chinese Exercise Featuring "Robot Wolves" Aims To Enhance Tactical Advantages

7

Chinese military units are integrating unmanned ground systems, referred to as "robot wolves," capable of carrying weapons and performing various offensive and defensive tasks to enhance the effectiveness of offensive tactics.

China and Russia Conduct Joint Sea-2025 Exercise

10

China and Russia held their eleventh joint maritime exercise in the Sea of Japan, showcasing live-fire drills, submarine operations, and missile defense in a continued push to strengthen naval interoperability.

New Chinese Polar Research Vessel Navigates Russian Arctic Waters

13

China continues to invest and deploy research vessels in Arctic waters, suggesting the Chinese determination to have a presence in the Arctic even though China has no Arctic territory.

China Establishes an 18-Day Arctic Containership Route to Europe

15

China has recently launched a new and faster Arctic commercial shipping route to Europe; this will not only speed up commercial exchanges but will also give Beijing a deepening Arctic presence.

RUSSIA

Russia Expands Officer Education System To Achieve Personnel Goals

17

Russia is expanding its officer education system to create an armed force with 1.5 million personnel.

Russia's Refurbished Admiral Nakhimov Cruiser Starts Sea Trials

20

Facing an aging fleet, Russia has recently refurbished and is testing its Admiral Nakhimov battle cruiser.

Norway Celebrated Svalbard's Centennial Anniversary Amid Tensions With Russia

22

Russia continues to exploit the sensitive issue of Svalbard sovereignty to challenge NATO in the Arctic, reflecting Moscow's use of diplomatic pressure and hybrid tactics to contest Western presence in the High North.

Russia Exploiting Ties With Minority Communities To Maintain Influence With Damascus

24

Russia appears determined to retain a foothold in post-Assad Syria by collaborating with minority groups.

IRAN

Iran Replaces Air Defenses Following the 12-Day War

28

Iran has rebuilt its air defenses in anticipation of another war with Israel.

Iranian Intelligence Asserts Domestic Control Despite 12-Day War Losses

30

Iranian intelligence claims it maintains domestic control despite major losses during the 12-Day War with Israel.

NORTH KOREA

Kim Jong Un Photo With Troops Exposes Malnutrition and Stunted Growth

32

Kim Jong Un's ceremonial photo with his army's best-performing artillery troops shows small, seemingly malnourished personnel.

North Korea Rejects South Korean Rapprochement Efforts

34

Kim Yo Jong's authoritative statement disclaims any desire to improve relations with Seoul and denies the South Korean President's reports of any potential to do so. It also indirectly invites Seoul to offer unilateral concessions.

TERRORISM AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

Japan Expresses Concern Over Rising Piracy in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore Strait

36

A notable uptick in incidents of piracy in the Strait of Malacca and the Singapore Strait could increase instability in world markets, forcing regional powers to provide additional military and policing activity in the region.

Venezuela and Colombia Establish Economic Border Zone in Crime and Terrorism-Affected Region

38

The Venezuelan and Colombian governments agreed on the creation of a binational economic zone that could ultimately serve criminal interests, provide the Maduro regime a lifeline, and decrease regional stability.

Terrorist Attack on Benin Border Post Poses Threat to Nigeria

40

A surprise attack on Benin's border with Nigeria provides evidence of the Supporters of Islam and Muslims' (JNIM) expansion beyond Sahelian states and into new areas of operation in Nigeria. This could lead to JNIM linking with Boko Haram factions in Nigeria.

GLOBAL OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Pakistan Aims To Strengthen Air Defenses Following India's Strikes

42

While Pakistani aircraft held off Indian air forces during the first day of the May 2025 clashes, coordinated air strikes by India with decoys, drones, and cruise missiles exposed gaps in Pakistan's short- and medium-range air defense.

Turkey Leery of Kurdistan Workers' Party Disarmament and Integration Operations in Syria

45

The Kurdish terrorist group, Kurdistan Workers' Party, began disbanding in July 2025, ending a decades-long conflict with Turkey. However, Turkey still views the Syrian Democratic Forces as a threat in Syria until it completes integration with the Syrian armed forces.

Israel's Regional Operations Prompt Concerns About Broader Hybrid Warfare Ambitions

47

Israel's campaign against Iran and Hezbollah has spurred Egypt and Turkey to highlight hybrid war threats. Both countries are reassessing their defensive postures, while growing Egypt-Turkey ties and concerns over Israel's reach may reshape regional security.

Panama Asserts Sovereignty, Seeking To Cancel Chinese Port Concessions Amid Great Power Competition

50

Panama's government filed two lawsuits before the Panamanian Supreme Court, which could result in the cancellation of Hong Kong-based company Hutchison Port Holdings' concessions to run strategic ports at the Panama Canal.

The Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is part of the US Army Transformation and Training Command (T2COM), G-2, whose mission is to Understand, Describe, Deliver, and Assess the conditions of the Operational Environment. For over 30 years, FMSO has conducted open source research on foreign perspectives of defense and security issues, emphasizing those topics that are understudied or unconsidered. Operational Environment Watch provides translated selections with background from a diverse range of foreign media that our analysts and expert contributors believe will give security professionals an added dimension to their critical thinking about the Operational Environment.

The views expressed in each article are those of the author and do not represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the US Government. Release of this information does not imply any commitment or intent on the part of the US Government to provide any additional information on any topic presented herein.

The appearance of hyperlinks does not constitute endorsement by the US Army of the referenced site or the information, products, or services contained therein. Users should exercise caution in accessing hyperlinks.

OEWATCH

FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Issue 8

2025

Editor-in-Chief

Jason Warner

Editor

Dodge Billingsley

Creative Director

Susan Littleton

Regional Analysts and Expert Contributors

Chuck Bartles

Cindy Hurst

Lionel Beehner

Kevin Kusumoto

Ryan Berg

Matthew Stein

Dodge Billingsley

Lucas Winter

Holly Dagres

Peter Wood

Les Grau

Jacob Zenn



China's Army Newspaper Stresses Loyalty to Political Party

By Peter Wood
OE Watch Commentary

Every August, the editors of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) newspaper, *PLA Daily*, release an Army Day Editorial laying out key ideas for the PLA. Like the pseudonymous editorials in the newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, *People's Daily*, which reflect key leader concepts and ideas or are used to signal important developments, these Army Day editorials provide a snapshot of the leadership's current top priorities.^{1, 2}

In this year's excerpted Army Day Editorial, a key theme is political loyalty, which is likely influenced by recent official acknowledgement of the decision to remove senior officials from the Central Military Commission (CMC), including People's Liberation Army Navy Admiral Miao Hua. Miao, who oversaw political work, which includes loyalty and anti-corruption, was reportedly removed for serious violations of discipline.³ CMC Vice-chair GEN He Weidong is also reportedly under investigation.



Chinese People's Liberation Army Emblem

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Emblem_PLA.svg; Attribution: Public Domain

Since 2012, Xi Jinping has removed eight CMC members, likely testing his trust in the PLA's reliability.

“We must deeply advance the rectification of conduct and the fight against corruption, forge strong Party organizations that are politically firm and highly capable, and cultivate a high-quality cadre force that is loyal, clean, and responsible, capable of shouldering the heavy responsibilities of strengthening the military.”

Source: “在革命性锻造中铸牢政治忠诚 全力以赴打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战——热烈庆祝中国人民解放军建军九十八周年 (Forging Unwavering Political Loyalty Through Revolutionary Tempering, Going All Out to Win the Decisive Battle for the Centennial Goal of the PLA – Warmly Celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Liberation Army),” *PLA Daily* (newspaper of the People's Liberation Army), 1 August 2025. <https://archive.is/gAbXR>

Achieving the centennial goal of the PLA's founding as scheduled and accelerating the building of the people's army into a world-class military is a strategic requirement for comprehensively building a modern socialist country. Chairman Xi has clearly stated that the central task of our military's development in the coming years is to achieve the centennial goal of the PLA's

founding, issuing a political command to fight a decisive battle, demanding full effort and guaranteed success...

The entire military must thoroughly study and implement Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the military, forging the military's soul under the Party's banner, restoring and carrying forward the fine traditions of our Party and military, and the fine traditions of

continue on 6

military political work. We must leverage the exemplary role of advanced models, stimulate positive energy for strengthening the military, firmly establish the prestige of political work, more effectively demonstrate its lifeline status and role, and continuously enhance our military's political advantage under new historical conditions. We must unswervingly deepen political rectification⁴, carry forward the spirit of thorough self-revolution, emphasize political rectification at its root, resolve fundamental ideological issues concerning ideals and beliefs, Party spirit cultivation, official ethics, and personal character. We must deeply advance the rectification of conduct and the fight against corruption, forge strong Party organizations that are politically firm and highly capable, and cultivate a high-quality cadre force that is loyal, clean, and responsible, capable of shouldering the heavy responsibilities of strengthening the military, thereby providing strong political guarantees for the cause of strengthening the military. We must focus on military training and combat readiness, adapt to

changes in modern warfare forms and combat methods, closely align with combat missions, adversaries, and environments, and deeply promote realistic military training. We must systematically advance the building of new and new-type combat capabilities⁵, innovate models for combat capability building and application, and carry out military struggle with determination and flexibility to shape the security posture, contain crises and conflicts, and win local wars. We must promote planning and execution with high quality and efficiency, adhere to a path of high quality, high efficiency, low cost, and sustainable development. We must spare no effort to ensure smooth execution of plans, enhance the systematicness [系统性], overall integrity, and coordination of plan execution, conduct professional evaluations throughout the entire process of plan execution, leverage oversight to serve and promote plan execution, and ensure the successful completion of our military's "14th Five-Year Plan."⁶

Notes:

- 1 For more on these pseudonymous editorials see for example: Tsai, Wen-Hsuan, and Peng-Hsiang Kao. "Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams." *The China Quarterly*, no. 214 (2013): 394–410. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23509604>; see also: Howard Wang, "Political Discourse, Debate and Decision making in the Chinese Communist Party," RAND, 2025. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA3800/RRA3821-1/RAND_RRA3821-1.pdf
- 2 Examples of this kind of Army Day Editorial analysis include Michael S. Chase, "Army Day Coverage Stresses PLA's Contributions and Party Control," *China Brief*, 17 August 2012. <https://jamestown.org/program/army-day-coverage-stresses-plas-contributions-and-party-control>
- 3 Laurie Chen, "China purges senior military official Miao Hua from top ruling body," Reuters, 27 June 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-purges-senior-military-official-miao-hua-top-ruling-body-2025-06-27/>; K. Tristian Tang, "He Weidong's Possible Downfall and Xi's Trust Deficit With the PLA," *China Brief*, 11 April 2025. <https://jamestown.org/program/he-weidongs-possible-downfall-and-xis-trust-deficit-with-the-pla/>; Erickson, Andrew S. and Sharman, Christopher, "CMSI Note #11: Admiral Miao Hua's Fall: Further Navy Fallout?" (2024). CMSI Notes. 11. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/11>
- 4 Rectification means reassertion of the Party's central line and essentially the punishing or elimination of contrary ideologies or threats to the Party's rules. There have been multiple rectification campaigns during the Party's history.
- 5 For an explanation of this phrase and its meaning, see: Peter Wood, "New Domain Forces and Combat Capabilities in Chinese Military Thinking," *OE Watch*, 02-2023. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/new-domain-forces-and-combat-capabilities-in-chinese-military-thinking/>
- 6 Like the PRC State Council's national 5-year plans the PLA operates on 5-year plans, though these are not made public beyond of the broad outlines published in key leader speeches.

Chinese Exercise Featuring “Robot Wolves” Aims To Enhance Tactical Advantages

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

Chinese unmanned ground systems, known as “**robot wolves**,” are garnering attention after recently participating in a human-drone collaborative military exercise. Aired on state-controlled *China Central Television CCTV-7*, a military and defense broadcast station, the segment shows People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers from two motorized infantry companies within the PLA’s 76th Group Army, carrying **QBZ-191** assault rifles, QBU-191 marksman rifles, and man-portable rocket launchers, alongside robot wolves equipped with QBZ-191 assault rifles or reconnaissance payloads.¹ According to the first article excerpt, published by the Chinese Communist Party news service *Global Times*, the robot wolf was developed by state-owned China South Industries Group Corporation.² It weighs 154 pounds

and can reportedly navigate complex terrain, climb ladders, and overcome high obstacles. It can be used for attack, reconnaissance, transport, and support. The robot wolf was first unveiled to the public during the 2024 Zhuhai Airshow and is viewed as an upgraded version of an earlier robot dog, according to the second article excerpt, published in the popular pro-government Chinese-language website *Sohu*.³

The exercise shown on CCTV-7 combined traditional infantry units with modern drone technology. The *Sohu* article explains that typically, when PLA units execute positional attacks, they will first conduct reconnaissance, identify enemy targets, and then carry out precision strikes, all of which the robot wolves are capable of. The article

goes on to explain that based on the video footage, the troops conducted the traditional and highly effective “three-three system” tactics.⁴ While the three-three system tactics have been praised for being highly effective in offensive maneuvers against better-equipped adversaries on rugged terrain, the accuracy, vision, and quick reaction time of the robots and UAVs deployed offer another advantage, greatly elevating the overall effectiveness. A third excerpted article, published on Chinese internet platform giant *NetEase*, points out that the effectiveness of incorporating drones and the robot wolves into the traditional three-three system model has profoundly reshaped these tactics.

“China’s robot wolves have recently been deployed in a human-drone collaborative exercise... the robot’s first appearance in a Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) drill shown to the public.”

A prototype of the Robotic Guide Dog created by Dr. Reuth Mirsky of Bar-Ilan University, a leading university in Israel, moving around the campus. Several countries, including the United States, China, and Russia, are actively developing and testing robot dogs for military combat.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robotic_Guide_Dog_prototype.jpg; Attribution: CC-BY-3.0



Source: Liu Xuanzun and Liang Rui, "China's Robot Wolves Join PLA Exercise, Official Media Reveals," *Global Times* (Chinese Communist Party news service), 15 July 2025. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202507/1338433.shtml>

China's robot wolves have recently been deployed in a human-drone collaborative exercise, official media reported. This marks the quadrupedal robot's first appearance in a Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) drill shown to the public.

On the training ground, two motorized infantry companies from a brigade of the PLA's 76th Group Army conducted a confrontational drill featuring human-drone collaborative assault operations, the military channel of China Central Television (CCTV) reported on Tuesday.

Building on the traditional infantry offensive tactics, the exercise integrated unmanned systems such as drones and robot wolves to carry out combat operations, including preliminary reconnaissance verification,

precision strikes on key targets and covering charges during breakthroughs.

The robot wolf was first unveiled to the public at Airshow China 2024 held in Zhuhai, South China's Guangdong Province.

Weighing about 70 kilograms, the robot wolf is a utility quadrupedal robot platform with variants for attack, reconnaissance, transport and support missions. The robot wolf has high mobility and adaptivity in complex terrains. It can operate alongside human soldiers, overcome high obstacles and climb ladders, the Global Times learned from its developer, the state-owned China South Industries Group Corporation.

Source: "大国才玩得起：“机器战狼”在76集团军普及，美国造价是中国20倍 (Only Big Countries Can Afford It: "Robot Wolf Warrior" is Popular in the 76th Group Army, and the Cost of the US is 20 Times That of China)," *Sohu* (popular pro-government Chinese-language website targeting a youth and gaming readership), 17 July 2025. https://www.sohu.com/a/914719560_121200872

According to the CCTV program, the troops participating in the exercise are two small teams from a company-level unit of a combined battalion under the 76th Group Army. The first team cooperated with the "Robot Wolf" and the second team cooperated with drones. Although the exercise subjects are still the traditional "positional attack", the addition of new equipment has changed the battlefield combat form. This is a significant change. Typically, when the PLA conducts a positional attack, they first conduct reconnaissance, identify enemy targets, and then conduct precision strikes. During this process, while infantry charge and capture positions, other soldiers provide necessary fire support.

From the footage released in the program, we can see that the PLA troops still adhere to the traditional "three-three system" tactics - when three soldiers

attack, another three soldiers provide fire cover. During the attack, when the attacking team's ammunition is exhausted, the other soldiers will take turns to ensure the continuity of the attack and the support of firepower. During this process, the drone was quickly Throwing it onto the battlefield, it gives troops the ability to fight in three dimensions. UAVs not only have excellent vision and quick reaction time, but also the ability to strike accurately, which makes it almost impossible for enemy defenses to cope with it. Even infantry equipped with protective equipment find it difficult to resist the small ammunition of UAVs. In addition, UAVs can fly farther and farther. Of course, infantrymen need to be proficient in the operation of drones. After repeated training, this is the real weapon on the battlefield.

continue on 9

From “robot dogs” to “robot war wolves,” these four-legged robots have gradually developed into different combat types: reconnaissance, comprehensive support, and combat. The reconnaissance type is mainly used to collect target information and transmit data back; the comprehensive support type is like a “mule,”

responsible for transporting supplies, ammunition, and wounded personnel; the combat type can be equipped with rifles. It can demonstrate its powerful combat capability in performing complex combat missions, whether in field environments or in confined spaces.

Source: “大国才玩得起：‘机器战狼’在76集团军普及，美国造价是中国20倍 (Only Big Countries Can Afford It: “Robot Wolf Warrior” is Popular in the 76th Group Army, and the Cost of the US is 20 Times That of China),” *NetEase* (one of China’s largest internet companies, subject to regulatory oversight and censorship by China’s cyberspace Administration), 16 July 2025. https://www.163.com/dy/article/K4J2C47R05562LLY.html?f=post2020_dy_recommends.

In the (CCTV) footage, infantry squads collaborate with drones and quadrupedal bionic robots, seamlessly connecting ground and air information flows. The traditional “three-three” advancement model has been

profoundly reshaped by intelligent equipment. High-risk links such as reconnaissance, fire suppression, and material delivery have begun to be taken over by “Robot Wolf Warriors.”

Notes:

- 1 See: “前方高能！解放军首次公开机器狼作战画面：与无人机配合发动进攻！20250715 | 军迷天下 (High Energy Ahead! The PLA Releases First Footage of a Robot Wolf in Combat: Coordinating with Drones to Launch an Attack!),” *YouTube*, 15 July 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1m6_LKVYuWg
- 2 China South Industries Group Co Ltd produces light weapons vehicles, advanced ammunitions vehicles, and other equipment. “China South Industries Group Co Ltd,” *Bloomberg*, accessed 7 August 2025. <https://www.bloomberg.com/profile/company/CSIGCZ:CH>
- 3 See Cindy Hurst, “China Introduces New Unmanned Systems in Combat Exercises,” *OE Watch*, 14 Nov 2024. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/china-introduces-new-unmanned-systems-in-combat-exercises/#:~:text=China%20introduced%20and%20employed%20some,on%20new%20drone%20combat%20techniques>
- 4 The three-three system tactic was conceptualized in the mid-1900s by Lin Biao, a former Chinese politician and Marshal of the PRC who played a key role in the Communist victory during the Chinese Civil War. It is offensive in nature. In a three-three system, three people form a combat team, three of these combat teams forms a combat squad, and three combat squads form a combat group. Each soldier has a clear task, with one attacking, one covering, and one supporting. Two soldiers are in front, and the squad leader is in back. Covering significantly more ground than human wave tactics, the three-three system tactics has been used to overcome a better equipped adversary. “解放军打败美军的三三制战术，究竟有多厉害？(How Powerful was the PLA’s Three-Three Tactics in Defeating the US Military?)” *Zhuanlan* (a dedicated section within *Zhihu*, a popular Chinese Q&A website and social media platform known for its high-quality content), accessed 11 August 2025. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/165222230>

China and Russia Conduct Joint Sea-2025 Exercise



Chinese Type 054A guided-missile frigate took part in previous naval exercises in the Tasman Sea, February-March 2025.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Type_054A_frigate_-_/media/File:PLANS_Huanggang_\(FFG-577\)_20200720.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Type_054A_frigate_-_/media/File:PLANS_Huanggang_(FFG-577)_20200720.jpg); Attribution: CC BY 4.0

By Major Kevin Kusumoto
OE Watch Commentary

From 1 to 6 August 2025, the Chinese and Russian navies conducted their annual Joint Sea-2025 exercise in the area off Vladivostok, Russia.¹ According to official statements published in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tabloid *Global Times*, the joint exercise focused on “maintaining the security of strategic channels” and “responding to security threats in the Western Pacific,”² covering subjects such as submarine rescue, joint antisubmarine warfare, air and missile defense, and naval combat with live-fire training.³ According to the *Global Times* article, COL Zhang Junshe, a researcher at the Naval Military Academic Research Institute, identified three key highlights ahead of the joint exercise. First, it would focus on safeguarding maritime routes and, for the first time in the Joint Sea series, on responding to security threats in the Western Pacific. Second, it would emphasize air and missile defense, as “both China and Russia face serious missile threats.” Third, as a recurring exercise held since 2012, he noted that

it underscores the enduring strategic mutual trust between the two countries and reflects the steady growth of practical cooperation between their navies.

According to the excerpted article published by the CCP-controlled *Beijing Daily*, both sides showcased new tactics and methods, deployed new weaponry, and exchanged insights to learn from each other’s strengths and weaknesses.⁴ Furthermore, the four Chinese ships participating in the exercise offer various combat and support functions, covering multidomain warfare, coordinated operations, patrol and surveillance, logistics, and rescue and medical support. With instability and potential crises lingering across the Pacific, joint exercises like Joint Sea-2025 best demonstrate China and Russia’s ability to address these challenges, while also suggesting that future drills may extend to coastal force projection using landing and amphibious assault ships.

The joint naval exercises and patrols between China and Russia reflect the deepening of their strategic partnership as both seek to counter U.S. influence and alliances in the Pacific.⁵ For the first time, Joint Sea-2025 explicitly declared its intent to address perceived security threats in the Western Pacific, giving the exercise a more outward-facing and assertive posture. This underscores both nations’ efforts to sharpen joint operational skills and project themselves as a unified force, while also allowing China to steadily expand its blue-water naval experience.

“If in future China-Russia naval joint exercises include training subjects such as risk control in coastal areas and force projection, it is possible that we will also see the participation of large dock landing ships or advanced amphibious assault ships.”

Source: “国防部：中俄海军8月将举行联合演习 (Ministry of National Defense: Chinese and Russian navies will hold joint exercises in August 2025),” *Global Times* (tabloid newspaper under the CCP), 31 July 2025. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1839126666813920099&wfr=spider&for=pc>

Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang announced that the Chinese and Russian navies will hold the ‘Joint Sea-2025’ exercise in the sea and airspace near Vladivostok, Russia. The exercise will be conducted in three phases: troop assembly, joint planning, and joint drills. During the planning phase, both sides will carry out troop coordination, tactical research, and map exercises. The joint drills will include submarine rescue, anti-submarine warfare, air and missile defense, and maritime operations. The official theme of the exercise is “jointly maintaining the security of strategic channels” and “jointly responding to security threats in the Western Pacific.”

Military expert Zhang Junshe, who has closely followed the China-Russia Joint Sea series since 2012, identified three key highlights for this event. First, the exercise focuses on two main themes—safeguarding strategic maritime routes and, for the first time in the Joint Sea Series, jointly responding to security threats in the Western Pacific. Second, it emphasizes air and

missile defense, with Zhang noting that both China and Russia face “serious missile threats.” Third, the event underscores the high level of strategic mutual trust between the two militaries and reflects a significant increase in practical cooperation. Zhang added that this year’s joint and air missile defense drills will involve radar reconnaissance against aircraft, missiles, and drones, requiring both countries to share radar information—a demonstration of mutual trust.

Participating Chinese forces will include units from the Eastern and Northern Theater Command navies, such as missile destroyers, a comprehensive supply ship, a rescue ship, fixed-wing aircraft, shipborne helicopters, and marines. Russia will contribute a large anti-submarine ship, a light frigate, a lifeboat, fixed-wing aircraft, shipborne helicopters and marines. Following the conclusion of Joint Sea-2025, some vessels will continue with joint patrols in relevant waters of the Pacific, consistent with previous iterations of the exercise.

Source: “中俄“海上联合-2025”演习新舰实战 两国携手共护西太安全 (China and Russia’s ‘Joint Sea-2025’ naval exercise, two countries join hands to safeguarding Western Pacific security),” *Beijing Daily Client*, 9 August 2025. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1839968535725771613&wfr=spider&for=pc>

On August 1, the opening ceremony of the China-Russia ‘Joint Sea-2025’ was held in the port of Vladivostok, Russia. On August 3, the maritime training phase of the event was fully launched. Military expert Wei Dongxu noted that both sides practiced using shipborne radar to track simulated aerial targets such as drones, conducting search, tracking, and location drills. Joint anti-submarine warfare was also carried out, with China deploying conventional submarines to train in

tracking and detecting enemy submarine activity. During the exercise, both navies showcased new tactics and methods, tested new weaponry, and exchanged insights to learn from each other’s strengths and weaknesses.

China dispatched four ships: the Shaoxing, a type 052D guided missile destroyer equipped with advance electronic and acoustic systems; the Urumqi, another Type 052D destroyer with strong multi-domain combat capabilities, including anti-sea, anti-air, anti-shore,
continue on 12

and anti-submarine operations; the *Qiandao Hu*, a supply ship with expensive logistics capacity and flexible replenishment methods; and the *Xihu*, a rescue vessel with modular carrying capability for search and rescue, medical treatment, and maintenance. Russia contributed a large anti-submarine ship, a light frigate, a lifeboat, as well as fixed-wing aircraft, shipborne helicopters, and marines.

Wei Dongxu emphasized that the 'Joint Sea' series is becoming a key platform for cooperation between the Chinese and Russian navies, with each iteration achieving new successes and improvements. He argued that this reflects growing mutual trust between the two navies, which he described as critical given the instability of the Pacific region. Looking ahead, Wei suggests that future exercises may become more comprehensive and could expand to include coastal landings and amphibious operations.

Notes:

- 1 To watch official coverage of 'Joint Sea-2025,' see CCTV-7 news coverage, *CCTV-7 Military Report*, 5 August 2025. <https://tv.cctv.com/2025/08/05/VIDEQRugBWble45XyjqDAXf4250805.shtml>
- 2 Official statements regarding 'Joint Sea-2025,' published on *CCTV-7 Military Report* official Weibo account, Weibo, 1 August 2025. <https://weibo.com/6189120710/PDP7erCkb>
- 3 Liang Rui, "China, Russia Joint Sea-2025 naval drill enters full maritime exercise phase," *Global Times*, 03 August 2025. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202508/1339962.shtml>
- 4 To watch Wei Dongxu's analysis and commentary on 'Joint Sea-2025,' see his CCTV-13 interview, *CCTV-13 News Coverage*, 9 August 2025. <https://tv.cctv.com/2025/08/09/VIDEQEPwRa85spSYfVA8zgtr250809.shtml>
- 5 Patricia Kim, Asli Aydintasbas, Angela Stent, and Tara Varma, "The China-Russia relationship and threats to vital US interests," *Brookings*, 16 December 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-china-russia-relationship-and-threats-to-vital-us-interests/>

New Chinese Polar Research Vessel Navigates Russian Arctic Waters

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

China continues to expand its Arctic-capable fleet with icebreakers and research vessels. According to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, its newest research vessel, the *Tan Sun San Hao*, was built in a record ten months and finished its sea trials in late 2024. The *Tan Sun San Hao* sailed past Kamchatka towards the Bering Strait in early August. According to the article, the *Tan Sun San Hao* has Russian permission to sail along its Arctic coast from 3 August to 30 September. The duration of its Arctic trials is not yet announced.

Chinese interest and exploration of the Arctic and deep-sea research are evident. According to the excerpted article from India-based *Eurasian Times*, Beijing is currently in the process of building one of the world's largest fleets of polar research ships, with the *Tan Sun San Hao* being the newest addition. According to the Times article, China's focus seems to signal that it intends to be a long-term player in the Arctic, despite having no territorial claims in the region.



Seal of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The Academy took delivery of the *Tan Sun San Hao* in December 2024.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Academy_of_Sciences#/media/File:Seal_of_the_Chinese_Academy_of_Sciences.png; Attribution: Public Domain

“Research icebreaker Tan Sun San Hao is operated by China’s Institute of Deep-sea Science and Engineering. It is designed for year-round operations in thick ice.”

Source: Atle Staalesen, “China’s first multi-functional icebreaker for deep-sea research is on its way into the Russian Arctic,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 20 August 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/with-new-icebreaking-research-vessel-beijing-sets-eye-on-russias-arctic-seabed/435309>

Research icebreaker Tan Sun San Hao is operated by China’s Institute of Deep-sea Science and Engineering. It is designed for year-round operations in thick ice. With its new icebreaking research vessel, Beijing sets eye on Russia’s Arctic seabed. China’s first multi-functional icebreaker for deep-sea research is on its way into the Russian Arctic.

It is the first Arctic voyage of the Tan Sun San Hao. The 104-meter-long ship was rolled out from the Guangzhou Shipyard International in December 2024. Half a year later, it set out from the port of Nansha with a course for the Arctic.

The Tan Sun San Hao is an icebreaker with Polar Class 4. It can sail in sea-ice up to a meter thick. It will be operated by the Institute of Deep-sea Science and Engineering. Judging from the ship tracking service MarineTraffic, the vessel in early August sailed past Kamchatka towards the Bering Strait.

The ship is expected to sail into Russian Arctic waters. A document from the Russian Northern Sea Route Administration shows that it has permission to sail along the Arctic coast during the period between August 3 and September 30. Judging from information from the

continue on 14

Administration, the Tan Sun San Hao is the only Chinese icebreaker that will sail in the area this year. In previous years, both the Xuelong and Xuelong-2 Chinese large icebreakers have paid visits to Russian Arctic waters.

According to retired Indian Rear Admiral Monty Khanna, China is by far the country with the largest investments in deep-sea research. In 2016, China established the Institute of Deep-sea Science and Engineering (IDSSE). The institution functions directly under the

Chinese Academy of Science. China has the National Deep Sea Center (NDSC), which operates under the Ministry of Natural Resources. The Arctic is one of the priority areas of the deep-sea research activities..

The Tan Sun San Hao was built in record time. Steel cutting reportedly commenced on 25 June 2023. She was subsequently launched in April 2024 in a record time of ten months. She underwent sea trials in October 2024 and was delivered to the IDSSE on 29 Dec 2024.

Source: “Five Chinese Icebreakers Push Into The Arctic, Come Within 290 NM Of Alaska; Should The U.S. Be Alarmed?,” *The Eurasian Times* (India-based global news service), 25 August 2025. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/header-chinas-expanding-polar-footprint-five-icebreakers/>

Earlier this month, a fleet of five Chinese icebreakers and research vessels entered the Arctic Ocean after passing through the Bering Strait. The ships included the Xue Long 2 (Snow Dragon 2), a state-of-the-art polar research icebreaker, along with several other vessels equipped with deep-sea submersibles and laboratories.

According to tracking data, the ships came within 290 nautical miles of Alaska—close enough for the U.S. Coast Guard to send aircraft and a cutter to monitor their movements... From Beijing’s perspective, the voyage was entirely legitimate. Chinese analysts pointed out that under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the exclusive economic zone of any country extends only 200 nautical miles from its coast.

Still, the timing and scale of the operation raised eyebrows. Over the past decade, China has declared itself a “near-Arctic state,” a label that many in Washington view as opportunistic. By building one of the world’s

largest fleets of polar research ships, Beijing is signaling that it intends to be a long-term player in the Arctic, even though it has no territory there.

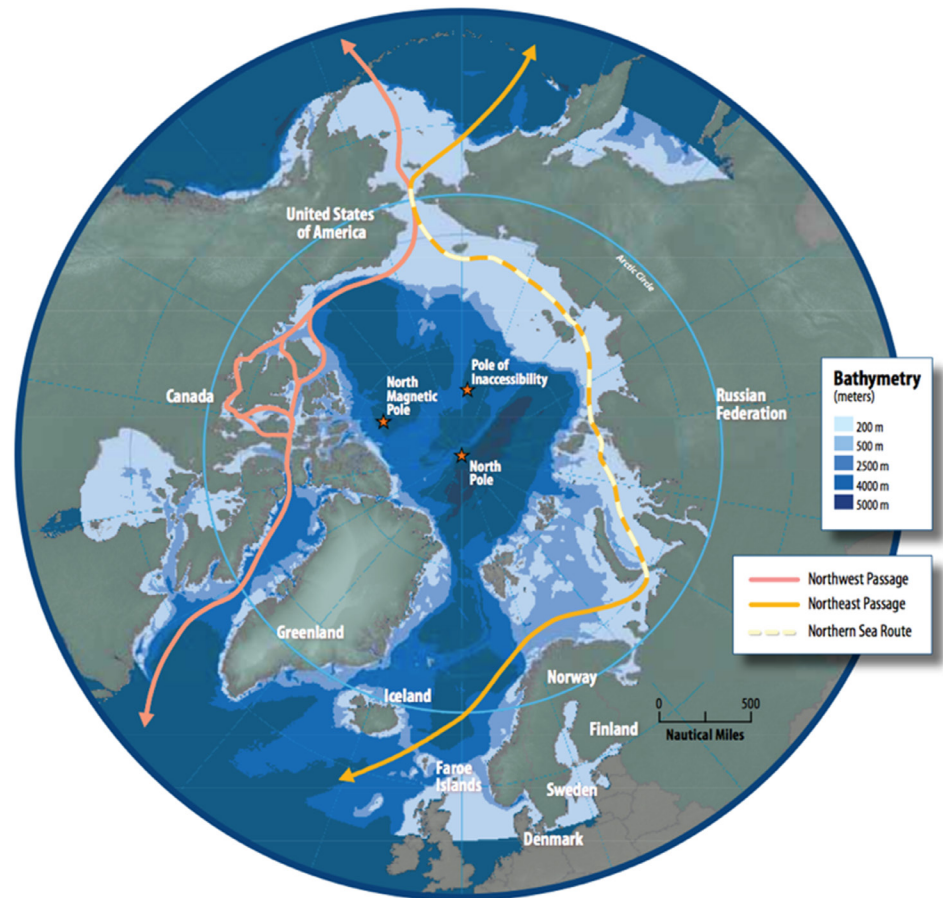
The fuss over a handful of research ships might seem excessive, but the Arctic is increasingly central to global strategy. The melting of sea ice is opening up two major shipping routes: the Northern Sea Route along Russia’s coast and the Northwest Passage across Canada’s Arctic archipelago... For China, which depends heavily on maritime trade, shorter and cheaper routes are enormously attractive.

Beyond shipping, the Arctic holds vast reserves of oil, gas, and minerals. Estimates suggest that 13 percent of the world’s undiscovered oil and 30 percent of its undiscovered gas may lie beneath the Arctic seabed. As the ice retreats, competition to exploit these resources is likely to intensify... China has no bases in the Arctic but is building the capacity to project its presence.

China Establishes an 18-Day Arctic Containership Route to Europe

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

China is exploring a faster cargo alternative to the standard 28-day China-to-Europe cargo container delivery via the Suez Canal. According to the excerpted article from the Norway-based *High North News*, China has launched its first container ship route via the Arctic, estimated to take only 18 days. The announcement will affect the operational environment in numerous ways. The Arctic route offers a more economical journey, nearly halving the duration compared to the Suez option. The new route will also avoid current and potential conflicts in the Middle East that are likely to have a direct impact on shipping in that region. This route will give China a greater presence in the Arctic, which can justify additional Chinese naval operations in the region if Beijing determines there is any threat



to its Arctic shipping, akin to China's naval escort mission to protect shipping from piracy off the coast of East Africa.

Map of the Arctic region showing the longstanding bathymetry and the Northeast Passage, the Northern Sea Route within it, and the Northwest Passage. China plans on using the Arctic routes to cut shipping time to its global export partners.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arctic_shipping_routes_-_/media/File:Map_of_the_Arctic_region_showing_the_Northeast_Passage,_the_Northern_Sea_Route_and_Northwest_Passage,_and_bathymetry.png
Attribution: Public Domain

“A Chinese shipping company is set to launch the first liner-type container shipping route via the Arctic. The service will begin in September connecting three ports in China to four destination ports in Western Europe.”

Source: Malte Humpert, “China Launches 18-Day Arctic Express Containership Route To Europe With Stops in UK, Germany, Poland,” *High North News* (independent newspaper published by the High North Center at the Nord University, Bodo Norway), 18 August 2025. <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-launches-18-day-arctic-express-containership-route-europe-stops-uk-germany-poland>

A Chinese shipping company is set to launch the first liner-type container shipping route via the Arctic. The

service will begin in September connecting three ports in China to four destinations in Western Europe. The
continue on 16

country's Ministry of Transport has begun to release live sea ice monitoring to improve safety for Arctic shipping. After several years of point-to-point container shipping operations connecting China and Russia via the Arctic, a Chinese operator is set to begin the first liner-type service to Western Europe.

Haijie Shipping Company will launch its China-Europe Arctic Express service in September. The routing will connect the port of Ningbo-Zhoushan with the UK's largest container port, Felixstowe, with onward sailings to Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Hamburg, Germany and Gdansk, Poland. The service will originate in Qingdao with a stop in Shanghai. The Arctic portion of the route from Ningbo to Felixstowe via Russia's Northern Sea Route is scheduled to take just 18 days, less than half of a traditional sailing via the Suez Canal.

The route will be seasonal until high ice-class container-ships can expand the sailing window into winter and spring. The inaugural voyage, set to depart on September 20, has been fully booked. The low ice-class containership Istanbul

Bridge has a capacity of 4,890 standard containers (TEU), small by today's standards for the Suez and Panama Canals but a significant size for the nascent Arctic service.

Haijie's service will bypass Russian ports entirely. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine an increasing share of Arctic shipping, including container operations, focused on service between Russia and China. Last year 95 percent of all transit cargo via the Northern Sea Route flowed between the two countries.

Further highlighting China's interest in expanding shipping via the Arctic, the country's North Sea Navigation Support Center of the Ministry of Transport has begun releasing a live Arctic sea ice monitoring product together with Tianjin Marine Center Meteorological Observatory. The product greatly improves the spatial resolution of Arctic Sea ice monitoring, identifies waters passable by ships, and provides more accurate data support for the safety of Arctic shipping routes.

Russia Expands Officer Education System To Achieve Personnel Goals

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

At a December 2022 Collegium of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Russia announced a massive expansion of the Russian military, including an increase from approximately 1 million to 1.5 million uniformed personnel.¹ One of the major obstacles to Russia's long-term expansion plans is the availability of a sufficient number of officers to man a larger force.² According to the accompanying excerpted article from the Russian daily newspaper *Izvestiya*, Russia may overcome this obstacle by significantly expanding its officer education system.

The Russian Defense Ministry plans to open 15 military academies between 2025 and 2034. For the most part, these academies are not new but simply reopened after being shut down during the 2008 New Look reforms that downsized the Russian Armed Forces. One notable exception is the new academy



Russian postal stamp of the Omsk Higher Combined Arms Command School.

Source: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Омское_высшее_общевойсковое_командное_училище#/media/Файл:Russia_stamp_2019_No_2549.jpg; Attribution: Public Domain

“Foreign officers trained in our universities are Russia’s soft influence in different regions of the world for decades to come.”

for the Unmanned Vehicle Troops³ scheduled to open on 1 September 2027.⁴ It is important to note that Russia likely sees these new academies not just as a means of producing new officers,

but also as an important means of projecting soft power. Russian academies have historically had large numbers of foreign officers in attendance. Educating foreign officers is considered a way of exporting knowledge of Russia and the Russian way of war, demonstrating commitment, and creating lasting influence in foreign militaries.



Emblem of the Saratov Higher Military Engineering School of Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defense

Source: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Саратовское_высшее_военное_инженерное_училище_радиационной,_химической_и_биологической_защиты#/media/Файл:4dbkS0gmDaituA8jLT0vbyjss7XRdUCvrZ91WmtolqRNpRyOX-37wTkdnNgNtdX-k74UMpvdvh.jpg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

Source: Timofey Volkov and Fedor Gorbunov, “Задел кадров: в России значительно увеличат число военных вузов (Personnel Backlog: Russia to Significantly Increase Number of Military Universities),” *Izvestiya* (Russian daily newspaper), 1 July 2025. <https://iz.ru/1912965/timofei-volkov-fedor-gorbunov/zadel-kadrov-v-rossii-znacitelno-uvelicat-cislo-voennyh-vuzov>

The Russian Defense Ministry is discussing an initiative to create 15 new military academies within ten years. Training of cadets in them will begin between 2025 and 2034.

In 2025, the Saratov Higher Military Engineering School of Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defense and the Nizhny Novgorod Higher Military Engineering School will open. Preparations for the admission of cadets are being completed...According to the publication's sources, the largest number of academies may begin their work in 2026 — three at once. According to the preliminary plan, these are the Chelyabinsk Higher Tank Command School, the Ulyanovsk Higher Military Aviation School of Pilots, and the Novocherkassk Higher Military Command School of Communications...In 2027, the Higher Military School of Unmanned Vehicle Troops in the Moscow Region will begin accepting cadets. In 2028, the Omsk Higher Combined Arms Command School...In 2029, the Krasnoyarsk Higher Military School of Air Defense Radioelectronics. In 2032, the Pushkin Higher Military School (Aerospace Defense)...It is proposed to open four branches of the Military Medical Academy over the next few years: in 2029 in Sevastopol, in 2032 in Samara, in 2033 in Novosibirsk, and in 2034 in Khabarovsk. The Tomsk Higher Military Command School of Communications will be the last to accept cadets, which should happen in 2034.

Military experts noted that most of the universities will be established are in the same cities where they were closed during the [New Look] reforms that occurred the post-Soviet era. The new military universities will prepare the missing personnel for the Russian Armed Forces, they note. There is a shortage of officers now, especially at the lower and middle levels — this is

felt during the SMO [special military operation].⁵ We should not forget that new military units and districts are being created now, where competent commanders are also needed, — military expert Viktor Litovkin told Izvestia. We now need officers for all branches of the armed forces...

They will attract specialists with experience in the SMO, he believes. And they will be taken into post-graduate studies to prepare scientific and pedagogical personnel. According to the state's social policy, officers who have been wounded will be attracted there first. In the future, they will occupy positions in the teaching staff. They will also attract specialists from military training centers that exist at federal universities in Russia. New military academies will be needed not only by the Russian army. Viktor Litovkin reminded that the demand for training in our military universities is growing among foreigners. “They also need military academies, and not at the expense of training our own personnel...This is an important matter, and it cannot be left to chance. People educated in our universities know Russian and understand Russia. Foreign officers trained in our universities are Russia's soft influence in different regions of the world for decades to come.”

continue on 17

Notes:

- 1 “Изменение призывного возраста и увеличение армии: Путин и Шойгу выступили в Минобороны (Changing the draft age and increasing the army: Putin and Shoigu spoke at the Ministry of Defense)” TASS, 21 December 2022. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/16655079>
- 2 Russia’s military requires relatively little training for most enlisted personnel, but requires well trained officers, trained at four or five-year branch-specific academies (motorized rifle, tank, artillery, engineer, air defense, etc.).
- 3 Another interesting aspect of the article is some commentary by the well-respected Russian military analyst Viktor Litovkin. According to Litovkin “UAVs play an important role. But a hypothetical clash with NATO will have a different character — the role of UAVs will decrease. But missiles will be used more actively, the role of aviation, artillery, which can use special ammunition, as well as NBC defense troops, military doctors will increase.” If Litovkin’s understanding of the changing character of war resembles the thinking of other Russian theorists, Russia may posture itself differently in a conflict with NATO than would otherwise be expected from observing current Russian actions in Ukraine.
- 4 Russia currently has no specialized UAV academies, but the N.E. Zhukovsky and Yu.A. Gagarin Air Force Academy and the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School currently have unmanned aerial vehicle departments.
- 5 Moscow uses the term *spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya* (“special military operation”) or *spetsoperatsiya* (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.

Russia's Refurbished Admiral Nakhimov Cruiser Starts Sea Trials



The Admiral Nakhimov prior to modernization, circa 2014.

Source: Mil.ru, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_battlecruiser_Admiral_Nakhimov_-_media/File:Russian_Navy_Admiral_Nakhimov_Repair_1.jpg; Attribution: CC By 4.0

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Faced with an aging fleet and the difficulty of bringing new warships online quickly, Russia continues to modernize older naval platforms to meet its security needs, especially in the Arctic. According to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, Russia has refurbished the nuclear-powered *Admiral Nakhimov* battle cruiser, which last sailed in 1997. The *Admiral Nakhimov*, which recently left its shipyard for sea trials, is replete with rockets, torpedoes, and missiles, including the Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile. In addition to new fuel elements for its two nuclear reactors, the Tsirkon missile on board the *Admiral Nakhimov* will provide Russia with a weapon capable of hitting targets in the Norwegian Sea “with very short warning notice for NATO

“The warship will be armed with the Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile. This missile can, if launched from a position in the Russian sector of the Barents Sea, fly over land and hit sea targets in the Norwegian Sea with very short warning notice for NATO forces.”

forces.” The Northern Fleet, already the largest and most powerful Russian fleet, will get an additional boost in strike power from the recommissioning of the *Admiral Nakhimov*.¹

Source: Thomas Nilsen, “Nuclear powered battle cruiser sails again for the first time since 1997”, *The Barents Observer*, (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 19 August 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/nuclear-powered-battle-cruiser-sails-again-for-the-first-time-since-1997/435204>

The Admiral Nakhimov will be the largest operational warship in the Russian Navy. It will also be one of the oldest. On August 18, the 251-meter-long battle cruiser was assisted by tugs out from the Sevromash shipyard in Severodvinsk in northern Russia. The shipyard has not officially commented on the departure of the giant warship, but several social media channels from the region posted photos as the Admiral Nakhimov went out to the White Sea for the first time since 1999.

The Soviet built warship sailed for the Northern Fleet for the last time in 1997 and was towed to Severodvinsk in 1999 after being laid up in Severomorsk north of Murmansk for a two-year period. The state-controlled information agency TASS on Monday confirmed that the nuclear-powered battle cruiser had set out for the

first stage of tests. Later, the warship will sail north to the Barents Sea for sea trials that will last for several months before being officially deployed with the Navy.

Decades of modernization of the battle cruiser will eventually give the Northern Fleet a weapons platform packed with rockets, torpedoes, missiles and guns like no other of the surface warships in the Russian Navy.

*Russia's Defense Ministry has previously stated that the warship will be armed with the **Tsirkon** hypersonic cruise missile. This missile can, if launched from a position in the Russian sector of the Barents Sea, fly over land and hit sea targets in the Norwegian Sea with very short warning notice for NATO forces.*

Notes:

- 1 “Адмирал Нахимов’ вышел на заводские ходовые испытания (The Admiral Nakhimov begins factory acceptance trials),” TASS, 18 August 2025. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/24811503>

Norway Celebrated Svalbard's Centennial Anniversary Amid Tensions With Russia

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

On 14 August, Norway marked the centennial of its sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago with celebrations in Longyearbyen, the world's northernmost inhabited town. Crown Prince Haakon and Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre attended the event. Both leaders highlighted the stability and low tensions that Norway's "consistent and predictable" governance has brought to the Arctic Island since the implementation of the Svalbard Treaty in 1925, according to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*.

However, Moscow's renewed denunciation overshadowed the commemorations. During his weekly press briefing, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Aleksei Fadeev accused Oslo of "anti-Russian discrimination," "militarization," and violating the 1920 Svalbard Treaty. Fadeev alleged that Norway is restricting Russian scientific and economic activity on the islands, integrating the archipelago into NATO planning structures, and provoking confrontation in the Arctic. The Russian statement warned that Oslo's "provocative actions" could heighten tensions in the high latitudes, urging Norway to "reconsider its politicized and unconstructive approaches."

This is not Moscow's first attempt to challenge Norwegian sovereignty



View of Longyearbyen, Svalbard.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:View_of_Longyearbyen,_Svalbard,_from_a_nearby_mountain.JPG; Attribution: CC0 1.0

over Svalbard. In 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov issued a similar protest letter, claiming discrimination against Russian activities and calling for bilateral consultations—an idea firmly rejected by Oslo. Norway continues to assert that Svalbard is an integral part of its kingdom and that it exercises sovereignty there in accordance with international law.

For Moscow, the Arctic is both a symbol of national identity and a core element of military security, housing Russia's nuclear second-strike capability in its ballistic missile submarine fleet based near Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula, only 900 miles from the archipelago. These submarines must transit the shallow Barents Sea and pass through the

"Norway has full sovereignty over Svalbard and the exclusive right to exercise authority over the archipelago. We do so in accordance with principles of international law."

- Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre

Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap to reach the Atlantic, making control of this region strategically vital to Russia's deterrent posture.¹ A large

percentage of Svalbard's population, especially the town of Barentsburg, is Russian, which has raised suspicions of Russia trying to annex the

archipelago using hybrid tactics similar to its use of Little Green Men to annex Crimea in 2014.²

Source: Atle Staalesen, "Amid Norway's celebration of Svalbard Treaty comes another verbal attack from Moscow," *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site), 14 August 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/amid-norways-celebration-of-svalbard-treaty-comes-another-verbal-attack-from-moscow/435081>

The Svalbard Treaty was signed in 1920. Five years later, on August 25, 1925, it came into force and the archipelago officially became part of Norway.

"Norway has exercised its authority in Svalbard consistently and predictably for 100 years," Prime Minister Støre emphasized in a speech. "This has helped to keep tensions low in the High North."

"Norway has full sovereignty over Svalbard and the exclusive right to exercise authority over the archipelago. We do so in accordance with principles of international law," he underlined.

But not everyone is happy with the Norwegian rule over Svalbard. On the day before the celebrations in Longyearbyen, the Russian foreign ministry lashed out against the Norwegians.

In its weekly press conference, foreign ministry spokesperson Aleksei Fadeev accused Oslo of 'anti-Russian discrimination,' 'militarisation,' and 'violation of the Svalbard Treaty.' The country that wages the

most aggressive and bloody war in Europe since WWII accuses Norway of violating international law.

"We note the increasing efforts of the Norwegian authorities to strengthen their sovereignty over the archipelago in violation of the 1920 Treaty, to the detriment of our interests," he said and pointed at alleged increasing restrictions on Russia's economic and scientific activities in the area.

According to the Russians, Oslo is "taking steps to increase its military presence in the archipelago and bring it into the orbit of NATO's military and political planning structures."

The statement also includes a threat. "With its provocative actions, Oslo is creating an atmosphere of confrontation around the archipelago, which could lead to increased tensions in the high latitudes."

"The Russian side expects Oslo to reconsider its politicized and unconstructive approaches and return to the conscientious fulfilment of the commitments it made 100 years ago," the foreign ministry emphasizes.

Notes:

- 1 Tressa Guenov, Ian Brzezinski, "Dispatch from Svalbard: Tensions are simmering in the High North," *The Atlantic Council's New Atlanticist*, 9 July 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/dispatch-from-svalbard-tensions-are-simmering-in-the-high-north/>
- 2 "Tensions on Svalbard between Russians and Norwegians," *DW News*, 30 September 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY4ZmNmnnqxl>

Russia Exploiting Ties With Minority Communities To Maintain Influence With Damascus

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Despite reports of a Russian withdrawal from Syria following the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024, Moscow appears intent on preserving its influence in the country: rather than exiting, Russia is using ties with minority groups to position itself as a key broker in the country's emerging political order.¹ On 31 July, Syria's foreign and defense ministers met with their Russian counterparts in Moscow. Soon after, and apparently as a result of consultations in Moscow, Russian forces began reinforcing their positions at the Qamishli Airport in northeast Syria—territory held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).² As noted in the first excerpted article from the pro-government outlet *Syria TV*, Russian vehicles and personnel in Qamishli have been stationed in fortified positions, with military transport flights regularly arriving under cover of darkness. The second excerpted article, from the independent Lebanese outlet *Daraj*, describes a recent armed patrol by Russian forces near the airport, without SDF participation and seemingly at the behest of the government in Damascus. Russia, in short, appears to be carefully balancing between the



Syria map, showing Qamishli in the northeast corner.

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

Sunni government in Damascus and the Kurdish autonomous government in northeast Syria.

Beyond Qamishli and the Kurdish-controlled areas, Russia continues to maintain its presence at Tartous and Hmeimim, both nominally under the control of Damascus but located in Alawite-majority areas. Moscow's longstanding ties with key figures in the Alawite community—drawn from the core of the former Assad regime—remain a central pillar of its Syria policy.

Russia's continued military presence in Kurdish and Alawite areas does not have a counterpart in Syria's third key minority enclave, the Druze-majority province of Suwayda in the country's south.

The third excerpt, also from *Syria TV*, reports on a recent Russian article claiming that the Syrian foreign and defense minister delegation that recently traveled to Moscow requested that Russia conduct patrols in Druze-majority areas of southern Syria. The goal appears to be deterring Israeli strikes on Sunni

“New Russian-Syrian understandings that go beyond on-the-ground coordination, and may also pave the way for Damascus’s gradual return to some key areas in northeastern Syria.”

Arab pro-government militias that have clashed with the Druze.³ While Russia is unlikely to risk confrontation with Israel on Damascus’s behalf, Moscow appears intent on using its relationships with Syria’s minority groups—Alawites,

Druze, and Kurds—to shape the country’s political future.⁴ In doing so, Russia is positioning itself as a key player in Syria’s evolving post-Assad order, particularly in regions where its military

access and ties to minority communities provide enduring strategic leverage.

Source:

بتحركات ليلية.. روسيا تعزز قاعدتها وتزيد عدد قواتها في القامشلي

“With nighttime movements, Russia reinforces its base and increases its forces in Qamishli,” *Syria TV* (pro-government Syrian news website), 11 August 2025. <https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B2-%D9%82%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%84%D9%8A>

The source expected that there are presently approximately 200 Russian soldiers at Qamishli Airport. According to the source, Russia closed a site where senior officers were staying near Qamishli Airport and relocated them to a more fortified location in front of the airport gate. Russia also expanded the soldiers’ living quarters

and moved its vehicles away from exposed areas of the airport and into the Russian base. Russia still maintains a 24/7 radar at Qamishli Airport, three helicopters, and two cargo planes that fly back and forth almost daily.

Source:

ما الذي تفعله روسيا في القامشلي؟

“What is Russia doing in Qamishli?” *Daraj* (independent Lebanese news website), 13 August 2025. <https://daraj.media/%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%9F/>

On August 4, 2025, Russian forces conducted a patrol of four armored vehicles on the road between Qamishli and Tirbespi, accompanied by two helicopters, for the first time in years, without any participation from the SDF or Asayish forces. Although sources close to the SDF confirmed that the movement was carried out with their knowledge, their absence from the field carried clear political implications...

The patrol’s launch coincided with a visit to Moscow by a Syrian government delegation headed by Foreign Minister Asaad al-Sheibani, where they met with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. This timing opens the door to speculation about new Russian-Syrian understandings that go beyond on-the-ground coordination, and may also pave the

continue on 26

way for Damascus's gradual return to some key areas in northeastern Syria...

Despite the ambiguity of the situation, Russian movements in Qamishli and its airport appear to be a

prelude to a redistribution of influence in northeastern Syria, where the US position—whether it is present or withdrawing—will remain the decisive factor in shaping the outcome of the next phase.

Source:

صحيفة "كوميرسانت": دمشق تبدي اهتماماً بعودة الدوريات الروسية إلى الجنوب السوري

"Kommersant newspaper: Damascus shows interest in the return of Russian patrols to southern Syria," *Syria TV* (pro-government Syrian news website), 12 August 2025. <https://www.syria.tv/%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A>

Kommersant, one of Russia's leading daily newspapers, reported that the Syrian government is interested in the return of Russian patrols to southern Syria, similar to their presence before the fall of the Assad regime on December 8.

The newspaper quoted a source who participated in a meeting between Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad

al-Sheibani and the Syrian community in Moscow in late July as saying that Damascus believes the return of Russian patrols could reduce Israeli occupation operations, which have escalated in recent months under the pretext of establishing a buffer zone and "protecting the Druze."

Notes:

- 1 Syria's three key minority groups are the Alawites, a religious minority which constituted the Assad regime's bulwark; the Kurds, an ethnic minority which controls the bulk of the country's northeast; and the Druze, a religious minority which is concentrated in southern Syria. All three groups are distrustful of the current Sunni-led government. For more on Russia's role in Syria following the Assad regime's collapse, see: Samer al-Ahmed. "Russia's military presence in post-Assad Syria: A growing security liability undermining stability," *Middle East Institute*, 2 July 2025. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-military-presence-post-assad-syria-growing-security-liability-undermining>
- 2 Russian forces have been present at Qamishli airport since 2016. Despite losing control over much of the Kurdish-majority Northeast, the Assad regime maintained nominal control over the airport throughout the 2010s. The airport was seized by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces following the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024. In June 2025, the SDF-backed Kurdish administration (DAANES) began taking steps to reopen the airport, a move opposed by the Damascus government. For more on the move to reopen the airport, see: "Syrian govt slams Kurdish move to reopen and administer Qamishli Airport," *The New Arab*, 23 June 2025. <https://www.newarab.com/news/syrian-govt-slams-kurdish-move-reopen-qamishli-airport> For an overview of the airport, see: "Qamishli International Airport: A Symbol of Change and Hope in Syria's Northeast," *Syriac Press*, 5 June 2025. <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2025/06/05/qamishli-international-airport-a-symbol-of-change-and-hope-in-syrias-northeast/>

- 3 For more, see: Lucas Winter, “Israeli Support for Syria’s Druze Strains Ties With Syria, Creates Security Challenges for Druze Community,” *OE Watch*, 06-2025. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/oe-watch-issue-6-2025/?highlight=Israeli%20Support%20for%20Syria%E2%80%99s%20Druze%20Strains%20Ties%20With%20Syria%2C%20Creates%20Security%20Challenges%20for%20Druze%20Community>
- 4 During the second half of the 2010s, Russia maintained good relations with the Druze. Russian presence in southern Syria began to decline following its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. See: Lucas Winter, “Russian Influence Fades in Southern Syria,” *OE Watch*, 11-2023. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/russian-influence-fades-in-southern-syria/>

Source:

سامانه‌های آسیب‌دیده پدافند هوایی جایگزین شدند

(Damaged air defense systems replaced),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 20 July 2025. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00NAd3>

According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) news agency, Rear Admiral Mahmoud Mousavi, deputy operations chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, referring to the achievements of the armed forces and arm during the 12-day Holy Defense: “In this imposed war, the first actions of [Israel] targeted the country’s radar and air defense systems, but our comrades in the air defense of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army were at the systems day and night and confronted the enemy.”

He added: “Criminal [Israel] carried out a cowardly invasion against Iranian soil and pursued certain objectives from this invasion.”

The deputy operations chief of the army pointed to the air defense’s capability in securing the country’s skies and stated: “The Israel enemy sought to destroy Iran’s defense capabilities, and some of our defense systems were damaged in this war; but with the efforts of my comrades, the damaged systems were replaced and deployed at predetermined locations.”

He added: “We were able to cover the airspace of the country and ensure the security of our dear Iran’s airspace by utilizing existing systems and replacing them with new ones; as a result, the enemy was unable to achieve its objectives despite desperate efforts.”

Admiral Mousavi stated that [Israel] did not enter the war alone and that the United States and NATO helped it, said: “The capacity of Iran’s armed forces is beyond what illegitimate [Israel] can confront; however, the supporters of the usurper regime helped this regime by gathering intelligence months ago, and we consider the United States to be complicit in [Israel’s] crimes...”

The Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces congratulated the Iranian nation on its victory over the [Israel] enemy and emphasized, “Despite all the hype and claims, the fake [Israeli] regime was almost crushed and destroyed under the blows of the Islamic Republic.”

Notes:

- 1 Emanuel Fabian, “The Israel-Iran war by the numbers, after 12 days of fighting,” *Times of Israel*, 24 June 2025. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-israel-iran-war-by-the-numbers-after-12-days-of-fighting/>

Iranian Intelligence Asserts Domestic Control Despite 12-Day War Losses

By Holly Dagres
OE Watch Commentary

Despite suffering massive security and intelligence failures—including the assassination of nearly three dozen senior military commanders and 15 nuclear scientists during the 12-Day War with Israel—Tehran is still claiming that it is in control of the domestic situation inside Iran. Per the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB) news agency, on 20 July, the Minister of Intelligence and Security Seyed Esmail Khatib stated, “Although our enemies had planned to create conditions and social and security crises inside the country and carry out activities aimed as terrorist acts, thanks to God, all of them were arrested. Khatib added that “with the cooperation of the armed forces and the Interior Ministry, we witnessed internal security these days” since the 24 June ceasefire. The intelligence minister also further emphasized that infiltration and espionage agents in our country “are a continuous and daily

“Although our enemies had planned to create conditions and social and security crises inside the country and carry out activities aimed as terrorist acts, thanks to God, all of them were arrested.”

activity of the Intelligence Ministry, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Intelligence Organization, and various intelligence and security groups in the country.” He praised the judiciary’s role in the crackdown, saying, “Thanks to God, we are witnessing the cooperation and support of the judicial system, and their actions and support have doubled these successes for us.”

At least 21,000 suspects were arrested during the 12-Day War—a stark increase from the 1,500 initially announced.¹ While the discrepancies raise questions about the credibility of the figures provided, they may also be the regime’s attempt to signal to the Iranian public that the state’s security apparatus is

actively doing its job and maintaining security. Khatib also said that Iranian intelligence obtained documents and evidence from Israel and provided the armed forces “with complete details regarding the important targets that the regime has.”

Through his comments, Khatib appears to be shifting blame and minimizing scrutiny of the intelligence ministry’s failures, even as forty-five key figures were killed in their homes by Israeli operations during the war.² The intelligence minister’s commentary highlights a gap between Tehran’s vulnerabilities and its alleged claims of control.

Source:

(We gave important documents about [Israel’s] goals to the armed forces),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 20 July 2025. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00NAdF>

اسناد مهمی از اهداف صهیونیست‌ها را به نیروهای مسلح دادیم

According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) news agency, Seyed Esmail Khatib, Minister of Intelligence and Security, stated in a meeting on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting: “Thanks to God and the efforts of the anonymous soldiers of Imam [Mahdi], in this imposed war with the [Israeli] regime and the

United States, which ended with the victory of the people and the armed forces, made every effort to ensure internal security. Therefore, with the cooperation of the armed forces and the Interior Ministry, we witnessed internal security these days.”

continue on 31

He added: “Although our enemies had planned to create conditions and social and security crises inside the country and carry out activities aimed as terrorist acts, thanks to God, all of them were arrested.”

The intelligence minister stated that we witnessed security and calm in various provinces of our country and said: “This was one of the major achievements that the Intelligence Ministry achieved in the fourteenth government.”

Khatib stated: “This achievement was the result of months of efforts that various security and intelligence forces have carried out in coordination, such that a clear example of that was the [Imam Ali] exercises that were carried out in the country.”

He stated: “The second point that the Intelligence Ministry achieved through the dedication and efforts of its forces was obtaining documents and evidence from the [Israeli] regime and providing the armed forces with complete details regarding the important targets that the regime has.”

The intelligence minister emphasized: “Infiltration and espionage agents in our country, due to the active presence of more than fifty (intelligence) services that have an Iran desk and espionage organizations, are a continuous and daily activity of the Intelligence Ministry, the IRGC Intelligence Organization, and various intelligence and security groups in the country. Therefore, thanks to God, we are witnessing the cooperation and support of the judicial system, and their actions and support have doubled these successes for us.”

Notes:

- 1 “Iran says it arrested 21,000 ‘suspects’ during 12-day war with Israel,” *Reuters*, 12 August 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-it-arrested-21000-suspects-during-12-day-war-with-israel-2025-08-12/>
- 2 Emanuel Fabian, “The Israel-Iran war by the numbers, after 12 days of fighting,” *Times of Israel*, 24 June 2025. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-israel-iran-war-by-the-numbers-after-12-days-of-fighting/>

Kim Jong Un Photo With Troops Exposes Malnutrition and Stunted Growth

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

On 27 July, North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un held a commemorative photo session with specially invited artillery troops on a “podium of honor envied by the entire army” for their commitment to training and readiness.¹ This photo shows that Korean People’s Army (KPA) soldiers remain noticeably smaller than their American and South Korean counterparts, with some KPA troops in the photo looking underweight and potentially malnourished. Kim Jong Un is considerably taller and heavier than his forces, easily twice their size in some cases.

According to the state-controlled national news service *Korean Central News Agency*, the troops came from 2nd Platoon, 3rd Battalion, 16th Artillery Regiment, 28th Infantry Division, 4th Corps, and received the honor of the Kim Jong Un photo as an award for maintaining consistent and excellent training. The propaganda apparatus likely selected the artillery troops for the photo because they represent the ideal KPA soldier, similar to how North Korea selects troops for border posts in the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarized Zone. The troops likely received new uniforms and equipment for the photos

as well. However, even with those propaganda-centric guardrails in place, North Korea cannot hide that its military continues to suffer from malnutrition, most likely because of corruption and a broken food distribution system.² North Korea’s food distribution system broke down in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. These developments led to a period known as the “arduous march” of mass starvation and even reports of cannibalism. These lingering problems appear to affect even the most “successful” North Korean troops, as seen in this photo.

“Comrade Kim Jong Un met with the heroic artillery combatants who set an example in implementing our Party’s training-first policy and warmly congratulated them.”



Kim Jong Un poses for a photo with artillery troops celebrated for their training and readiness, but who are clearly smaller than their South Korean and American counterparts, and Kim Jong Un himself.

Source: <https://kkfonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/7070.jpg>; Attribution: Via the Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il Foundation, Germany-based friendship association chartered to solicit foreign donations to preserve the mausoleums of the two deceased leaders. Image is a reproduction of a KCNA image that is in the public domain under PD-KPGov under the North Korea Copyright Act of 2006 which holds that “documents for state management, current news or information data shall not be the object of copyright unless commercial purpose is pursued”

Source: “경애하는 김정은동지께서 전승절경축행사에 특별초청된 조선인민군 제4군단관하 포병구분대 군인들을 만나시고 기념사진을 찍으시었다 (Dear Comrade Kim Jong Un met with soldiers from the artillery division under the 4th Corps of the Korean People’s Army who were specially invited to the Victory Day celebration and took a commemorative photo),” *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* (primary state-owned propaganda broadcaster), 27 July 2025. <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/738ad97ed9e21b18f7117ffd412d3165.kcmsf>

Comrade Kim Jong Un , General Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea and Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, met with the commanding officers and soldiers of the 2nd Platoon, 3rd Battalion, 16th Artillery Regiment, 28th Infantry Division, 4th Corps, Korean People’s Army, who were specially invited to the event celebrating the 72nd anniversary of the victory in the great Fatherland Liberation War on July 26, and had a commemorative photo session.

The hearts of the participants who had a meaningful commemorative photo session at the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Memorial Hall, a grand hall of education in the victorious traditions where the history of the victory of Juche Korea is encapsulated...Comrade Kim Jong Un met with the heroic artillery combatants who set an example in implementing our Party’s training-first policy and warmly congratulated them.

Comrade Kim Jong Un said that a soldier who fights well in wartime is a hero, but a soldier who trains well in peacetime is a hero, and expressed his conviction that the soldiers of the company would firmly inherit the fighting spirit of the victorious generation and prepare themselves more firmly as artillerymen capable of fighting a hundred times to open the way to victory at the forefront with the strongest and most merciless gunfire of justice in stern times. He then embraced them in his loving arms and took a meaningful commemorative photo to be remembered long in the history of the founding of the military.

The company commanders and soldiers respectfully expressed their gratitude to Comrade Kim Jong Un for highly evaluating their deserved training results, putting them on the podium of honor envied by the entire army, and repeatedly bestowing such love and favor upon them, and pledged a firm determination to remain faithful to the sacred mission and duty of defending the fatherland and revolution to the end.

Notes:

- 1 The photo was taken at the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum, a shrine dedicated to North Korea’s official version of the 1950-1953 Korean War in which the United States invaded the North and regime founder Kim Il Sung’s superhuman military and political genius saved the state. The April to August period in North Korea is marked by a successive period of party commemorations of Kim Il Sung’s birth, through the start of the Korean War, the Armistice, and ending with the end of World War II in Asia.
- 2 The stature and physical appearance of North Korean soldiers has been a topic of interest for decades. Many outside observers believe that poor diet in the early years of life has led to stunted growth. See for example: “Are North Koreans really three inches shorter than South Koreans?,” *BBC*, 23 April 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17774210>; in a more recent report, the UN noted that North Korean children are short for their age because they don’t have enough food to eat. See: “285K North Korean children suffer stunted growth due to malnutrition: Report,” *NK News*, 29 May 2023. <https://www.nknews.org/2023/05/285k-north-korean-children-suffer-stunted-growth-due-to-malnutrition-report/>

North Korea Rejects South Korean Rapprochement Efforts

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

On 14 August, Kim Yo Jong, Vice Director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's sister, issued a statement labeling Seoul's hope of rapprochement under new center-left South Korean President Lee Jae Myung "a foolish dream." Kim Yo Jong reiterated the policies laid out in Kim Jong Un's October 2024 speech¹ that Pyongyang has "no intention of improving relations with South Korea" and that the "position and view will be enshrined in our Constitution going forward." Kim Yo Jong made this statement in response to reports from South Korea that North Korea had removed propaganda loudspeakers along the

heavily militarized border with South Korea, which Kim Yo Jong denied.²

The Lee Administration³ had reportedly offered to be an intermediary to reopen dialogue with the United States and to reintroduce unilateral confidence-building measures, such as the scaling back of military exercises and reintroduction of the 2018 Inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement.⁴ Pyongyang rejected these overtures, with Kim Yo Jong calling Seoul's actions "a dirty deception."

Kim Yo Jong's statements on official matters are important both for her official position as vice director of the ruling party and for her status as Kim Jong Un's sister in the de facto hereditary

absolute monarchy that governs North Korea. The regime uses Kim Yo Jong's statements to present clear, firm, and authoritative policy positions at the level of near finality, second only to a Kim Jong Un statement. In this way, the regime can articulate its policies while still maintaining some room for negotiation and without elevating the pronouncement to an infallible Kim Jong Un "directive."

Kim Yo Jong's refusal to consider a rapprochement with South Korea and her reiteration of Seoul's "hostility" are likely designed to elicit further one-sided "golden concessions" from Seoul, such as humanitarian aid and the cancellation of joint military exercises.

"Our stance towards this dangerous and despicable state...should be clear."⁵

Kim Yo Jong stands next to her brother and Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un in this undated photo. Kim Yo Jong often accompanies her brother and is photographed with him at official functions as the de facto number two in the regime.

Source: <https://www.heute.at/i/kim-jong-uns-kleine-schwester-droht-suedkorea-120066489/doc-1ia2bqibn2>; Attribution: Austrian Heute news service provided under CC 4.0 license. Google link to image and its CC4.0 attribution here: <https://images.app.goo.gl/SXvkXUE9BeoYqFNJ7>



Source: “김여정 조선로동당 중앙위원회 부부장 담화 발표 (Kim Yo Jong, Vice Director of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, Releases Statement),” *Korean Central News Agency/KCNA* (primary state-owned propaganda broadcaster), 14 August 2025. <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/64e900f5bd0353837ca02d7babcce3ad3d0b4062e1c3303960729c8c2425c5fd6a47505ba5268fd7749c0fe11e4b24b4.kcmsf>

The full text of the statement “Seoul’s Hope is Just a Foolish Dream” released by Kim Yo-jong, Vice Department Director of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, on the 14th is as follows.

On the 12th, South Korea’s mass media outlets speculated that there was a possibility that our intentions would be conveyed to the US side at the upcoming Rome-US summit, which was a prime example of dreaming an empty dream...Why would we send a message to the US?

We have no interest in talks that obsess over the irreversible past, and we need no further explanation as to why we are not interested.

I would also like to take this opportunity to address the fact that South Korea is misleading public opinion by claiming that we have removed the loudspeakers installed along the southern border.

They are trying to mislead public opinion by making it seem as if their recent “goodwill measures” and “conciliatory policies” are being well-received and that the North Korea-US relationship is being “restored.”

We have never removed the loudspeakers deployed along the border, and we have no intention of doing so.

But these petty tricks are nothing more than empty dreams and do not interest us at all.

We don’t care and we don’t care whether South Korea removes its loudspeakers, stops broadcasting, postpones or scales back its training.

The dirty deception is no longer popular.

We have repeatedly stated that we have no intention of improving relations with South Korea, a loyal servant and staunch ally of the United States, and this position and view will be enshrined in our Constitution going forward.

Our stance toward this dangerous and despicable nation that poses a constant threat to our security should be clearer, and the Republic of Korea must be expressed and permanently entrenched in our national law as the most hostile threat in terms of its identity.

Notes:

- 1 See: Anthony W. Holmes, “Kim Jong Un Speech Previews Military Action to Change Relationship with South Korea,” *Operational Environment Watch*, 22 Jan 2025. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/kim-jong-un-speech-previews-military-action-to-change-relationship-with-south-korea/>
- 2 In the statement, Kim Yo Jong also once again disclaimed any desire to meet or negotiate with the United States.
- 3 The Lee Administration in Seoul took power on 4 June after center-right President Yoon Suk-yeol was convicted and removed from office in his impeachment after briefly declaring martial law. See: Ethan Teekah, “Lee Jae-Myung,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 23 June 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lee-Jae-Myung>
- 4 Heejin Kim, “South Korea’s Lee to end some military activity on border with North Korea,” *Reuters*, 15 August 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-lee-end-some-military-activity-border-with-north-korea-2025-08-15/>
- 5 The contextual meaning of the statement is something like “our stance toward this dangerous and despicable nation...should be obvious by now” even though a literal translation would be “Our stance toward this dangerous and despicable nation that poses a constant threat to our security should be clearer.” I have attempted to present compromise text that keeps to the original literally-speaking.

Japan Expresses Concern Over Rising Piracy in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore Strait

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

The Strait of Malacca, through which 30% of global trade passes, has seen a sharp increase in piracy and armed robbery in 2025—nearly four times the number of incidents for the same period in 2024. According to the excerpted article from Japan-based *Nikkei Asia*, the increase in acts of piracy coincides with the dramatic increase in the amount of commercial ship traffic through the Malacca Strait due to instability and conflict in the Middle East. This incident is of particular concern to Japan, as 80% of the country's crude oil imports pass through the strait. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued warnings regarding security in the strait, and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and

Armed Robbery, founded by Japan in 2006 to share security information and improve enforcement capacity in the strait areas, has also increased its coverage and analysis of the uptick in piracy. It is notable that a heat map published with the *Nikkei Asia* article shows that most of the acts of piracy actually take place in the Singapore Strait, which is defined as the narrow, but deep, waterway that sits between the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. It is likely no coincidence that the Singapore Navy has announced upgrades to its fleet to meet a variety of traditional and emerging threats, including piracy, trafficking, and illegal and unreported fishing.¹ Unless contained, the uptrend

in piracy in these straits will eventually alter the operational environment, as nations will have to respond to protect unilateral and global shipping interests. On the positive side, according to the *Nikkei Asia* article, most acts of piracy and illegal boardings are conducted by local criminal elements rather than transnational criminal elements.

“Incidents of piracy and armed robbery have roughly quadrupled this year around the straits of Malacca and Singapore.”



Commercial ships anchored in the Singapore Strait, technically between the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea—one of the busiest waterways in the world. The Singapore Strait has seen a four-fold rise in piracy and illegal boarding in the last 12 months.

Source: Dodge Billingsley; Attribution: Author's own photo. Given by permission.

Source: Fumika Sato and Tomonori Washida, "Piracy and armed robbery quadruples in Strait of Malacca region, *Nikkei Asia*, 20 August 2025. https://asia.nikkei.com/spotlight/society/crime/piracy-and-armed-...8201900000900&seq_num=10&si=be7d155e-99d8-4492-8070-8657af0c6aee

Incidents of piracy and armed robbery have roughly quadrupled this year around the straits of Malacca and Singapore, key Southeast Asian shipping lanes that have seen an uptick in traffic due to the conflict in the Middle East.

There were 80 incidents of piracy and armed robbery recorded in the first half of the year in the straits of Malacca and Singapore, according to the tally kept by the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). The count, which includes incidents that took place on both international and territorial waters, has increased by a factor of 3.8 from the year-earlier period. Ships frequently idle in the water waiting to dock at the region's ports, or they slow down due to the meandering routes. Slow or idle ships are a draw for criminal gangs. The assailants usually threaten the onboard crew with knives, then attempt to steal engines parts, paint and equipment.

More ships are passing through the Strait of Malacca region due to heightened Middle East tensions. Shipping companies are avoiding the Red Sea route, instead

taking a long detour around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope. About 30% of the world's trade passes through the Strait of Malacca, including more than 80% of Japan's crude oil imports.

For Japan, the straits of Malacca and Singapore are a key navigation point for shipping routes to Europe. Last Friday, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a warning against piracy and armed robbery in the Singapore Strait. "Measures to prevent boarding, such as locking ships and posting lookouts, are effective, and we are urging ships to be vigilant," said a representative from the Japanese Shipowners' Association.

Japan has taken the lead in Asia's anti-piracy efforts through the creation of ReCAAP. The agreement, which took effect in 2006, now counts 21 members and facilitates efforts like information-sharing. Improving all nations' enforcement capacity is essential, as no country can police the territorial waters of another. The Japan Coast Guard continues to support the anti-piracy efforts of other Asian countries.

Notes:

- 1 See: "Singapore navy exploring how to adapt cheaper, off-the-shelf drones to counter emerging threats," *Channel News Asia* (CAN), 9 May 2025. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/navy-rsn-drones-strales-76mm-guided-gun-counter-uas-5119326>

TERRORISM AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIME

Venezuela and Colombia Establish Economic Border Zone in Crime and Terrorism-Affected Region

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

After over a year, the Maduro regime in Venezuela seeks to turn the page on its stolen election on 28 July 2024.¹ One of Maduro's principal goals is to convince regional governments to treat him as a legitimately elected president at the head of a legitimate government. This can be achieved through diplomatic visits, negotiations, and the lifting of trade barriers and economic penalties levied in response to last year's election fraud. According to Argentine online media outlet *Infobae*, Maduro and Colombia's President, Gustavo Petro, recently agreed to create the first binational economic zone along the border between the two countries. The zone will be centered around the Colombian state of Norte de Santander and the Venezuelan states of Táchira and Zulia. Earlier this year, the publication

mentions, the region erupted as foreign terrorist organizations, such as dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), violently clashed and pushed thousands from their homes.² The second excerpted article, also published in *Infobae*, features an in-depth interview with a former senior Colombian military officer who has operational experience in this area. The officer notes the deep connections between the Maduro regime and the groups operating in this region, as well as the ability of the FARC and ELN groups to potentially render Venezuela ungovernable should democratic forces ever succeed in removing Maduro from power.³ The officer believes that the binational zone is yet another ploy by Maduro to remain in power.

Beyond reigniting a crucial economic lifeline for Maduro and enriching some of the Maduro regime's senior military officers, the creation of a binational economic zone in the epicenter of organized crime and foreign terrorist group activity carries significant risks for the operational environment and regional stability. With a high concentration of non-state actors in this border region—some operating with the complicity of the Maduro regime—the greatest risk is that a binational economic zone, posing as a free trade zone, ultimately serves criminal interests. This zone could provide economic cover for activities such as drug trafficking and illegal gold mining, exacerbating instability in the region.

“The signing of this memorandum is the beginning of ‘a dream’ that began with the Liberator Simón Bolívar, ‘a dream that Hugo Chávez continued, a dream that President Maduro, President Petro, have today’...this region is also where guerrilla violence left at least 70 dead and more than 55,000 displaced earlier this year.”



A sign for the ELN, a recognized foreign terrorist organization, in the border region between Colombia and Venezuela.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ELN_guerrilla_poster.jpg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0

Source: “Petro y Maduro acordaron crear la primera zona económica binacional entre Colombia y Venezuela (Petro and Maduro agreed to create the first binational economic zone between Colombia and Venezuela),” *Infobae* (an Argentine online media outlet with excellent regional coverage), 18 July 2025. <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2025/07/18/petro-y-maduro-acordaron-crear-la-primera-zona-economica-binacional-entre-colombia-y-venezuela/>

Colombia’s minister of commerce emphasized that border areas should see this agreement as an opportunity to ‘strengthen’ and ‘transform’ their territories. ‘We hope this will consolidate a territory that represents and translates into development and economic and social growth in areas that deserve to be dignified and recognized,’ she noted. The official stated that trade between Colombia and Venezuela has ‘grown significantly,’ without providing figures, since the border reopened in

2022, following Petro’s arrival to the presidency. Meanwhile, the Colombian government’s chief of staff, Alfredo Saade, indicated that the signing of this memorandum is the beginning of ‘a dream’ that began with the Liberator Simón Bolívar, ‘a dream that Hugo Chávez continued, a dream that President Maduro, President Petro, have today’ ...this region is also where guerrilla violence left at least 70 dead and more than 55,000 displaced earlier this year.

Source: “Un militar retirado denunció que Maduro y Petro pretenden crear un territorio binacional para asegurarse la permanencia en el poder (A retired military officer denounced that Maduro and Petro intend to create a binational territory to ensure their permanence in power),” *Infobae* (an Argentine online media outlet with excellent regional coverage), 30 July 2025. <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2025/07/30/un-militar-retirado-denuncio-que-maduro-y-petro-pretenden-crear-un-territorio-binacional-para-asegurarse-la-permanencia-en-el-poder/>

The Maduro regime would have ‘a territory with hotbeds of violence, instability, and ungovernability under a transitional government in Venezuela, which they would do with a radicalized sector of the armed forces and the Colombian guerrillas who have not demobilized. This is what the activation of a Zone of Peace, as Nicolás Maduro and Gustavo Petro call it, seeks as a strategy for their permanence in power...After 1998, and especially ‘since Hugo Chávez stated in the National

Assembly that he limited the Colombian guerrillas along the southwestern border, the relationship began to permeate, the military commanders present in the theaters of operation and the deployed military units saw a certain permissiveness in the Venezuelan government’s willingness to allow the Colombian guerrillas to cross into Venezuela.

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the election theft and its fallout, see: Ryan C. Berg and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, “Can Maduro Pull Off the Mother of All Electoral Frauds?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-maduro-pull-mother-all-electoral-frauds>
- 2 For more information on the surge of violence in Colombia that began in early 2025, see: “More Than 80 People Killed in Northeast Colombia as Peace Talks Fail,” *CNN*, 19 January 2025. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/19/americas/colombia-80-killed-peace-talks-fail-intl-latam/index.html>
- 3 For more information on the Maduro regime’s deep ties to criminal organizations and foreign terrorist organizations, see: Moises Rendon, “Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 July 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/identifying-and-responding-criminal-threats-venezuela>

Terrorist Attack on Benin Border Post Poses Threat to Nigeria

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 12 June, the website of the Beninese radio station, *fraternitefm.bj*, reported on a terrorist attack on the Beninese border post in Basso, adjacent to Nigeria's Kebbi and Kwara states, which was subsequently claimed by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).¹ Although the excerpted French-language article mentions "unidentified" attackers, it highlights the strategic nature of the operation, which affected cross-border movements between Benin and Nigeria. As a result, the article considered the attack serious and warranting significant Beninese reinforcements to the border area.

The article's authors likely expected that JNIM would not be involved in the operation, given that the group had not previously extended its area of operation as far south as Basso. However, JNIM claimed the attack a day later and posted a video of several dozen fighters overwhelming the military position and asserting they took control of the border area.² Once it became clear that JNIM, in fact, conducted the attack, Nigeria's National Security Advisor, Nuhu Ribadu, warned of JNIM's violence spilling over from its main bases in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger through Benin and into Nigeria.³

Nigeria's northwestern border area with Benin has largely been spared from



Benin's roughshod border with neighboring countries, including Togo and Niger, as seen in the adjacent image, have been targeted by JNIM over the past years, but for the first time Benin's eastern border post with Nigeria was seized by the militant group in early June.

Source: YouTube from United States, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_border_crossing_into_Benin_from_Niger_\(5488529569\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_border_crossing_into_Benin_from_Niger_(5488529569).jpg); Attribution: CC x 2.0

Boko Haram violence, despite the main factions having attempted to establish cells and deployed fighters from the epicenter of violence in the northeast to that region.⁴ Besides Boko Haram, and especially its al-Qaeda-affiliated faction, Ansaru, however, multiple banditry groups could potentially align with JNIM. The overall insecurity of northwestern Nigeria, the porousness of the Benin-Nigeria border, and overstretched Nigerian security agencies will provide JNIM ample opportunity to open a new area of operation in Nigeria, just as Benin and its neighbor Togo have fallen into the group's reach over the last few years.⁵

“The incident, which occurred in a sensitive area near the Nigerian border, shocked the local population.”

Source: “La base militaire de Basso ciblée par des individus armés (Basso military base targeted by armed individuals),” *fraternitefm.bj* (official French-language website of the Beninese radio station, *fraternitefm*, which covers Beninese current affairs from a neutral perspective), 12 June 2025. https://fraternitefm.bj/?La-base-militaire-de-Basso-ciblee-par-des-individus-armes&fbclid=IwY2xjawK3p7pleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHq0vJFBKP3TgeVEBS4px2USL13yDRT1wzLIAid3LHCk8Vyl689w9GO8NnmJ_aem_Ep5rhPtHg2q45q9TnwBG1A

The Basso military base in the commune of Kalalé (northeastern Benin) was the target of a violent attack by unidentified armed individuals. The incident, which occurred in a sensitive area near the Nigerian border, shocked the local population. According to security sources, the assault reportedly resulted in several casualties, both among the ranks of the Beninese defense forces and the attackers.

The exact circumstances of the attack also remain unknown. Due to the gravity of the situation, significant military reinforcements are being deployed to the area at dawn to secure the area and prevent any risks of further incursion. The Basso base, located on the road leading to the border town of Babana, holds a strategic position in the monitoring of cross-border movements.

Notes:

- 1 See, for example, @Sahelintel1, 14 June 2025: <https://x.com/Sahelintel1/status/1933954892877439012>
- 2 @MENASTREAM, X, 12 June 2025. <https://x.com/brantphilip1978/status/1933264928799953126>
- 3 Yakubu Mohammed, “Al-Qaeda terrorists claim attack near Nigerian border with Benin,” *Premium Times*, 13 June 2025. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/800648-al-qaeda-terrorists-claim-attack-near-nigerian-border-with-benin.html>
- 4 See, for example: Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram’s Expansionary Project in Northwestern Nigeria: Can Shekau Outflank Ansaru and Islamic State in West Africa Province?,” *Terrorism Monitor*, 28 July 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/boko-harams-expansionary-project-in-northwestern-nigeria-can-shekau-outflank-ansaru-and-islamic-state-in-west-africa-province/>
- 5 See: Jacob Zenn, “Al-Qaeda’s Sahel Affiliate Targets Togo” *OE Watch*, 07-2022. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/al-qaedas-sahel-affiliate-targets-togo/?highlight=Al-Qaeda%E2%80%99s%20Sahel%20Affiliate%20Targets%20Togo>

Pakistan Aims To Strengthen Air Defenses Following India's Strikes



Pakistan is the only foreign operator of variants of the Chinese HQ-16 medium-range surface-to-air missile. The missile is used by both Pakistan's army and navy.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HQ-16A_Surface-to-air_missiles_20170919.jpg; Attribution: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International, 3.0 Unported, 2.5 Generic, 2.0 Generic and 1.0 Generic license.

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Pakistan claimed that it had effectively countered Indian aircraft on the first day of the May 2025 clashes but was reluctant to admit that India's air strikes in the following days penetrated its air defense systems.¹ The accompanying excerpted article from *Quwa*, a news website reporting on defense issues in Pakistan, reports on the need to develop a more capable air defense system as a result of India's successful air strikes. The author mentions India's use of supersonic Brahmos cruise missiles as part of a coordinated strike against Pakistani airbases during the clashes, revealing Pakistan's air defense systems as inadequate against such an attack. During the coordinated strikes on 9-10

May, India reportedly used decoys to compel Pakistan to activate its radar and air defense systems, which India then targeted with loitering munitions. With air defenses reduced in number or eliminated, Indian aircraft then launched **Brahmos** cruise missiles at several Pakistani airbases. Pakistan's airbases sustained some damage, and the strike marked the first use of the Brahmos in a conflict.²

"The short-to-medium-range air defence layer is now an urgent, acknowledged gap for both the Army and the Air Force."

The article notes several Chinese medium- and long-range surface-to-air missiles currently in use by

Pakistan, including the **HQ-9BE** and **HQ-16FE** with Pakistan's Air Force and the HQ-9/P, LY-80EV, and LY-80 with Pakistan's Army.³ The author notes that following the recent clashes, the short-to-medium-range air defense layer is "now an urgent, acknowledged gap" for Pakistan. The author suggests that Pakistan begin developing new air defense systems through a partnership and transfer of technology. The author does not mention China as a partner, but Beijing has been the largest supplier of weapons to Pakistan in recent years and would be the most likely partner in a new venture.⁴ As China has likely drawn lessons from the May 2025 India-Pakistan clashes, it would have an interest in air defense systems that can counter similar coordinated strikes.

Source: Bilal Khan, “The Blueprint for Pakistan’s Future-Proof Air Defence System,” *Quwa* (news website reporting on defense issues in Pakistan), 27 July 2025. <https://quwa.org/pakistan-air-force-news/the-blueprint-for-pakistans-future-proof-air-defence-system/>

The May 2025 conflict was a brutal validation of a new reality in South Asian warfare. While the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) demonstrated tactical prowess in air-to-air engagements on the conflict’s opening night, the subsequent days revealed a key vulnerability.

India’s large-scale, coordinated use of supersonic-cruising BrahMos cruise missiles to strike targets deep within Pakistan, bypassing frontline defences to hit main operating bases, was not merely a tactical success; it represented a strategic shock. It proved that a determined adversary could hold Pakistan’s core military infrastructure at risk with conventional, standoff weapons, threatening Islamabad’s air power before it could even get airborne.

This reality has rendered Pakistan’s previous air defence posture insufficient...

The BrahMos threat is not a hardware problem; it is a symptom of a deep-seated procurement philosophy that has prioritized immediate, off-the-shelf tactical fixes over the long-term, arduous work of building a core platform and, in turn, a sovereign industrial base...

For years, Pakistan’s approach to air defence has been a patchwork of imported solutions, often pursued in service-specific silos. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF)

acquired Chinese long-range systems like the HQ-9BE and medium-range platforms like the HQ-16FE to fill its operational gaps...the Pakistan Army (PA) operates the Chinese HQ-9/P, LY-80EV, and LY-80...

While each decision may have been logical within its own narrow context, the collective result is a fragmented national air defence architecture, reliant on foreign supply chains and devoid of a unifying industrial backbone. This siloed procurement model prevents the economies of scale necessary for domestic industrialization and, instead, scatters resources and expertise across disparate platforms...

However, the outcome of the May 2025 conflict presents a unique strategic opportunity. The short-to-medium-range air defence layer is now an urgent, acknowledged gap for both the Army and the Air Force...By amalgamating the requirements of its service arms, Pakistan can aggregate its demand, creating the scale necessary to justify a deep and meaningful transfer of technology and the establishment of a robust domestic production line.

Therefore, the selection of the next SAM system is less about the missile itself and more about the industrial and technology partnership it brings...

Notes:

- 1 Indian aircraft carried out strikes from their own air space against terrorist groups based in Pakistan as part of the first day of India’s Operation Sindoor on 7 May 2025. Pakistan’s J-10C multi-role fighters, acquired from China, reportedly downed a handful of Indian aircraft in the air-to-air engagements in the first day but India’s Brahmos cruise missiles hit Pakistani airfields and bases in the subsequent days of the clashes. For information on the Pakistani Air Force response to the operation, see: Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Air force credits Cobras with ‘six IAF kills,’” *Dawn*, 6 June 2025. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1915722/>; for more information on India’s successful air strikes, see: Christopher Clary, “Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025,” *The Stimson Center*, 28 May 2025. <https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/>

continue on 44

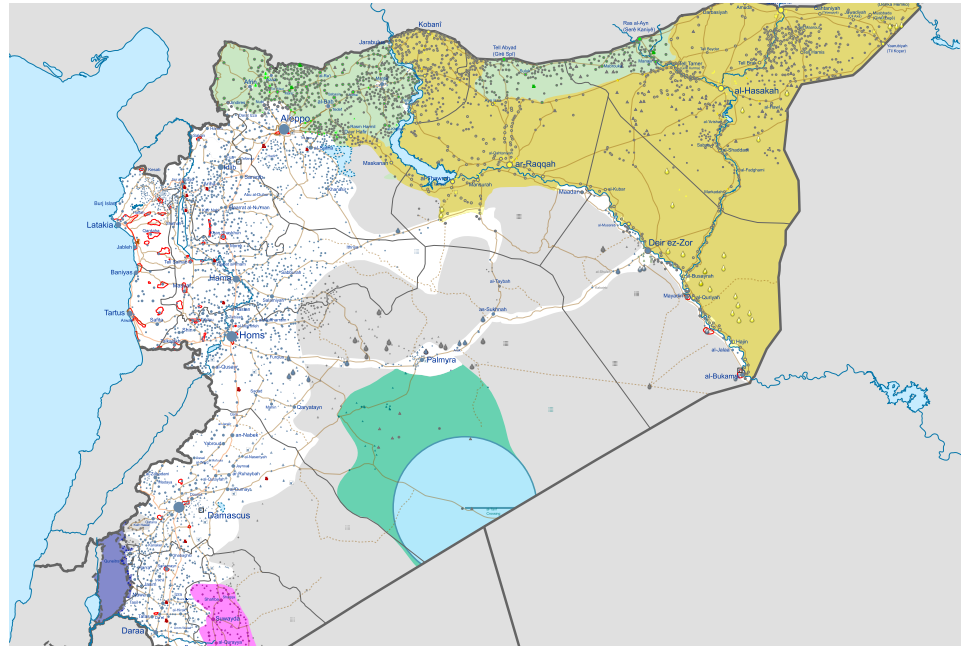
- 2 For more on the coordinated strike, see: “Operation Sindoor: How India Delivered Devastating Blow to Pakistan’s Air Defenses with Dummy Jets, BrahMos Missiles,” *The Times of India*, 15 May 2025. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/operation-sindoor-how-india-delivered-devastating-blow-to-pakistans-air-defence-with-dummy-jets-brahmos-missiles/articleshow/121192203.cms>
- 3 Pakistan is one only a handful of foreign operators of variants of China’s HQ-9, a long-range semi-active radar homing surface-to-air missile, and the only foreign operator of variants of China’s HQ-16, a medium-range surface-to-air missile. The LY-80s with Pakistan’s army are a variant of the HQ-16.
- 4 Pakistan’s acquisitions from China include fighter aircraft, radar systems, and drones. For more information on the list of Pakistan’s imports of Chinese systems from 2000-2025, see: Atul Kumar, “Dual Fault Lines in China’s Military: Weapons Fail, Generals Jailed,” *Observer Research Foundation*, 23 May 2025. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/dual-fault-lines-in-china-s-military-weapons-fail-generals-jailed>

Turkey Leery of Kurdistan Workers' Party Disarmament and Integration Operations in Syria

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

On 12 May 2025, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) announced it would disband and thus end its conflict with Turkey that began over 40 years ago.¹ The accompanying excerpted article from the Turkish daily newspaper, *Daily Sabah*, reports on what the PKK's disbandment could mean for Turkey. The article notes that Turkey is expecting a total handover of weapons by the PKK in Iraq to be completed within a few months. A spokesperson from the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), the ruling party of Turkey, stated that if the disarmament period goes beyond five months, the situation between the PKK and Turkey could deteriorate.²

The article also notes how the disbandment of the PKK is taking place alongside the integration of the People's Protection Units (YPG) (one component of the larger PKK structure, often referred to as its Syria wing) into the Syrian government armed forces. Turkey supports the integration of the YPG into the Syrian Army, as it would bring the group under the command of the new President of Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa, and potentially reduce Kurdish control over northeastern Syria, which borders Turkey. It is important to note that Turkey considers the PKK and the YPG as affiliated groups. The



Syrian Democratic Forces, which the YPG belongs to, control areas in northeastern Syria (shaded in yellow). The new Syrian government under President Ahmad al-Sharaa controls areas in white.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_Civil_War_map_\(ISW-CTP\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_Civil_War_map_(ISW-CTP).svg); Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 International

goal of Turkey's recent "terror-free initiative" is to combat all terrorism, but it is largely aimed at eliminating the threat from Kurdish terrorist groups after decades of fighting.³

"The PKK's dissolution also coincides with the issue of its Syrian offshoot, the YPG, integration into Syria's new army, which Türkiye supports, following the ouster of Bashar Assad."

The article notes that while the YPG agreed to integrate with the Syrian Army, its implementation of the agreement

is being held up by whether it can maintain its autonomy or if it will come under a centralized government based in Damascus. In addition, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has stated that all PKK-affiliated groups must disband, including those in Syria.⁴ This statement has been interpreted as meaning that Turkey might try to force the YPG to integrate with the Syrian government. Overall, the beginning of the PKK's dissolution is an important step toward peace, but until the PKK fully disbands and disarms and the YPG has been integrated into the Syrian armed forces, Turkey's conflict with Kurdish groups will continue.

Source: “PKK terrorists begin disarming in Iraq as 1st step toward dissolution,” *Daily Sabah* (Turkish daily newspaper), 11 July 2025. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/pkk-terrorists-begin-disarming-in-iraq-as-1st-step-toward-dissolution>

Dozens of PKK terrorists began laying down their arms as a first step toward dissolution in northern Iraq on Friday, two months after the group decided to end its decadeslong terror campaign as part of Türkiye’s terror-free initiative.

The PKK has been based in northern Iraq’s mountainous regions, chiefly Qandil, after being pushed well beyond Türkiye’s southeastern frontier in recent years...

Türkiye expects the total handover of weapons should be completed within a few months. “The disarmament process (in Iraq) needs to be completed within three to five months ... If it exceeds this period, it will become vulnerable to provocations,” Çelik said...

The move is a key step in the monthslong terror-free push that began last year in October when Devlet Bahçeli, head of government ally Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), called on PKK jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan to order the group to lay down arms...

The PKK finally announced in May it would disband and end its operations... The PKK’s dissolution also coincides with the issue of its Syrian offshoot, the YPG, integration into Syria’s new army, which Türkiye supports, following the ouster of Bashar Assad...

The YPG and the new Damascus administration, led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, struck an accord in March with U.S. backing for the YPG’s integration into the new Syrian military but its implementation has been held up by differences between the two sides.

Shortly after the accord, the YPG voiced demands for a decentralized system of governance, to the chagrin of Damascus. The YPG controls vast swathes of territory in the oil-rich northeast and enjoys military backing by the United States, which views it as a partner in the fight against another terrorist group, Daesh.

Türkiye, whose relations with Washington are strained over the latter’s support for the YPG, hopes the group will bow down to the demand of the new government.

Notes:

- 1 The PKK’s disbandment came after its jailed leader, Abdullah Öcalan, called for the organization to lay down its arms and disband in February 2025. Öcalan issued the statement from Turkey’s prison island of Imralı in the Sea of Marmara, where he is serving a life sentence. For more information on Öcalan’s announcement, see: “Öcalan calls on PKK to dissolve in historic statement,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 February 2025. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ocalan-calls-on-pkk-to-dissolve-in-historic-statement-206339>
- 2 Turkey has carried out operations against the PKK in southeastern Turkey and across the border into northern Iraq over the past several years. Despite the PKK’s reduced presence and capabilities in Turkey and Iraq as a result of these operations, Turkish officials still consider the PKK a threat. For a history of recent clashes between Turkey and the PKK that has led to the current situation, see: “Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 May 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups>
- 3 For more background on Turkey and its conflict with Kurdish groups in the region, see: “Analysis: Call to disband PKK reshapes Türkiye, Syria power dynamics,” *Al-Jazeera*, 12 March 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/12/analysis-call-to-disband-pkk-reshapes-turkiye-syria-power-dynamics>
- 4 Erdogan’s statement for all PKK-affiliated groups in the region to disband and disarm came in response to the PKK’s official announcement of its disbanding, see: Dr Burcu Ozcelik, “After the PKK: Peacebuilding Challenges in Turkey, Syria,” *RUSI*, 3 June 2025. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/after-pkk-peacebuilding-challenges-turkey-syria>

Israel's Regional Operations Prompt Concerns About Broader Hybrid Warfare Ambitions

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Israel's recent military operations against Hezbollah and Iranian targets have catalyzed concern across the Middle East region regarding Tel Aviv's evolving approach to warfare. Analysts in Egypt and Turkey, in particular, view Israel's regional actions as warning signs that underscore growing vulnerabilities in an era of "hybrid war." The first excerpt, an editorial in the semi-official Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*, describes Israel's actions as a "wake-up call" for the countries of the region. The author contends that it is "delusional" to think that Israeli ambitions will remain limited to Gaza and the West Bank and warns that Egypt and its neighbors must address the vulnerabilities exposed by Israel's operations against Hezbollah and Iran: the combination of kinetic operations, cyberwarfare, and intelligence

penetration. Recommendations include strengthening counterintelligence, boosting AI capabilities, and reducing reliance on foreign digital networks. The second excerpt, published by *al-Jazeera* and authored by an Egypt-based researcher focused on Turkish affairs, highlights a new report by Turkey's National Intelligence Academy analyzing Israel's campaign and its lessons for Turkey.¹ The report calls attention to Israeli capabilities in "cyber warfare, spy networks, and information operations" and urges the development of local alternatives for secure communication, especially within government institutions.²

Egypt in particular views itself as vulnerable, given its shared border with Gaza.³ The third excerpt, a commentary in the

"The Israeli government in Tel Aviv no longer shows clear respect for the two traditional peace allies, Egypt and Jordan."

Qatari-aligned al-Araby al-Jadeed, asserts that Israel "no longer shows clear respect" for its peace partners Egypt and Jordan. The author suggests that Egypt may eventually become a target of Israeli aggression—especially if its regional posture shifts, for example, through closer alignment with Turkey. Turkey and Egypt, at odds for much of the last decade, have recently increased their high-level diplomatic engagements. As reported in the fourth excerpted article from the English-language *al-Ahram Weekly*, Egyptian and Turkish foreign ministers have increasingly exchanged visits and launched new bilateral working groups, with President Erdogan scheduled to visit Cairo next year. While it remains to be seen whether this warming trend will lead to closer security cooperation, regional commentary increasingly frames Israeli actions as a shared challenge that could drive alignment among states once at odds.



Map showing the location of Turkey (orange) and Egypt (green).
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_Turkey_Locator.png; Attribution: CCA-SA 3.0

Source:

حروب إسرائيل الهجينة جرس إنذار

Saeed Shalash. "Israel's Hybrid Wars Are a Warning Bell," al-Ahram (semi-official Egyptian daily), 17 July 2025. <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/daily/News/205286/4/987210/%D9%82%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%B1.aspx>

The mobile warfare tactics employed by the Zionist enemy in its war of extermination in Gaza and its aggression against Lebanon and Iran are, I consider, a wake-up call for the countries of the region that must be carefully studied...

Once again, the extent of Zionist intelligence penetration into Iran and Iran's failure to capitalize on what happened with Hezbollah are evident. Anyone who imagines that Netanyahu's ambitions will stop at the borders of Gaza and the West Bank is delusional. Rather, he will continue his aggression against the countries of

the region to realize his dream of Greater Israel. This requires the countries of the region to prepare for a coming war and to work now to strengthen their cyber and intelligence security, train professional cadres capable of exposing agents and the modern methods used by the Mossad in its war with Lebanon and Iran, utilize artificial intelligence, secure nuclear, military, and scientific facilities, reduce reliance on foreign companies in the field of digital infrastructure, and monitor anonymous digital communications. The era of conventional wars is over and we have entered the era of hybrid wars.

Source:

تركيا والحرب القادمة مع إسرائيل

Dr. Saeed al-Hajj. "Turkey and the Coming War with Israel," al-Jazeera (Qatari media outlet), 7 August 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2025/8/7/%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84>

The Turkish National Intelligence Academy published an extensive study on the Israeli-Iranian war, not only because of its significance as a major regional confrontation, nor because it is a confrontation rich with lessons learned, but also because Turkey may be targeted in similar wars in the future, as the academy's lessons learned indicate...

The study also highlighted the dangers of cyber warfare, spy networks, and information warfare, emphasizing the need to find local alternatives for communication and information exchange systems, particularly for government institutions, employees, and workers in sensitive positions.

Source:

مصر وإسرائيل... سؤال الحرب المؤجلة

Ahmed El Gendy. "Egypt and Israel... The Question of the Postponed War," al-Araby al-Jadeed (Qatari-aligned daily), 21 July 2025. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B3%D8%A4%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AC%D9%91%D9%84%D8%A9>

One of the things that has recently become apparent is that the Israeli government in Tel Aviv no longer shows

clear respect for the two traditional peace allies, Egypt and Jordan. All the Israeli positions issued by the Israeli
continue on 49

government regarding the displacement of Palestinians to Sinai, and considering it a practical option for forced displacement, appear to be dictated and indicate a desire to impose solutions that harm Egypt's national security...

The truth is that there are various factors that make targeting Egypt, even politically or security-wise, a not-too-impossible possibility. Any change in Egypt's

position on Eastern Mediterranean gas issues, an alliance with Turkey and the entry into a strategic or military partnership with it, or even the emergence of independent Egyptian decision-making on issues that serve its national security but are against Israel's interests, could be among the reasons Israel embarks on a confrontation it knows is coming one day.

Source: Doaa El-Bey, "Egypt and Turkey coordinate on Gaza," *al-Ahram Weekly* (semi-official Egyptian English-language weekly), 14 August 2025. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/50/551163/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt-and-Turkey-coordinate-on-Gaza.aspx>

Bilateral relations between Egypt and Turkey have gained momentum in recent years through frequent reciprocal visits. [Foreign ministers] Abdelatty and Fidan praised this tangible progress in various fields, pointing to the increasing pace of high-level exchange visits in a way that helps foster cooperation and boost relations between Cairo and Ankara. Abdelatty visited Turkey in February, and the two ministers last met in June during the Organisation of Islamic Conference

Council of Foreign Ministers session in Istanbul. There has been a frequent exchange of phone calls to discuss pressing regional issues. They will hold a Joint Working Group meeting before the end of the year to prepare for the second round of the High Strategic Council expected during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's planned visit to Egypt next year. The first round of the council was co-chaired by the Egyptian and Turkish presidents in September 2024.

Notes:

- 1 The Turkish National Intelligence Academy is an academic institution affiliated with Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT). The academy was founded in early 2023 and began its activities the following year. Per the academy's website, "its objective is to advance the field of intelligence as a science in Türkiye by conducting postgraduate education and scientific research in the areas of intelligence, security, and strategy." See: <https://www.mit.gov.tr/en/akademi.html>. The full report, in Turkish, is available at: https://mia.edu.tr/uploads/f/12-gn-savasi-ve-trkiye-iin-dersler_1.pdf?v=1754026418
- 2 For the full report in Turkish, see: https://mia.edu.tr/uploads/f/12-gn-savasi-ve-trkiye-iin-dersler_1.pdf?v=1754026418
- 3 See: Lucas Winter, "Fears of Gaza Violence Prompt Egypt To Reinforce the Sinai Border," *OE Watch*, 02 2024. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/fears-of-gaza-violence-prompt-egypt-to-reinforce-the-sinai-border/>

Panama Asserts Sovereignty, Seeking To Cancel Chinese Port Concessions Amid Great Power Competition

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

In early 2025, the American multinational investment company announced that an American-European consortium would purchase 43 ports operating in 23 countries, including two at the strategic approaches to the Panama Canal, from the Hong Kong-based Hutchison Port Holdings, provoking China's ire.¹ After an initial silence, Chinese President Xi Jinping repudiated the deal and moved to block the sale of these strategic ports by launching an investigation through China's State Administration for Market Regulation. According to Panama's oldest daily newspaper, *La Estrella de Panamá*, after waiting on the results of these exclusive negotiations, which ultimately ended inconclusively thanks to China's maneuvering, the Panamanian government of José Raúl Mulino has

decided to act. Panama's Comptroller General, Anel Flores, presented two cases to the country's Supreme Court, demanding the annulment of Hutchison Port Holdings' contracts to run the two ports at the strategic approaches to the canal, arguing they are unconstitutional. Argentine online media outlet *Infobae* reports that Flores has leveraged an earlier audit by his office, which found Hutchison Port Holdings in arrears on millions of dollars in royalty payments and having improperly utilized tax loopholes in a prior renewal of its concession agreements.² The article states that a favorable ruling could find the port contracts in question unconstitutional and thus nullify Hutchison Port Holdings' 2021 contract extension.

"I don't think it's right that there are other people in other latitudes negotiating the future of assets that belong to us Panamanians."

The two Hutchison ports at the strategic approaches to the Panama Canal have been the subject of considerable geopolitical competition recently.³ Panama's move to reassert sovereignty is the latest in the country's ports saga. Given that Panama is a critical maritime chokepoint in the Western Hemisphere, the outcome of the two cases in Panama's Supreme Court will have geopolitical ripple effects.



In recent years, the Panama Canal has become a flashpoint in geopolitical competition due to its ability to serve as a maritime chokepoint.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/whltrav-el/5895017175/>; Attribution: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Source: “Contraloría presenta dos demandas contra contrato de Panama Ports (Comptroller’s Office files two lawsuits against Panama Ports contract),” *La Estrella de Panamá* (the oldest daily newspaper in the country), 31 July 2025. <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/contraloria-presenta-dos-demandas-contra-contrato-de-panama-ports-CE14898802>

‘The ports belong to the Republic of Panama, and therefore, to all Panamanians. And I don’t think it’s right that there are other people in other latitudes negotiating the future of assets that belong to us Panamanians,’ Flores stated...In January of this year, shortly after the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump...the Comptroller’s Office announced the start of audits of the Chinese company. In April, one day before the U.S.

Secretary of Defense arrived in Panama, the Comptroller’s Office announced preliminary results, detailing that Panama should have received \$1.337 billion in port concessions over the past 24 years, but only \$483 million actually arrived... ‘There are countless people involved at ministerial levels, directors of the AMP, who obviously authorized, illegally, an extension of a contract that is clearly ‘unfair’ for the Republic of Panama,’ Flores said.

Source: “Demandan ante el Supremo el contrato con operador hongkonés por puertos en Canal de Panamá (The contract with a Hong Kong operator for ports in the Panama Canal is being litigated before the Supreme Court),” *Infobae* (an Argentine online media outlet with excellent regional coverage), 30 July 2025. <https://www.infobae.com/espana/agencias/2025/07/31/demandan-ante-el-supremo-el-contrato-con-operador-hongkones-por-puertos-en-canal-de-panama/>

The country’s highest judicial body will evaluate requests to annul agreements related to the management of strategic terminals, following an official audit that denounced harmful conditions and possible irregularities in the administration of key concessions for the nation... The unconstitutionality claim refers to the contract with Hutchison, and ‘the nullity is exclusively related to the subsequent extension’ of that contract,

Flores clarified...The official explained that the legal actions are based on the findings of an audit conducted by the Comptroller General’s Office, delivered on April 7, which revealed ‘numerous irregularities,’ describing the contract as ‘unfair and abusive against the country’s interests.’

Notes:

- 1 For details of the blockbuster deal, see: Ryan C. Berg, Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Juliana Rubio, Henry Ziemer, and Rubi Bledsoe, “Chinese Ports in Panama Come Under New Management,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 March 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-ports-panama-come-under-new-management>.
- 2 To understand how the latest move by Panama’s government leverages international law, see: Carlos Ruiz Hernandez and Ryan C. Berg, “Panama Ports Lawsuits Reshape Great Power Competition in the Americas: The Mulino Doctrine in Action,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 August 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/panamas-port-lawsuits-reshape-great-power-competition-americas-mulino-doctrine-action>.
- 3 For more information on how ports have become key nodes in geopolitical competition, see: Henry Ziemer, Jaehyun Han, and Aidan Powers-Riggs, “No Safe Harbor: Evaluating the Risks of China’s Port Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 June 2025. <https://features.csis.org/no-safe-harbor-china-ports/>.