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FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



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

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OEWATCH

FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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China's Plan To Render Antiballistic Missile Systems Less Effective

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

A team of Chinese military researchers¹ is pursuing new technology that, according to the following article excerpt published on the highly regulated Chinese internet platform *Tencent*, could pose a serious challenge to antiballistic missile systems. Sourcing its information from a scientific research paper published in the Chinese peer-reviewed international journal, *Chinese Journal of Aeronautics*, the second excerpted article explains that the team proposes a new technology they refer to as “Integrated Evasion and Impact Autonomous Decisionmaking Model of Exoatmospheric Vehicles.” Simply put, the team has set out to reduce or eliminate its exoatmospheric vehicles’² vulnerability to enemy interception. The article explains that these missiles are most vulnerable at the mid-course phase.³ The mid-course point is the point at which an adversary’s early warning system will most easily detect

“[I]f this new technology...can be realized, then... the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system, which the United States has spent more than a decade and hundreds of billions of dollars to build, is likely to become a decoration.”

and intercept a ballistic missile, well in advance of it getting to its target. Limited maneuverability fixes and constrains a missile’s course at this point. According to the article, solving the issue of mid-course interception is a complex problem, with energy consumption being a major constraining factor. The missile’s ability to deviate from its original trajectory to avoid destruction requires increased energy to maneuver to maintain target accuracy. The Chinese team is focused on developing a model that relies on an autonomous system of artificial intelligence-guided, self-learning decisionmaking built-in program that considers maneuver avoidance and precision strikes while ensuring energy consumption is within the

missile’s capacity. The article explains that one cannot simply rely on any kind of AI. Rather, it requires a specially tuned “AI pilot” that can continually upgrade itself, optimizing through a sort of deep reinforcement learning algorithm.

It is not clear how far the team is in developing this technology, when it could be ready, or even if it will be ready at all. However, the article claims that its adversaries’ antiballistic missile systems will be rendered almost completely ineffective due to China’s less predictable trajectory maneuvering method and “the probability of successful interception [by China’s adversaries] will fall.”

Source: Korolev, “解放军研发新技术, 让洲际导弹中段可变轨, 美国GMD要成摆设? (The PLA’s Development of New Technology, Allowing Intercontinental Missiles To Change Orbit During The Mid-Course. Will The US GMD Become a Decoration?),” *Tencent* (China’s largest multinational technology conglomerate, operating within a tightly regulated environment), 8 January 2025. <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250108A066W500>

Recently, the “Chinese Journal of Aeronautics” revealed that a team, under Professor Xian Yong of the Rocket Force University of Engineering, proposed a new technology, namely the “Integrated Evasion and Impact (IEI) autonomous decision-making model

of Exo-atmospheric Vehicles (EVs),” which could represent a changed future direction...

[I]f this new technology...can be realized, then land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, medium-and long-range ballistic missiles, hypersonic gliders, and

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other aircraft whose flight trajectories are partly outside the atmosphere will be able to perform irregular maneuvers in the middle of the trajectory, which has otherwise been an area of relatively stable flight making it easy to intercept. This will further increase the missile's uninterceptability. What's even more amazing is that the mid-course section will be controlled by the missile's new generation of artificial intelligence algorithm for autonomous decision-making... The Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system, which the United States has spent more than a decade and hundreds of billions of dollars to build, is likely to become a decoration.

Academically, mid-course refers to the stage of flight when a ballistic missile has left the atmosphere and reached the Karman line, which is more than 100 kilometers above the ground. At this point, the booster separates and the missile relies on inertia to fly along a predetermined trajectory toward the target. This is the most stable stage in the missile's entire flight process because there is basically no atmospheric resistance and the missile's direction, speed, altitude and other parameters are relatively fixed. Therefore, as long as there is a certain level of early warning measures, such as strategic early warning radar, reconnaissance satellites, etc., it is possible [for the adversary] to detect and lock onto the missile in the middle of its trajectory...

[H]ow to make decisions on mid-course maneuvers is complex. The key problem is that mid-course maneuvers also consume energy, which means that the duration and number of maneuvers are limited. Maneuvers are also contradictory to precision strikes: maneuvering to avoid requires energy consumption. The goal is to require the missile to deviate from its original trajectory as much as possible, while precision strikes require that the missile must be accurate no matter what method is used.

On the premise of controlling energy consumption, Professor Xian Yong's team proposed a method to ... to establish an integrated "avoidance-strike" autonomous decision-making model.

This algorithm combines deep learning perception and reinforcement learning decision-making capabilities allowing AI to autonomously learn the best solution to a problem by allowing it to interact with the environment...

[T]he US GMD, which was developed and built in the early 1990s and originally used mid-course interception as its main interception method, will be rendered almost completely ineffective due to its less predictable trajectory maneuvering method. Therefore, if the US interceptor missile does not have the same flexibility after being fired, the probability of successful interception will fall.

Source: Deep Reinforcement Learning Based Integrated Evasion and Impact Hierarchical Intelligent Policy of Exo-Atmospheric Vehicles, *Chinese Journal of Aeronautics* (a Chinese, peer-reviewed international journal that covers all aspects of aerospace engineering) Volume 38, Issue 1, January 2025. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1000936124003303>

Exo-atmospheric vehicles are constrained by limited maneuverability, which leads to the contradiction between evasive maneuver and precision strike. To address the problem of Integrated Evasion and Impact (IEI) decision under multi-constraint conditions,

a hierarchical intelligent decision-making method based on Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) was proposed. First, an intelligent decision-making framework of "DRL evasion decision" + "impact prediction guidance decision" was established: it

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takes the impact point deviation correction ability as the constraint and the maximum miss distance as the objective, and effectively solves the problem of poor decision-making effect caused by the large IEI decision space. Second, to solve the sparse reward problem faced by evasion decision-making, a hierarchical decision-making method consisting of maneuver timing decision and maneuver duration decision was proposed, and the corresponding Markov Decision Process (MDP) was designed.

A detailed simulation experiment was designed to analyze the advantages and computational complexity of the proposed method. Simulation results show that the proposed model has good performance and low computational resource requirement. The minimum miss distance is 21.3 m under the condition of guaranteeing the impact point accuracy, and the single decision-making time is 4.086 ms on an STM32F407 single-chip microcomputer, which has engineering application value.

Notes:

- 1 The *Chinese Journal of Aeronautics* lists the six authors of the research paper as being affiliated with the following three institutions: **1)** Xi'an Research Institute of High Technology: According to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), the Xi'an Research Institute of High Technology is a possible "non-existent cover institution," in this case, for the Rocket Force University of Engineering in Xian. The ASPI further assesses the Rocket Force University as "very high risk" due to espionage or misconduct. See "Rocket Force University of Engineering 中国人民解放军火箭军工程大学," ASPI Unitracker, last updated 12 November 2019, <https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/universities/rocket-force-university-of-engineering/>. **2)** China Xi'an Satellite Control Center and Department of Automation at Tsinghua University: This is a space tracking and control facility located in Xian, China. **3)** Department of Automation, Tsinghua University, Beijing: According to their website, their research focus includes control theory and control engineering; pattern recognition and intelligent systems; detection technology and automation devices; navigation, guidance, and control; industrial intelligence systems; and brain and cognitive sciences.
- 2 An exoatmospheric vehicle is a missile or interceptor system that operates outside the Earth's atmosphere to target certain threats.
- 3 The mid-course phase is the phase after which the booster has burned out and the missile is traveling outside the earth's atmosphere, coasting through space before it begins its re-entry into the atmosphere.



Far western Beijing from the CCTV Tower. The Western Hill can be seen in the distance.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Hills#/media/File:View_from_Beijing_TV_Tower_2\(2007-07\)\(small\).JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Hills#/media/File:View_from_Beijing_TV_Tower_2(2007-07)(small).JPG); Attribution: Netopyr-2, CC BY-SA 3.0

China Potentially Building World's Largest Military Command Center

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

The London-based daily *Financial Times* released an article, excerpted below, on a possible military wartime command center under construction approximately 19 miles southwest of Beijing. If true, according to the article, it would become the world's largest military wartime command center. Dubbed "Beijing Military City," the site is roughly 1,500 acres (2.34 square miles), at least 10 times larger than the Pentagon, and could become a new advanced underground command bunker for top military leadership, including Xi Jinping in his capacity as chairman of the Central Military Commission.

The second article excerpt, published in the Taiwan-based news information platform *NewTalk*, describes the project as a high-tech war fortress, built by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), to be used for a long-term strategic confrontation. The article speculates that it will be an underground command and control center

for military decisionmaking and battlefield control during a nuclear war or high-intensity conflict. Its design indicates it is meant to defend key decisionmakers against U.S. military precision strike weapons targeting underground facilities. Based on the size, scale, and partially buried characteristics of the new site, the article speculates it will replace the Western Hills complex, currently China's main secure command center, which is in Beijing's Western Hills, northeast of the new facility. It could be used to support the People's Liberation Army global military operations and even become a hub for global cyber warfare operations. Finally, it could serve as a safe place for Xi Jinping and his top CCP leaders to direct continued military operations, even under nuclear attack.

Some analysts view the command center as having limits. For instance, the *Financial Times* article questions the project's suitability as an underground bunker. A researcher at the Council on Strategic and Wargaming

Studies in Taipei argues that "it can only be assumed that the site will be used for an administrative organization or a large training base."

"Chinese leaders could use the new facility for greater security against US 'bunker buster' munitions, and even against nuclear weapons."

No matter what it is, Chinese sources are either remaining tight-lipped¹ about it or claiming ignorance. Meanwhile, according to the article, while there was no visible military presence at the site, there were signs warning against drones flying in the area or taking photographs. Guards also prohibited entry and would not discuss the project. The situation is of concern to Taiwan. As the article in *NewTalk* concludes; with China pushing for reunification, "construction of the 'Beijing Military City' is a

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symbol of the CCP's military expansion and also shows that Xi Jinping is preparing for a possible worst-case wartime scenario. This move will not only increase Cross-Strait tensions,

but it could also change the global strategic landscape and pose a serious threat to world peace." Therefore, the project should be carefully monitored.

Source: Demetri Sevastopulo et al., "China Builds Huge Wartime Military Command Centre in Beijing," *Financial Times* (London-based daily newspaper), 30 January 2025. <https://www.ft.com/content/f3763e51-8607-42b9-9ef9-5789d5bf353d>

China's military is building a massive complex in western Beijing that US intelligence believes will serve as a wartime command centre far larger than the Pentagon, according to current and former American officials.

Several current and former US officials said the intelligence community was closely monitoring the site, which would be the world's largest military command centre — and at least 10 times the size of the Pentagon...

Three people familiar with the situation said some intelligence analysts had dubbed the project "Beijing Military City."

"If confirmed, this new advanced underground command bunker for the military leadership, including President Xi as the chairman of the Central Military Commission, signals Beijing's intent to build not only a world-class conventional force but also an advanced nuclear warfighting capability..."

While there was no visible military presence at the site, there were signs warning against flying drones or taking photographs. Guards at one gate abruptly said that entry was prohibited and refused to talk about the project. One supervisor leaving the construction site refused to comment on the project.

Access to the back of the project has been blocked by a checkpoint. A guard said the public could not access popular hiking and tourist areas near the site, which a local shopkeeper described as a "military area."

"China's main secure command centre is in the Western Hills, north-east of the new facility, and was built decades ago at the height of the cold war...The size, scale and partially buried characteristics of the new facility suggest it will replace the Western Hills complex as the primary wartime command facility."

"Chinese leaders could use the new facility for greater security against US 'bunker buster' munitions, and even against nuclear weapons," the former intel people close to Taiwan's defence ministry also said the PLA appeared to be building a new command centre, though some experts questioned if the area was suitable for underground bunkers.

"The land area is much larger than a normal military camp and military school, so it can only be assumed that it is a site for an administrative organisation or a large training base," said Hsu Yen-chi, a researcher at the Council on Strategic and Wargaming Studies think-tank in Taipei.

Source: “中共打造全球最大軍事基地威脅國際秩序 (China Builds the World’s Largest Military Base, Threatening International Order),” *NewTalk* (Taiwan-based news information platform), 11 February 2025. <https://newtalk.tw/citizen/view/65479?a1>

[T]he “Beijing Military City” is not only a traditional military command post, but also a high-tech war fortress built by the Chinese Communist Party for long-term strategic confrontation.

It is speculated that the following key facilities are equipped inside:

- 1. Underground command and communication center: ensure that military decision-making and battlefield control can be maintained in nuclear war or under high-intensity conflict.*
- 2. Anti-bunker weapon design: specially designed to defend against the US military’s precision strike weapons against underground facilities, such as the “Hell Penetrator” (GBU-57).*

3. Advanced network and electronic warfare capabilities: used to support the PLA’s global military operations. The site could become the hub for launching cyber warfare abroad.

4. Wartime government shelter: Xi Jinping and the top CCP leaders can hide in the event of war to ensure the continued operation of the ruling institutions.

The construction of the “Beijing Military City” is a symbol of the CCP’s military expansion and also shows that Xi Jinping is preparing for a possible worst-case wartime scenario. This will not only increase Cross-Strait tensions, but it could also change the global strategic landscape and pose a serious threat to world peace. The international community should pay attention to this development...

Notes:

- 1 Most recently China has further cracked down on the release of military and other information it deems sensitive. See Dodge Billingsley’s article “China Takes Steps To Control the Publishing of Sensitive Security Related Information on the Internet” in this issue of OE Watch.

China Takes Steps To Control Publication of Military-Related Information

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

A modern and capable fighting force is central to China's 21st-century geopolitical ambitions. Controlling the flow of information surrounding its military in a globally connected world is also a priority. China recently released guidelines on “governing... false military information, leaking military secrets” on the internet and “creating a good network public opinion atmosphere for achieving the goal of building the army for 100 years.” The rather lengthy litany of measures published by China's National Administration of State Secrets Protection¹ at the end of January provides self-policing instructions to government institutions and individuals governing the flow of military and

“Internet military information service providers are encouraged and supported to establish or clearly define editorial agencies responsible for military information services, and to be equipped with full-time editors and content reviewers.”

security information. The directive also addresses military-themed content by civilian bloggers, influencers, and anyone else who might publish “sensitive” information.

The new measures will likely cause Chinese military bloggers and enthusiasts to hesitate before publishing photos and commentary of military-related developments such as the flyover of China's never-before-seen next-generation stealth aircraft over Shenyang city on 22 December 2024,² which was widely shared on Chinese social media platforms.³ At the same time, tightening the restrictions on sharing military-related content could indicate that when a military event occurs, such as the above-noted stealth flyover or the 2015 public reveal of China's **DF-21** “carrier killer” surface-to-ship missile in a state parade and picked up on Chinese social media,⁴ it can be considered approved and therefore something China wants the rest of the world to see. The new guidelines could affect the information sphere of the operational environment if a significant amount of open-source military news about China becomes restricted.



◀ The DF-21D missile as seen after the military parade on September 3, 2015. New publishing guidelines introduced by China's National Administration of State Secrets Protection may dampen enthusiasm among the public and enthusiasts to photograph or report on such sightings for fear of breaking the laws regarding state secrets.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DF-21_-_/media/File:Dongfeng-21D.JPG; Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

Source: “关于印发《互联网军事信息传播管理办法》全文及答记者问的通知 (Notice on Issuing the Full Text of the “Internet Military Information Dissemination Management Measures” and Answering Questions from Reporters),” Policy and Regulations Department Print Notice on Issuing the “Internet Military Information Dissemination Management Measures, National Administration of State Secrets Protection (a government agency), 9 February 2025. <https://www.gjbmj.gov.cn/n1/2025/0208/c409099-40415038.html>

In order to regulate Internet military information dissemination activities, safeguard national security and social public interests, and protect the legitimate rights and interests of citizens, legal persons and other organizations...

Internet military information service providers are encouraged and supported to establish or clearly define editorial agencies responsible for military information services, and to be equipped with full-time editors and content reviewers who have experience in military news publishing or radio and television work, high political literacy, military professional literacy and confidentiality literacy, or have received military news publishing or radio and television, military information dissemination management training, which are commensurate with the scale of services.

Propaganda of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era and Xi

Jinping’s Thought on Strengthening the Military;

Propaganda of the decisions and deployments of the CPC Central Committee and the Central Military Commission: ...Military personnel who accept interviews, publish articles, serve as keynote speakers, or participate in online live broadcasts and other related activities on the Internet on issues such as national defense and military construction and military operations shall comply with relevant military regulations.

*... for promoting the main theme, spreading positive energy, governing the Internet’s false military information, leaking military secrets, and other issues, clearing the network public opinion environment related to the military, gathering the will and strength to strengthen the military, and creating a good network public opinion atmosphere for achieving the goal of building the army for 100 years.*The DF-21D

Notes:

- 1 The National Administration of State Secrets Protection or (NASSP) is an institution of the State Council of China. responsible for the protection of classified material.
- 2 “Two Chinese stealth aircraft programmes emerge unexpectedly,” *Janes* (UK based defense publisher), 15 January 2025. <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-and-national-security-analysis/post/two-chinese-stealth-aircraft-programmes-emerge-unexpectedly>
- 3 “The Screws Tighten on Military Content,” *China Media Project* (U.S. based with offices in Singapore and Taipei, Taiwan), 10 February 2025. <https://chinamediaproject.org/2025/02/10/china-tightens-the-screws-on-military-content/>
- 4 For and in-depth look at the DF-21 and its successors, and the implications of Chinese information regarding the DF program, see: Gerry Doyle and Blake Herzinger, *Carrier Killer: China’s Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile and Theater of Operations in the early 21st Century*. Asia at War series, Helion & Co. Ltd, 2022.

China Increasing Its Military Partnership With Burkina Faso



By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

China's military influence in the Sahel¹ is increasing primarily through formal military-to-military partnerships.² The first excerpted article from the French-language Burkinabé publication *sidwaya.info* presented details of the Chinese ambassador to Burkina Faso, Lu Shan's, 21 January meeting with Burkinabé Prime Minister Ouédraogo.³ According to the article, the two parties agreed to strengthen military relations. Importantly, Lu Shan acknowledged and thanked Burkina Faso for its recognition of China and its breaking of ties with Taiwan.⁴ Lu Shan pledged to aid Burkina Faso to regain its territorial integrity and sovereignty from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and its rival, the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), but not through joint counterinsurgency operations. Instead, China pledged to provide additional

“China is also concerned about the struggle undertaken by Burkina Faso to regain its territorial integrity and sovereignty.”

weapons to Burkina Faso to counter JNIM and ISGS.

Speaking to the growing friendship between the two countries, as per the second excerpted French-language article in *afrik.com*, in September 2024, Prime Minister Ouédraogo's predecessor visited military and space technology companies in China, as well as executives of China's communications giant, Huawei. At that time, according to the article, Ouédraogo also asserted that China offered more opportunities to Burkina Faso than the West. The article also noted that

The Burkinabe armed forces formerly trained with U.S. forces at Flintlock in 2017, but now the Burkinabe junta is receiving military support from China, which portrays itself as a preferable partner compared to the West.

Source: Sgt. Benjamin Northcutt, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flintlock_2017_closing_ceremony_in_Burkina_Faso_170316-A-MQ814-095.jpg; Attribution: CC x2.0

in addition to strong relations with China, Burkina Faso has decisively turned away from the West in favor of cooperation with Russia.

While Russia is offloading its excess military supplies in neighboring Mali, China has more resources to sustainably provide military support to Sahelian countries like Burkina Faso, especially advanced surveillance technologies like those associated with Huawei. However, the security challenges Burkina Faso faces from insurgents like JNIM and ISGS are not easily quashed by advanced technologies and weapons systems. Rather, addressing dissatisfaction among the population toward misgovernance,

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discrimination, and lack of economic opportunities will be key—and it does not appear that either Burkina Faso’s

associations with China or Russia—the broader region’s partner of choice—are aimed at these concerns.

Source: “Coopération sino-burkinabè: la Chine s’inscrit dans la vision actuelle du Burkina Faso (Sino-Burkinabe cooperation: China is part of Burkina Faso’s current vision),” *Sidwaya.info* (national French-language daily newspaper in Burkina Faso, which was formerly state-run but now is independent), 21 January 2025. <https://www.sidwaya.info/cooperation-sino-burkinabe-la-chine-sinscrit-dans-la-vision-actuelle-du-burkina-faso/>

The Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China, Lu Shan, was received in an audience by the Prime Minister, Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo. The discussions between the Chinese diplomat and the head of government focused on strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries.

After leaving, the Chinese diplomat stated he was honored to be received by the Prime Minister. After reviewing various aspects of Sino-Burkinabe cooperation with the head of government, Lu Shan

praised the country’s current dynamics and reaffirmed China’s commitment to Burkina Faso.

Ambassador Lu Shan [...] also “reaffirmed to the Prime Minister China’s constant support for Burkina Faso. China will firmly support Burkina Faso’s efforts to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty to the best of its ability.”

The Chinese diplomat also noted that Burkina Faso’s support for the People’s Republic of China is recognized and appreciated internationally

Source: “Burkina-Chine: vers le renforcement de la coopération dans l’aviation militaire et le contrôle de l’espace aérien (Burkina-China: Towards Strengthening Cooperation in Military Aviation and Airspace Control),” *afrik.com*, (French-language daily newspaper covering Africa and the Maghreb region), 10 September 2024. <https://www.afrik.com/burkina-chine-vers-le-renforcement-de-la-cooperation-dans-l-aviation-militaire-et-le-controle-de-l-espace-aerien>

The Burkinabe Prime Minister visited two Chinese companies specializing in military aviation and space technologies. His goal is to strengthen ties between his country and China in strategic sectors. This visit provided an opportunity to discover Chinese advanced modern military equipment and to explore opportunities

for cooperation in this strategic area for Burkina Faso.

In his statement, the Prime Minister stressed the added value of cooperation with China, rejecting previous criticisms of relations with China. According to him, China offers Africa substantial opportunities that surpass those offered by Western partners.

Notes:

- 1 For more on China’s military influence in Burkina Faso, see: Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Amelia Cheatham, “Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Burkina Faso,” U.S. Army, Foreign Military Studies Office, January 2024. https://g2webcontent.z2.web.core.usgovcloudapi.net/OEE/M-DIME/TRADOCG2_FMSO_20240109_MDIME_CHI_Burkina_Faso.pdf. For a similar study on Russia’s military influence in Burkina Faso, see: Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Amelia Cheatham, “Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Burkina Faso,” U.S. Army, Foreign Military Studies Office, January 2024. https://g2webcontent.z2.web.core.usgovcloudapi.net/OEE/M-DIME/TRADOCG2_FMSO_20240109_MDIME_RUS_Burkina_Faso.pdf

continue on 15

- 2 China's approach to the region is strikingly different than Russia's via Africa Corps', which has generated significant attention due to its role in counter-insurgency operations, abetting post-coup military juntas, and engaging in various forms of illicit economic activities and human rights abuses.
- 3 The head of Burkina Faso's military junta Captain Ibrahim Traore named Ouédraogo as prime minister one day after he dissolved the government in December 2024. Ouédraogo was formerly a journalist and director of the country's state television network. As Ouédraogo was a close ally and supporter of Traore, after the September 2022 coup, Traore tapped him to serve as communications minister and government spokesperson until he was finally named prime minister.
- 4 In May 2018, Burkina Faso recognize the People's Republic of China (PROC) and ended diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC, or Taiwan). By 2021, China sought to bring Burkina Faso under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and relations have only deepened since then, including militarily. See: China Daily. "China hopes to ink BRI cooperation documents with Burkina Faso soon: Chinese FM." 11 June 2021. <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/11/WS60c2c768a31024ad0bac51e1.html>

Russia To Reestablish Pipeline Brigades Based on Ukraine Lessons Learned

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from the major Russian daily newspaper *Izvestia* discusses how Russia is increasing the capabilities of its Pipeline Troops.¹ The changing character of war as experienced by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the *special military operation* in Ukraine is the impetus for this change.² The persistent overhead surveillance that UAVs provide makes fuel trucks an ideal target for artillery and first-person-view UAVs. However, although tactical pipelines can be damaged, they can be buried and concealed and are relatively easy to repair—and therefore important on the modern battlefield. Russia will respond by reestablishing pipeline brigades, which underwent down-

sizing to become pipeline battalions during the 2008 “New Look” reforms. Currently, the pipeline battalions are subordinated to the Combined Arms Armies. It is possible that newly formed pipeline brigades could be subordinated to the higher-level Military District (Joint Strategic Command) headquarters.

It is important to note that, unlike the U.S. Army, rail and pipelines are key enablers for Russian logistics and strategic mobility. The extensive use of rail, pipelines, and centralized logistics permits Russian units to be substantially smaller than U.S. and NATO units with similar capabilities. For reference, a Russian 152mm **2S19 Msta-S** battalion with 18 guns has approximately 200 personnel, while a U.S. 155mm **M109A6 Paladin** battalion

with 18 guns has 400-500 personnel.³ Although this system has caused Russia some substantial problems in Ukraine, it has permitted Russia to field a force with much more “tooth” than “tail” when compared to U.S. and NATO armies. Therefore, Russia’s logistic system should not be thought of in terms of “better” or “worse” than the U.S./NATO system: it simply has different “plusses” and “minuses.”

“Several new pipeline brigades will be created in the Russian army. These units are necessary to supply troops with all types of fuel and water during large-scale military operations.”



Russian soldiers conduct refueling operation.

Source: <https://mto.ric.mil.ru/Statii/item/636699/>;
Attribution: Russian Ministry of Defense, Russia CC BY-SA 4.0

Source: Yulia Leonova, Vladimir Matveev, Bogdan Stepovoy, “Прилив сил: в российской армии создадут новые трубопроводные бригады (A surge of strength: new pipeline brigades are to be created in the Russian army), *Izvestia* (major Russian newspaper), 13 February 2025. <https://iz.ru/1838212/vladimir-matveev-bogdan-stepovoi/priliv-sil-v-rossiiskoi-armii-sozdadut-novye-truboprovodnye-brigady>

Several new pipeline brigades will be created in the Russian army. These units are necessary to supply troops with all types of fuel and water during large-scale military operations. Experts note that, in addition to solving military tasks, such units have repeatedly come to the aid of civilians during emergency situations.

*The fundamental decision on the formation of pipeline brigades has already been made by the Russian Defense Ministry. Until relatively recently, there were more than 20 such large units in the armed forces, but by the beginning of the 2010s, only a few pipeline battalions remained, sources in the Russian military department told *Izvestia*. The special military operation has shown that pipeline battalions are needed because the equipment that delivers fuel is a priority target for the enemy: both fuel tanks and individual vehicles, military expert Dmitry Kornev told *Izvestia*.*

Modern pipelines are easy to camouflage, and their repair is quite simple. It is not difficult to make false

pipelines to mislead the enemy, he explained. Fuel is required for almost all equipment used in the combat zone. It is quite possible that there is currently a shortage of professional units that could quickly deploy fuel pipeline networks. The delivery of fuel and petroleum products to certain distribution centers will still be carried out by traditional methods. But further distribution will go through networks, the construction of which will be carried out by new units.

*Construction of pipelines near the front line requires high levels of military training and a high level of technical development for the entire country, military expert Viktor Litovkin told *Izvestia*. In Russia, these specialized troops have repeatedly provided assistance to both the military and the civilian population, the expert noted. Large groups on the front lines are easier to supply with fuel by way of pipelines instead fuel trucks. Fuel trucks are especially vulnerable on frontline roads, especially now, when enemy drones are trying to attack them.*

Notes:

- 1 The Pipeline Troops are a special branch of the Russian Armed Forces' Material Technical Support Troops. They are intended to deploy and maintain fuel pipelines for the Ground Forces, Navy, and Aerospace Troops during combat activities. Field pipelines can be constructed easily and quickly (in good conditions), and moved when needed. In addition, they can transport fuel and water at much lower cost than other means of transportation in field environments or support fuel distribution from national stores to military district fuel depots and airfields. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Red Army had 24 pipeline brigades, six separate pipeline battalions, three separate pipeline companies, and eight separate pipeline platoons, totaling over 5,000 personnel. The Russian Federation has disbanded or downsized the pipeline brigades and now uses separate pipeline battalions as the primary means of military pipeline support. The pipeline battalion consists of several pipeline companies and can lay pipe at a rate of 60-80 km a day. A pipeline company can install and operate pumping stations, and for the operation and defense of their segment of the pipeline, to include patrolling, emergency services and maintenance. The company can lay the pipeline in the event that the automated pipe laying is not possible. When pipeline operations are no longer needed, the company's personnel dismantle the pipeline and uninstall pumping stations. Aside from military operations, the Pipeline Troops may also provide pipe laying and support of: strategic industries, operations in extreme climates, and operations to support natural and man-made disaster relief.
- 2 Moscow uses the term *spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya* ("special military operation") or *spetsoperatsiya* ("special operation") to describe its campaign in Ukraine.
- 3 Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics and Modernization of the Ground Forces*, co-authored with Chuck Bartles, Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, 234 and Headquarters, Department of the Army, ATP 3-09.23, *Field Artillery Cannon Battalion*, US Government Printing Office, 24 September 2015, 1-3.

Russia Validates Floating Nuclear Power Plant Viability

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

Moscow has been committed to pursuing nuclear power in the Arctic for decades: indeed, the Soviet Union constructed nuclear power plants in the region to bridge vast distances that otherwise would have been impossible to provide electricity generation.¹

According to the excerpted article from Norwegian media outlet *The Barents Observer*, the world's only floating nuclear power plant, Russia's *Akademik Lomonosov* (introduced in 2020), recently "reloaded the uranium fuel elements for the first time" since becoming operational. The refueling indicates the viability of Russia's

"Both reactors on the Akademik Lomonosov have reloaded the uranium fuel elements for the first time since the floating nuclear power plant was put into operation in 2020. It is the world's only floating nuclear power plant and at the same time the world's northernmost heat and electricity producing unit."

floating nuclear power plants. In fact, in 2022, two years before the recent refueling, Russia announced plans to build three additional floating nuclear power plants. Moreover, China has also shown a strong interest in staking a claim in the polar waters. In 2021, Russia and China announced that China, as part of a joint Russia-China project, would build four additional

floating nuclear power plants for Russia.² While ostensibly for civilian use, Russia's cheap, reliable power in the Arctic could give Moscow an advantage, or at least a logistic head start, as the Arctic becomes a focal point for competition between Russia, China, and the West.

Russia's first floating nuclear power plant to cast off from St. Petersburg, April 2017.

Source: Dmitry Sharomov, Greenpeace, https://www.nuclear-heritage.net/index.php/File:Floating_nuclear_power_plant_SPb_2017.jpg; Attribution: SA-4.0



Source: Thomas Nilsen, "Floating nuclear power plant completes first fuel cycle," *The Barents Observer*, (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 16 January 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/floating-nuclear-power-plant-completes-first-fuel-cycle/423201>

Both reactors on the Akademik Lomonosov have reloaded the uranium fuel elements for the first time since the floating nuclear power plant was put into operation in 2020. It is the world's only floating nuclear power plant and at the same time the world's northernmost heat and electricity producing unit. With reactor technology similar to that of Russia's icebreakers, the fuel cycle requires changing the uranium elements every 3 to 5 years. This January the plant had delivered its first one billion kilowatt-hours. The state nuclear corporation also reports that the work on replacing the uranium fuel elements in the second reactor is now completed. The first reactor had its elements replaced in late 2023, early 2024.

The plant is anchored on the coast to the East Siberia Sea on the Chukotka Peninsula, the nuclear power plant delivers electricity to a grid that is separated from the rest of Russia. Main consumers are the settlement of Pevek and the nearby Baimskaya mine and its soon-to-be-built ore processing plant. Rosatom reported that the fresh uranium fuel was shipped to Pevek in special containers via the Northern Sea Route, but no details were provided as to which vessel was used. International shipping regulations set strict norms for ships allowed to transport radioactive

material, and especially so for fresh and spent uranium fuel. According to the Northern Sea Route administration, Rosatomflot's special purpose vessel Rossita received permission to sail north of Siberia valid for the period September 25 to November 30, 2024, but it is unclear if this was the transporter of the fuel elements to Pevek.

A video posted by Rosatom shows how the spent nuclear fuel elements are loaded out of the reactor and placed inside the storage rooms onboard Akademik Lomonosov. The spent nuclear fuel will likely stay onboard for a few years before being transported back to Murmansk, where there is a reloading facility from ship to train, making it possible to send the spent fuel for reprocessing at the RT-1 plant in Mayak, Chelyabinsk region.

The Akademik Lomonosov was connected to the power grid in December 2019 and began commercial operation in May 2020. A 490-kilometers long power-transmission line from Pevek to Bilibino, providing more reliable electricity to the mining operations in the area, was put into operation in September 2023. Rosatom still operates a small-scale nuclear heat and electricity plant in Bilibino which was built during Soviet times.

Notes:

- 1 Most of these Soviet era nuclear power plants are still in production and plans exist for another land-based atomic power plant supporting the major Arctic extraction and refining center of Norilsk.
- 2 See: "Construction starts on Russia's next floating nuclear power plant," *World Nuclear News*, 31 August 2022. <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Construction-starts-on-Russia-s-next-floating-nucl>

Russia Develops New Lithium Extraction Method With Possible Military Implications

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

Russian scientists have reportedly developed a new method to extract lithium more efficiently, replacing sulfuric acid with ammonium bisulfate. This innovation could significantly reduce the environmental impact and logistical challenges of lithium production but also could enhance the production of Russian-made advanced missiles and aircraft, according to a recent article in the pro-Kremlin online news website SputnikGlobe. According to the article, lithium extraction has traditionally required vast amounts of resources, including chemical reagents and ore materials. The conventional method involves processing thousands of tons of ore concentrate with sulfuric acid to produce lithium carbonate. This new approach replaces sulfuric acid with ammonium bisulfate, which is fully

restored during processing. Russian scientists say they can now develop lithium onsite, avoiding transportation-related difficulties and making the process far more streamlined and resource-efficient.¹

Last fall, President Vladimir Putin called the extraction of Russia's one million tons of lithium reserves a "strategically important task."² Lithium is not only essential for consumer electronics but also for weapons manufacturers. Among other uses, drones often rely on lithium-ion batteries for their power.³ But its lithium market could face major roadblocks. The country's largest lithium mining project was sanctioned by the United States in January.⁴ The current race to produce lithium also coincides with negotiations over which country—the Russia, United States, or Ukraine—will profit from the lithium

"Apart from being a critical element for manufacturing gadgets, lithium is of paramount importance to production of missiles and planes, adding significantly to their advanced characteristics."

deposits in Russia-occupied parts of eastern Ukraine. The competition over lithium deposits demonstrates the overlap between geoeconomics and geopolitics, as Russia seeks to increasingly challenge U.S. interests in this burgeoning industry.

A lithium rush is taking place in Russia's high north.

Source: Reinhard Jahn, <https://images.app.goo.gl/YTvywn8b69ua5xca9>; Attribution: CCA SA-2.0



Source: “Russia Rolls Out Breakthrough Technology to Produce Lithium,” *SputnikGlobe* (pro-Moscow online news outlet), 17 February 2025. <https://sputnikglobe.com/20250217/russia-rolls-out-breakthrough-technology-to-produce-lithium-1121576159.html>

Finding effective ways to develop lithium remains on the radar of Russian scientists, Ruslan Khamizov, corresponding member of Russia’s Academy of Sciences and director of the Vernadsky Institute of Geochemistry and Analytical Chemistry, told Scientific Russia magazine.

Why is it an Issue? Extracting lithium from ores always requires large resources: both chemical reagents and ore materials. To obtain lithium, thousands of tons of ore concentrate should be treated with sulfuric acid so that the resulting extract can be processed into lithium carbonate.

What’s the New Method All About? Russian researchers have developed a new resource-sufficient technology to extract lithium by replacing sulfuric acid with ammonium bisulfate. During processing, this bisulfate is completely restored, and scientists can simply develop the ore on site without dealing with transportation-related problems. For example, just several kilograms of ammonium bisulfate allow them to develop tons of ore materials and obtain the relevant quantity of lithium carbonate. Similar technology allows Russian engineers to extract lithium from liquid substances and brines.

Notes:

- 1 Russia’s lithium industry suffered a momentary setback in the mid-1990s when its last lithium-extracting facility was destroyed amid speculation that lithium development was unnecessary due to the availability of imported resources.
- 2 “Putin calls lithium mining strategically important for import substitution,” TASS, 2 September 2024. <https://tass.com/economy/1837205>
- 3 Lithium, a key component in rechargeable batteries for mobile phones, laptops, digital cameras, and electric vehicles, remains a critical resource for both commercial and defense applications. See: Joseph Webster, “Batteries as a Military Enabler,” *War on the Rocks*, 20 June 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/batteries-as-a-military-enabler/>
- 4 Mia Jankowicz, “Russia wants a lucrative share of the world’s lithium market, but it’s hitting roadblocks,” *Business Insider*, February 2025. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-big-push-lithium-hitting-roadblocks-sanctions-china-reserves-us-2025-1>

New Abkhazian President Suggests Further Russian Militarization of Black Sea Coast



Map of the South Caucasus showing Georgia and its two breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, bordered by Russia in the north.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Abkhazia_and_South_Ossetia_-_/media/File:Georgia,_Ossetia,_Russia_and_Abkhazia_\(en\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Abkhazia_and_South_Ossetia_-_/media/File:Georgia,_Ossetia,_Russia_and_Abkhazia_(en).svg);
Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

The Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia has suffered a political crisis between pro-Moscow factions and the opposition that believes the would-be republic has surrendered too much to Russia. At the heart of the matter are a number of Russian-favored initiatives, including the development of a more capable port in Ochamchira to host elements of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, driven from Crimea by Ukraine.¹ According to the excerpted article from the Abkhazian diaspora news service *Abkhaz World*, election interference helped secure the victory for former vice president Badra Gunba, who is considered pro-Moscow—and a member of the previous government, which signed an agreement with Russia in 2023 to expand the Ochamchira port. According to the

article, Abkhazian citizens residing in Turkey who flew to Sochi, Russia, with the intent to cross the Russia-Abkhazia border and vote in the presidential elections were denied entry into Abkhazia by Russian border guards and effectively deported back to Turkey. Russia's refusal to allow members of the Abkhazian diaspora (who have the constitutional right to vote) entry into Abkhazia to vote is the latest attempt in a long string of actions since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Feb 2022² to pull Abkhazia, which Russia formally recognized in 2008, even closer to Moscow.³

“The denial of entry to Abkhaz citizens further underscores Moscow’s direct involvement in Abkhazia’s political process. These events leave little doubt that Russia’s assurances of non-interference in the elections were nothing more than an outright lie.”

Source: “Abkhaz Citizens Denied Entry to Russia, Deported Amid Presidential Elections,” *Abkhaz World* (Abkhaz news service run by Abkhazian diaspora in UK and Turkey), 15 February 2025. <https://abkhazworld.com/aw/current-affairs/2967-abkhaz-citizens-denied-entry-to-russia-deported-amid-presidential-elections>

Abkhaz citizens arriving in Russia to participate in Abkhazia’s presidential elections have been denied entry and issued deportation orders, raising concerns about political interference in the electoral process.

Passengers who landed in Adler from Istanbul intending to cross into Abkhazia were stopped by Russian border authorities and informed they were barred from entering the country. Among those affected was Ümit Ashba, an Abkhaz citizen who has travelled to Abkhazia regularly for three decades.

In a video statement, Ashba claimed that his deportation was politically motivated: “I flew to Sochi this morning to take part in the elections. Upon arrival, the Russian authorities informed me that I had been deported until 2034. I firmly believe my only

‘crime’ is opposing Badra Gunba and Bzhania. If I had committed an actual crime, I would have been arrested long ago and banned years before today.”

The deportations of opposition figures and voters have sparked outrage among the Abkhaz diaspora and opposition groups, who see them as a coordinated effort to suppress dissent and manipulate the outcome of the elections.

While Russian officials have yet to comment on the situation, the denial of entry to Abkhaz citizens further underscores Moscow’s direct involvement in Abkhazia’s political process. These events leave little doubt that Russia’s assurances of non-interference in the elections were nothing more than an outright lie.

Notes:

- 1 For previous information regarding the expansion of the naval base at Ochamchira, see: Dodge Billingsley, “Russia Signs Agreement To Open Naval Base In Abkhazia,” *OE Watch*, 10-2023. <https://fmsotrados.army.mil/2024/russia-signs-agreement-to-open-naval-base-in-abkhazia/>
- 2 While most analysts consider Abkhazia as occupied by Russia, the situation on the ground is far more complicated. Abkhazia is a breakaway region of the Republic of Georgia. It has also been recognized as an independent state by Russia (in 2008) and a handful of other states. However, most Abkhazians see their tiny nation as an independent state, under Russia’s security umbrella, but staunchly independent. Abkhazia’s internal politics and strategic position vis-à-vis Russia and Georgia has been more pronounced since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.
- 3 Although not part of Russia’s mobilization laws, Abkhazia has fielded a volunteer battalion in Ukraine since 2014. Known as the Pyatnashka Brigade, its numbers are small, and it has included foreign fighters, but continues to be led by an Abkhazian commander.

Russian Interests Pivot To the Sahel and Away From the Eastern Mediterranean

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Recent reports of Russian interest in taking control of an airbase deep in the Libyan desert suggest the continuation of a pivot toward the African Sahel that could be accelerated by the fall of the Assad regime in Syria.¹ While the formal relationship with Assad in Syria gave Russia access to the Mediterranean, its unofficial relationship with Khalifa Haftar in Libya primarily grants it access to eastern Libya airbases. Despite early 2024 rumors that Haftar and Russia might negotiate a more formal relationship allowing Russia to establish a naval base in northeast Libya, it appears that Russia's interest in Libya is focused on the country's location as a gateway to the Sahel, rather than to the Mediterranean.² Furthermore, as noted in the first accompanying excerpt, published in *al-Jazeera* and citing a report appearing in the French daily *Le Monde*, Russia is unlikely to pursue a formal military relationship with Haftar or any kind of overt naval presence in eastern Libya. This is because doing so would upset the existing balance of power in the country and elicit concerns from regional and global powers, including Turkey, which has a military presence in key cities along Libya's western coast and is the main patron of the Tripoli-based, internationally recognized government. A Russian focus



Map of Libya with yellow star indicating the approximate location of Maaten al-Sarra airbase.
Source: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/libya/map/>;
Attribution: Public Domain

on the remote desert, rather than on the coast, is less likely to provoke such reactions. To that effect, recent reports indicate Russian interest in upgrading and occupying the Maaten al-Sarra airbase near Libya's borders with Chad and Sudan, possibly transforming it into a transit hub for its regional military activities.³ As noted in the second accompanying excerpt from the Qatari-aligned *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, last January Haftar re-assigned authority over the Maaten al-Sarra base, likely to ensure he and his associates are fully in control of the base as it undergoes upgrades and renovations. Although Russian interest in the desert base appears to predate Assad's fall, the potential loss of its Syrian bases seems likely

“The continuation of Russian activities... serves a major geopolitical ambition, which is to strengthen the [Russian] arc of influence on the southern flank of North Africa, from Port Sudan to the Gulf of Guinea, including Chad, where the Russians want to establish a presence after the French depart.”

to accelerate Russia's pivot away from the Mediterranean and toward the Sahel, while also reinforcing the value

of maintaining less formal relationships than those that it had in Syria.

Moscow's "fragile pivot from Syria to Libya,"⁴ coupled with its growing influence-seeking activities in Sahelian states from Mali to Sudan, confirm Russian interest in the sparsely pop-

ulated and mineral-rich African Sahel, strategically located along migration routes to Europe yet far enough from the global geopolitical spotlight to not draw significant attention. The fall of Assad may also hold lessons for how Russia will pursue its bilateral

military relationships in this region and perhaps more broadly—less formally, with a lighter footprint, and in ways that yield immediate material benefits.

Source:

"Le Monde: Russia strengthens its presence in Libya after its setback in Syria," *al-Jazeera* (Qatari news channel), 12 February 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/2/12>

لوموند: روسيا تعزز وجودها في ليبيا بعد انتكاستها بسوريا

The newspaper wondered whether the Russian military equipment that is still moving to Haftar's strongholds is centered around a project for an old naval base in Tobruk or Sirte capable of housing the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean, a suitable reserve site after the loss of Tartus in Syria, or is it rather to feed the functional logistical transport to the Sahel countries that have fallen into the Russian sphere of influence, or even Sudan, where Moscow is looking to build a naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea?

It seems—as the newspaper suggests—that the priority now is closer to transit than to a permanent base. A UN source says that "Russia does not want at this stage to stir up the situation in Libya, or to

create an imbalance that might provoke a reaction from the Americans and the Turks," especially since establishing a suitable naval base in Tobruk or Sirte requires signing an agreement with the authorities in Benghazi, which is a very sensitive issue...

However, the continuation of Russian activities as a logistics center directed towards the Sahel and Sudan is less disruptive to the internal balances in Libya—as the newspaper sees it—and at the same time serves a major geopolitical ambition, which is to strengthen the arc of influence on the southern flank of North Africa, from Port Sudan to the Gulf of Guinea, including Chad, where the Russians want to establish a presence after the French depart.

Source:

"Libya's Sarra Air Base... Gateway to Russian Influence in Africa," *al-Araby al-Jadeed* (Qatari-aligned daily), 25 January 2025. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics>

قاعدة السارة الليبية... بوابة النفوذ الروسي في أفريقيا

On Tuesday, Saddam Khalifa Haftar, son of the commander of the eastern Libyan militias, retired Major General Khalifa Haftar, instructed the "Subul al-Salam Battalion" to take over the Sarra military base, located in the far south of the country on the Chadian and Sudanese borders with Libya, in order to secure it and the entire border sector with Chad. However, experts linked this move to Russia's desire to

increase its military presence in Libya after losing its bases in Syria, including deployment at the base...

It is worth noting that several Libyan sources, in conversations with Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, linked Haftar's dissolution of the 128th Reinforced Brigade and the dismissal of its commander to the latter's securing the arrival of Russian officers, in mid-December, to strategic military headquarters in the

continue on 26

south, including the Luweigh camp and the Sarra base, without coordination with Haftar's leadership. This increased Haftar's growing concern about Al-Zadma's efforts to strengthen his influence in the south, especially since he is primarily stationed at the Jufra air base, in the heart of the Libyan desert, which is considered the most important base where the Russian presence in Libya is located, in addition to the distinguished tribal relations in the south.

The same military source told Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that "the Subul Al-Salam Battalion has already begun securing the base's perimeter and the desert roads leading to it to facilitate the arrival of supplies of materials related to its upgrading." While the source

noted the recent arrival of fighters and military equipment, he indicated that "work at the base is still partial, as the nature of the materials that arrived via Kufra Airport, the closest area to Sarra base, is related to upgrading the base's runways, such as navigation devices for determining air deviations and wind intersections." He explained that these supplies "indicate that upgrading the base will take a long time due to its need for technicians, specialists, and foundation concrete, which means that the upgrading operations are still in the process of preparing the runways and other facilities such as warehouses and others"...

Notes:

- 1 Russia's presence in Libya is less formalized than it was in Syria, occurring primarily through an unofficial relationship with Khalifa Haftar, the eastern Libyan military leader. Russia has established a presence in several airbases in Haftar-controlled territory, most notably the al-Khadim base near the city of Benghazi and the al-Jufra airbase in the center of the country.
- 2 See: Lucas Winter, "Russia Uses Diplomacy To Increase Military Influence In Libya," *OE Watch*, 10-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/russia-uses-diplomacy-to-increase-military-influence-in-libya/>
- 3 See: Anton Mardasov, "Rebalancing Russia's Mediterranean strategy: From showing the flag to retreating to the gray zone," Middle East Institute, 4 February 2025. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rebalancing-russias-mediterranean-strategy-showing-flag-retreating-gray-zone>
- 4 See: Emadeddin Badi, "Russia is making a fragile pivot from Syria to Libya. The West should beware falling into a new trap," Atlantic Council, 2 January 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russia-syria-haftar-libya/>

Iran Claims It Produces 90 Percent of Its Military Equipment



◀ “Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari of the Iranian Army,” *Islamic Republic News Agency* (semi-official news agency), 10 February 2025.

Source: isna.ir/xdSR4C; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

“[M]ore than 90 percent of the equipment is manufactured domestically and access to various technologies is available for the building and production of different drones and electronic and cyber warfare are readily available.”

By Holly Dagres
OE Watch Commentary

A week after U.S. President Donald Trump signed a memorandum reinstating his maximum pressure policy on Iran, Tehran continues to boast about its military production capabilities.¹ Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari said Iran makes 90 percent of its military equipment according to state broadcaster *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB), on 13 February. He added, “Access to various technologies is available for the building and production of different drones, and electronic and cyber warfare are readily available.”

Sayyari made the comments at an event marking the 46th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, which brought the Islamic Republic to power. Sayyari noted that the four branches of the military build radar and defense

systems, various types of aircraft, missile-launching vessels, destroyers, and submarines. Per the *IRIB* article, the rear admiral stated the need to master “the enhancing and developing of sciences, weaponry, and groundbreaking technologies such as artificial intelligence, micro drones, plasma, and quantum.” He pointed out that “significant effort and valuable progress have already been initiated and achieved within the army to attain and develop these fields.”

Sayyari’s comments are noteworthy given that sanctions over the decades have pushed Tehran to be more self-sufficient in all aspects of the Iranian economy to prevent external shocks, part of the vision of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for a “resistance economy.”² However, despite these proud proclamations of indigenous production, Iran’s

continued dependence on foreign components underscores the limits of its self-reliance. Recent reports suggest that China must deliver a key component in fuel for its ballistic missile program.³ As U.S. sanctions persist and technological advancements become increasingly critical to modern warfare, Iran’s ability to sustain and expand its military capabilities will continue to be a struggle.

Source:

(More than 90 percent of defense equipment is manufactured domestically),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 13 February 2025. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00Igx1>

بیش از ۹۰ درصد تجهیزات دفاعی در داخل کشور ساخته می‌شود”

According to IRIB, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari at the tenth joint military socialization course for students of the army’s rank-and-file schools... stated: “Safeguarding territorial integrity, independence, and the Islamic system are three key principles that embody the army’s mission...”

Admiral Sayyari, highlighting the progress of the four branches of the military in developing various combat and defense weapons, stated: “Today, the army’s ground forces have successfully designed, produced, and operationalized various individual and collective weapons by relying on domestic capabilities and utilizing the available resources within the country. Similarly, different types of radars and defense systems are produced and deployed in the air defense force. The air force is also capable of manufacturing a wide range of aircraft, while in the navy, missile-launching vessels, destroyers, and submarines are being built.”

He continued: “Today, in the army of the Islamic Republic of Iran and thanks to the Islamic revolution, the blood of the martyrs, and the determination and zeal of the youth of this land, more than 90 percent of the equipment is manufactured domestically and access to various technologies is available for the building and production of different drones and electronic and cyber warfare are readily available.”

The deputy coordinator of the army, expressing the importance and necessity of advancing the the scientific and educational levels of the army, stated: “Enhancing and developing the level of science, education, training, and skill-based education are among the most important issues that must be addressed and cared about in order to counter the future and modern warfare threats.”

Admiral Sayyari emphasized: “The enhancing and developing of sciences, weaponry, and groundbreaking technologies such as artificial intelligence, micro drones, plasma, and quantum are among the areas that must be strived for and mastered from now. Thank God, significant effort and valuable progress have already been initiated and achieved within the army to attain and develop these fields.”

Pointing out that steps must be taken in the direction of developing and promoting modern science and technologies, he emphasized: “Taking steps and achieving important, sensitive, and fundamental breakthroughs in the field of military knowledge and modern technologies is the most important thing that is expected of the present and enthusiastic young generation in the country’s armed forces is to be able to benefit from the intelligence and ability of the country’s promising youth, we can utilize comparable and advanced technologies in the face of any threat.”

Notes:

- 1 “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Restores Maximum Pressure on Iran,” White House, 4 February 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-restores-maximum-pressure-on-iran/>
- 2 Bijan Khajepour, “Decoding Iran’s ‘resistance economy,’” *Al-Monitor* (independent news organization based in Washington DC with analysts from the Middle East), 24 February 2014. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/02/decoding-resistance-economy-iran.html>
- 3 Saskya Vandoorne, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Simone McCarthy, and Yong Xiong, “Iran is rearming its missile program and a ship of supplies just arrived from China, Western sources say,” *CNN*, 13 February 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/13/middleeast/iran-is-rearming-its-missile-program-and-a-ship-of-supplies-just-arrived-from-china-western-sources-say/index.html>

Iran Says Its Proxies Do Not Need Tehran's Assistance



Deputy commander of the Sarallah Headquarters of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) General Hossein Nejat speaking.

Source: hamshahronline.ir/x6tj7; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

By Holly Dagres
OE Watch Commentary

As Tehran reevaluates its security strategy amid a significantly weakened Resistance Axis,¹ it alleges that its proxies have continued to operate without assistance. According to state broadcaster *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting*, on 12 January, the Deputy Commander of the Sarallah Headquarters of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, General Hossein

“Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) don’t need Iran’s assistance.”

Nejat, said in an interview, “Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) don’t need Iran’s assistance,” adding that “they have adopted the idea of resistance to global arrogance from the Islamic revolution of Iran and are walking a clear path with authority and sufficiency.” He also focused on the capabilities of the Houthi rebels in Yemen, pointing to their “self-sufficiency in manufacturing domestic weapons,” ability to close the “Bab al-Mandab Strait to vessels associated with Israel,” and its targeting of Israel through its drone and missile attacks. Underscoring the point, the deputy commander, who is closely associated with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said that the proxies were “powerful and form the mobilization of the Islamic world.”

Nejat’s remarks were made just weeks after the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and the maiming of the leadership of Hezbollah after the assassination of its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and twin communication attacks that injured more than 3,000.² While the PMF in Iraq has remained mostly unscathed, the group is on its back foot given the events of the past year and fear of an Israeli response.

Nejat argued that Iran’s proxies are operating independently of guidance from Tehran and will continue down this path, though reports suggest that the groups continue to receive aid from Iran.³ He emphasized that the Resistance Axis’ unified goals that “Israel will be destroyed” and U.S. forces “be expelled from the region” have not changed—suggesting that the Resistance Axis is merely regenerating and adapting to the new dynamics of the region.⁴

Source:

(Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces don’t need Iran’s assistance),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (Iranian state broadcaster), 12 January 2025. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00Ia8U>.

حزب الله و حشدالشعبی نیازی به کمک های ایران ندارند

According to IRIB, the deputy commander of the Sarallah Headquarters of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [Hossein Nejat] said in an interview about Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi

Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that they have been inspired by the basij in Islamic Iran: “Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi PMF are powerful and form the mobilization of the Islamic world.”

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General Nejat added: “Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi PMF don’t need Iran’s assistance, but they have adopted the idea of resistance to global arrogance from the Islamic revolution of Iran and are walking a clear path with authority and sufficiency.”

The deputy commander of the Sarallah Headquarters of the IRGC stated that the basij is an inspiration to the resistance groups, adding: “The basij, Lebanese Hezbollah and all the resistance groups have a common message, which is that we will not be dominated by America and arrogance, and God willing, Israel will be destroyed and America will be expelled from the region.”

General Nejat also said about the capabilities of the Houthi rebels in Yemen: “The brave and valiant fighters of the Houthis showed that the dedicated and

resilient Hezbollah-inspired forces can strike America and Israel from anywhere in the world.”

General Nejat stated that the Houthis have the necessary ability to confront its heavily armed enemies: “Today the Houthi fights with their high capabilities and self-sufficiency in manufacturing domestic weapons, have closed the Bab al-Mandab Strait to vessels associated with Israel, and are not allowing aid to be delivered to this regime.”

The deputy commander of the Sarallah Headquarters of the IRGC added: “The Houthis, through multiple missile and drone operations, has targeted the occupied territories and Israel is incapable of countering these attacks.”

Notes:

- 1 The Axis of Resistance is a self-described informal coalition of Iranian supported militias and political organizations across the Middle East. The Axis includes Hamas in Gaza, the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon; the Houthi movement in Yemen; and various Shi’ite armed groups in Iraq and Syria.
- 2 Johnson Lai and Bassem Mroue, “Lebanon is rocked again by exploding devices as Israel declares a new phase of war,” *Associated Press*, 19 September 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-israel-exploding-pagers-hezbollah-syria-ce6af3c2e6de0a0dddfae48634278288>
- 3 “Lebanon said to stop transfer of funds to Hezbollah through Iranian flight to Beirut,” *Times of Israel*, 3 January 2025. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lebanon-said-to-stop-transfer-of-funds-to-hezbollah-through-iranian-flight-to-beirut/>
- 4 For more on how the Israel-Gaza war has altered the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, see: Lucas Winter, “Gaza War’s Impact On The Middle East Strategic Landscape,” U.S. Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office, June 2024. https://g2webcontent.z2.web.core.usgovcloudapi.net/OEE/Story%20Posts/TRADOCG2_FMSO_2024JUN26_FPB_GAZA_Winter_anonymous.pdf

Kim Jong Un Chairs Meeting Addressing Ruling Party Corruption

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

Major state-owned broadcaster Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) published a lengthy and significant report regarding a 27 January meeting of the ruling Workers Party of Korea (WPK) chaired by leader Kim Jong Un that solely focused on reports of party corruption. The meeting focused on a reported egregious breach of ruling party discipline in two locations: Onchon County in Nampo City and Usi County, Chagang Province, and was billed as the “30th Enlarged Meeting of Secretariat of Eighth Central Committee.”¹ Party officials reported to Kim Jong Un that party leaders in Usi County appropriated land for their ends and abused the legal system to enrich themselves. In Nampo, investigators said party officials held meetings in a “grossly formalistic way” and committed “group wrongdoing” that included widespread drunkenness and, apparently, insufficient revolutionary zeal.

Kim Jong Un’s decision to chair a party discipline meeting and for the major propaganda services to devote more than 2,200 words to the report and to feature it both internally and in externally facing media is significant for several reasons. First, it implies that the local party organs’ misdeeds were well enough known to warrant Kim Jong Un’s personal attention, eliminating any reason for



Kim Jong Un chairs a large group meeting devoted to ruling party corruption on 27 January 2025.

Source: <http://kcna.kp/siteFiles/photo/202501/PIC0087370.jpg>; Attribution: Public Domain under Art. XII of the Copyright Act of North Korea, aka PD-KPGov, which is “government or other works in the public domain.” Additionally, images from North Korean sources are immune from copyright claims because North Korea has not signed onto international conventions for the protection of copyrighted materials.

“The ringleaders and those involved in the hideous criminal cases will be put under investigation by law.”

the propaganda organs to obfuscate the breadth of the activity. Second, it reinforces the Kim family’s ruling trope of the “great leader with the bad subordinates” that alleviates the cognitive dissonance everyday North Koreans encounter when comparing the squalor of their living conditions with what they often know to be true of the outside world. Third, Kim Jong Un may be taking a page from Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s playbook of publicly attacking party corruption in hopes of reminding party officials that there are left and right limits on acceptable corruption.

The speakers, Kim Jong Un, and the investigators also editorialize heavily on how the officials’ actions are an affront to the ruling party’s dignity, plans, goals, and mission. At one point, Kim says the actions arise from “all sorts of alien and heterogeneous ideological elements” that demonstrate that “qualitative consolidation of the party’s cadre ranks” has not yet succeeded.

Source: “조선로동당 중앙위원회 제8기 제30차 비서국 확대회의에 관한 보도 (Report on 30th Enlarged Meeting of Secretariat of Eighth Central Committee of WPK),” *Korean Central News Agency/KCNA* (major state-owned party broadcaster), 29 January 2025. <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/b7d040edf71f8cac912719455bbb18d9.kcmsf>

Kim Jong Un, general secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, guided the meeting.

The Secretariat of the Party Central Committee convened the meeting of leading officials of the whole Party in connection with the occurrence of serious cases of gravely infringing upon the dignity, rights and interests of the people while wantonly violating Party discipline and exercising negative privileges in Onchon County of Nampho Municipality and Usi County of Jagang Province.

Onchon County made poor preparations for a plenary meeting of the county Party committee...and held the meeting in a grossly formalistic way. After that, there occurred the mega case, in which more than 40 officials, including Party officials, committed wrongdoing in group.

The group drinking spree openly committed in Onchon County is an act utterly contrary to the Party's line on building discipline, and this clearly proves that the ringleader of the case and those involved are a corrupt group and impudent rabble with no elementary qualifications as leading cadres.

The respected General Secretary made an important speech. He criticized that although all sorts of alien and heterogeneous ideological elements undermining the sound Party climate and obstructing the advance of the revolution, the political and moral crimes undermining Party discipline, occurred in the given region, it shows that the work of qualitative consolidation of cadre ranks, to which we have

attached special importance and directed efforts for Party building in the new era, has not been conducted in a substantial way.

He emphasized that the main target of the discipline inspection sector should be practices of corruption within the Party and all other violations of its discipline to be proactively and aggressively contained, practices that the Party despises most, reiterating the need to “aim at, pursue, search and wipe out” such malpractices on the basis of strict regulations and rules.

Then, the Enlarged Meeting of the Secretariat of the Party Central Committee dealt with the serious anti-people crimes committed in Usi County of Jagang Province. He sternly pointed out the fact that the Usi County agricultural inspection organ...flagrantly encroached upon the interests and property of the people by abusing the legal power.

Those inspectors unhesitatingly committed an unpardonable crime of inflicting sufferings on regional inhabitants and misappropriating their property at random by abusing the inviolable legal power.

The Secretariat of the Party Central Committee announced a strict proposal to dissolve the Usi county agricultural inspection organ and organize a new one and to deal with the chief secretary of the Usi County Party Committee, who fostered and connived at the anti-people acts, and the inspectors of the county agricultural inspection organ.

Notes:

- 1 Nampo City is North Korea's fourth largest city and a major port city on the Taedong River, which empties to the west in the Yellow Sea. Chagang lies on the Yalu River border south of China's Jilin and Liaoning Provinces.

North Korea Dismantles Inter-Korean Family Reunion Landmark

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

South Korea's Ministry of Unification, which handles relations between Seoul and Pyongyang, is "condemning" North Korea for demolishing a symbolically important family reunion center in Mt. Kumgang, North Korea. In an official statement, the Unification Ministry said the act violates both the cherished dreams of long-separated Korean families and South Korean state-owned assets that are supposed to be protected under the terms of existing inter-Korean agreements. Since the Korean War, families separated on either side of the border are periodically allowed to meet for "family reunions" on the North Korean side of the border. South Korea built the now-decommissioned Family Reunion Center in 2008.

North Korea's actions follow an established pattern. South Korea publicly invests millions of dollars to build infrastructure in North Korea, only for North Korea to demolish¹ or seize the assets when they were no longer politically useful for Pyongyang.² The destruction is also symbolically important, as it demonstrates Kim Jong Un's guidance to treat South Korea as an "enemy state."

Pyongyang's actions likely aim to accomplish several goals at once. First, destroying the family reunion center sends a strong political message to South Korea's left, which



North Korea destroys a rail line linking North and South Korea as part of a broader effort to complete separate the two countries in line with Kim Jong Un's instructions to treat South Korea as an "enemy country."

Source: <http://kcna.kp/siteFiles/photo/202410/PIC0084652.jpg>; Attribution: Public Domain under Art. XII of the Copyright Act of North Korea, aka PD-KPGov, which is "government or other works in the public domain." Additionally, images from North Korean sources are immune from copyright claims because North Korea has not signed onto international conventions for the protection of copyrighted materials.

are more likely than the political center-right to view the Koreans as still one people who are unnaturally divided. Allowing family reunions (always inside North Korea so the conversations can be monitored by North Korean internal security) is a historically easy way for North Korean leaders to earn goodwill and quick cash from Seoul. If South Korea's center-left pro-engagement Democratic Party wins the presidency, North Korea almost certainly will invite Seoul to fund and build yet another family reunion center in the Mt. Kumgang tourism area.

Second, in a speech to the Kim Jong Un National Defense Academy on 8 October 2024, Kim Jong Un disclaimed any further familial bonds between the two countries and officially ended reunification as state policy under North Korean rule.³ Although there are good reasons to doubt the sincerity of Kim's claims, North Korea's actions support his guidance.

Third, the resource-mismanaged and highly sanctioned North Korean economy is repurposing materials from South Korea for other projects within the country. It is useful to note that North Korea did not dramatically

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detonate the family reunion complex like it did the Inter-Korean Liaison Office but is rather taking it apart piece by piece according to reports.

North Korea's actions are designed to increase pressure on South Korea to be more accommodationist toward Pyongyang. These reunions are politically popular emotional specta-

cles, as elderly siblings and parents see their relatives for the first time in years. When reunions do occur, they take place in the North so that

the regime can collect "hosting fees," control the media narrative, and emphasize the humanitarian impacts of failing to appease Pyongyang.

"Demolishing the reunion center is an act against humanity that crushes the yearning of separated families, as well as a grave infringement of our state-owned property."

Source: "금강산 이산가족면회소 철거 동향 관련 통일부 대변인 성명 (Ministry of Unification Spokesperson's Statement on the Demolition of the Mt. Kumgang⁴ Separated Family Reunion Center)," Ministry of Unification (South Korean executive department responsible for relations between North and South Korea), 13 February 2025. <https://unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/news/release>

The ROK Government has confirmed that the North has dismantled the Reunion Center for the Separated Families at Mount Geumgang, a facility that conveys the aspiration of separated families to be reunited.

The Government expresses deep regret over the North's unilateral dismantlement of a facility that was built under agreement between the two Koreas, and sternly urges the North to immediately suspend all such actions.

Demolishing the reunion center is an act against humanity that crushes the yearning of separated families, as well as a grave infringement of our state-owned property.

The North's unilateral dismantlement cannot be justified under any pretext, and all responsibility rests entirely with the North Korean authority.

The Government will consider necessary measures, including legal actions and cooperation with the international society.

Notes:

- 1 Most famously, North Korea exploded the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in Kaesong, a town just inside the North Korean border, in June 2020. See: "North Korea blows up joint liaison office with South in Kaesong," *BBC*, 16 June 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53060620>
- 2 In 2016, Seoul pulled out of the North Korea-staffed but South Korea-built, funded, and maintained Kaesong Industrial Complex over concerns that North Korea was using the profits from the venture to fund its WMD program. See: "Unification Ministry officially calls it quits on Kaesong Industrial Complex," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 4 January 2024. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-01-04/national/northKorea/Unification-Ministry-officially-calls-it-quits-on-Kaesong-Industrial-Complex/1951309>; North Korea probably continues to operate the facility independently, strongly suggesting it has expropriated South Korean corporate assets. See: "Kaesong Industrial Complex: A Tortured History and Uncertain Future," *38 North*, 4 September 2024. <https://www.38north.org/2024/09/kaesong-industrial-complex-a-tortured-history-and-uncertain-future/>
- 3 See: Anthony W. Holmes, "Kim Jong Un Speech Previews Military Action To Change Relationship With South Korea," *OE Watch*, 10-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2025/kim-jong-un-speech-previews-military-action-to-change-relationship-with-south-korea/>
- 4 Commonly transliterated into English as Mt. Kumgang but sometimes officially transcribed as Geumgangsan

Benin To Reduce Tensions With Niger To Combat Terrorism

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

The excerpted article from the Malian French-language website *malijet.com* discusses Benin's concerns about the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Group of Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)'s infiltration into its territory. The article suggests Benin will respond to JNIM by reducing tensions with Niger to boost regional counterterrorism cooperation.

The turning point for Benin was the 9 January JNIM attack that killed around 30 Beninese soldiers at an army base near the border with Burkina Faso and Niger.¹ This attack was the latest demonstration of JNIM's expansion from its original heartland

in Mali toward coastal West African countries like Benin and Togo.² Given the cross-border nature of JNIM's operations, Benin's Army chief of staff, General Gbaguidi, was quoted in the article as acknowledging the fact that JNIM "ignores borders." However, the article notes that increasing regional cooperation will be difficult because Niger's military junta alleges Benin is conspiring with France to destabilize Niger, whose ruling junta ejected the French and U.S. militaries from Niger last year. Moreover, like the neighboring juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger aligned instead with Russia. Benin, on the other hand, is among the Economic Community of West African States that continues to

promote civilian rule and democracy in the region.

Benin must now weigh pursuing democracy in West Africa with the necessity of cooperating with the juntas to combat terrorism. Since General Gbaguidi describes Benin's need to work with Niger more closely to combat terrorism in the Sahel as

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"After a JNIM attack in the north of the country, the Beninese chief of staff called for joint action against terrorism, despite tensions with Niger."

The Beninese military, seen at an Independence Day anniversary march in 2024, will likely increase cooperation with Niger's military, despite Niger's shift away from democratic rule.

Source: Adoscam, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%C3%A9fil%C3%A9_militaire_de_la_c%C3%A9l%C3%A9bration_du_64e_anniversaire_de_l'ind%C3%A9pendance_du_B%C3%A9nin_en_2024_69.jpg; Attribution: CC x 2.0



urgent, at least for now, Benin appears ready to put aside its emphasis on regional democracy promotion. In addition, Benin will likely downplay its border dispute with Niger, which had led Benin to refuse oil

exports from landlocked Niger to pass through the port of Cotonou last year.³

In sum, the case of Benin and Niger shows the necessity of countering terrorism seemingly outweighs democracy promotion in West Africa.

Despite this, the trendlines indicate that both the security and democracy situations in West Africa are facing severe headwinds.

Source: “Face au JNIM, le Bénin veut dépasser les tensions régionales (Faced with JNIM, Benin wants to overcome regional tensions),” *malijet.com*, (popular French-language Malian news website known for reliable reporting), 17 January 2025. <https://malijet.com/actualite-sur-afrique/298526-face-au-jnim-le-benin-veut-depasser-les-tensions-regionales-.html>

After a JNIM attack in the north of the country, the Beninese chief of staff called for joint action against terrorism, despite tensions with Niger.

Niamey authorities accuse Cotonou of collusion with France to destabilize the political transition established since the coup d'état of July 2023.

“We are looking for a synergy of action...with all neighboring countries,” declared General Gbaguidi during the commemoration of the 48th anniversary of the aggression of January 16, 1977, citing diplomatic initiatives with Burkina Faso and a “very well” established collaboration with Togo.

Notes:

- 1 JNIM claimed the attack, noting that “more than 30” Beninese soldiers were killed, although Beninese officials acknowledged the deaths of only 28 soldiers. See: “Bénin: un groupe jihadiste revendique une attaque meurtrière contre l’armée béninoise dans le nord,” *Dakaractu*, 10 January 2025. https://www.dakaractu.com/Benin-un-groupe-jihadiste-revendique-une-attaque-meurtriere-contre-l-armee-beninoise-dans-le-nord_a257500.html
- 2 See: Jacob Zenn, “Terrorist Attack in Togo Reveals Turkish Counter-Terrorism Role,” *OE Watch*, 01-2025. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2025/terrorist-attack-in-togo-reveals-turkish-counter-terrorism-role/>
- 3 See: “Benin blocks Niger oil exports in border row,” *BBC*, 9 May 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cmm3dr2e5lqo>

Chilean Officials Claim Maduro Regime Linked To Assassination of Military Dissident



Diosdado Cabello, long considered the number two in the Maduro regime, stands accused of ordering the contract killing of a Venezuelan dissident in Chile.

Source: <https://picryl.com/media/diosdado-cabello-rondon-ad4263>; Attribution: PDM 1.0

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Chile's Attorney General and Interior Minister recently cited evidence tying the Maduro regime to the brutal killing of a military dissident granted asylum in Chile. Ronald Ojeda, a former Venezuelan military officer who had been living in Chile, was taken from his home in Santiago in the early morning hours by men dressed as Chilean police officers. His body was found more than a week later, buried in a suitcase under concrete, in a neighborhood outside Santiago.¹

According to the first excerpted articles from the Spanish news daily *El País*, the Maduro regime had marked Ojeda for retribution because of his activism against the government. The outlet reports that Chile's lead prosecutor in the

“Almost a year after the murder, the lead prosecutor in the case, Héctor Barros, told Radio ADN for the first time that ‘we believe that the Venezuelan government is behind this incident’ and that ‘it was a contract killing by the Tren de Aragua.’”

case has accused the Maduro regime of links to the murder, committed via the Venezuelan criminal group Tren de Aragua, and allegedly ordered by the regime's number two, Interior Minister Cabello.² As per the second excerpted article from Argentina's largest online daily newspaper, *Infobae*, reports that Chilean prosecutors have uncovered further evidence of the alleged nexus. The outlet says that Chilean authorities have arrested 19 members of the Venezuelan group Tren de Aragua, some of whom have admitted to the contract killing and the receipt of payment from Cabello. Upon divulging this information publicly, Chile severed diplomatic relations with Venezuela.

The accusation and mounting evidence are important for the operational environment for three principal reasons. First, it demonstrates the continued weakness of Maduro's regime after the stolen elections of July 2024 and the preoccupation with regime stability threatened by dissidents in the armed forces.

Second, it indicates new tactics and a hitherto unseen level of transnational repression to persecute perceived enemies and threats to regime stability abroad. Third, if the nexus between the Maduro regime and the Tren de Aragua is proven, it opens new possibilities for regional destabilization and retribution campaigns coordinated by Caracas directly.³

Source: “De un secuestro inusual a un crimen político por encargo de Venezuela: la tesis de la Fiscalía chilena por el asesinato de Ronald Ojeda (From an unusual kidnapping to a political crime commissioned by Venezuela: the thesis of the Chilean Prosecutor’s Office for the murder of Ronald Ojeda),” *El País* (Spain’s daily with excellent regional coverage), 25 January 2025. <https://elpais.com/chile/2025-01-26/de-un-secuestro-inusual-a-un-crimen-politico-por-encargo-de-venezuela-la-tesis-de-la-fiscalia-chilena-por-el-asesinato-de-ronald-ojeda.html>

Almost a year after the murder, the lead prosecutor in the case, Héctor Barros, told Radio ADN for the first time that ‘we believe that the Venezuelan government is behind this incident’ and that ‘it was a contract killing by the Tren de Aragua’... ‘There are three people who testify in the investigation, who attribute the order to authorities of the Venezuelan government,’ and one of them, whose identity will

remain anonymous, stated that ‘the order and the payment would have come from Diosdado Cabello [today, Minister of the Interior]’... ‘The rapid execution of the crime, between 24 and 72 hours after his kidnapping, and his political profile, lead us to the conclusion that this murder has a political background related to his opposition to the Government of Venezuela.’

Source: “Aseguran que Diosdado Cabello ordenó asesinar a Ronald Ojeda en Chile (They assure that Diosdado Cabello ordered the murder of Ronald Ojeda in Chile),” *Infobae* (Argentina’s largest online daily with full regional coverage), 6 February 2025. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2025/02/06/declaro-el-miembro-de-los-piratas-del-tren-de-aragua-que-aseguro-que-diosdado-cabello-mando-a-asesinar-a-ronald-ojeda-en-chile/>

Throughout this week, the formalization of the 19 members of the cell ‘Los Piratas’ del Tren de Aragua is being completed, accused of being responsible for carrying out the kidnapping and murder of former lieutenant Ronald Ojeda in Santiago de Chile at the end of February 2024...the Public Prosecutor’s Office called a protected witness to testify who had previously stated that the order to kill the Venezuelan dissident came directly from Diosdado Cabello, the strongman of the Nicolás Maduro regime...The protected witness also pointed out that, once the

‘work’ was done, Cabello made the agreed upon payment...but that several of those involved were left empty-handed since the money ‘stayed up there’ and did not trickle down to the soldiers who were charged today...The protected witnesses’ testimony is fundamental, as it corroborates the thesis of the Chilean Public Prosecutor’s Office that the kidnapping and murder of Ojeda was orchestrated by the Maduro regime...and ended up breaking the weak bilateral relations that remained between Chile and Venezuela.

Notes:

- 1 For more details on the Ojeda case itself, see: Jack Nicas, Pascale Bonnefoy, and John Barlett, “Maduro Government Accused of Dark New Tactic: Assassinations,” *New York Times*, 10 February 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/10/world/americas/venezuela-maduro-murder-chile.html>
- 2 For more information on the infamous Tren de Aragua gang, see this explainer: “Tren de Aragua,” *Insight Crime*, 12 July 2024. <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/tren-de-aragua/>
- 3 For more on the potential consequences of the Maduro regime’s relationship with the Tren de Aragua, see: “What a Murder in Chile Reveals About Maduro’s Relationship with Tren de Aragua,” *Insight Crime*, 12 February 2025 <https://insightcrime.org/news/what-a-murder-in-chile-reveals-about-maduros-relationship-with-tren-de-aragua/>

Colombia's Catatumbo Region Is the New Epicenter of Clash With Guerrilla Groups

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Colombian President Gustavo Petro's plan for forging peace with the country's remaining guerrilla groups is likely ending.¹ The restive Catatumbo region near Colombia's border with Venezuela has erupted in a miasma of violence. According to the excerpted article from Colombia's right-leaning weekly news magazine *Semana*, the National Liberation Army (ELN) is battling dissidents within the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia for territory. The intense confrontations, according to the publication, have contributed to the internal displacement of thousands, with many who remained forcibly recruited to fight. In addition to vying for territory, the publication speculates that the groups seek to dominate lucrative routes for cocaine trafficking near the border with Venezuela. *Semana* quotes senior army officials stating that the fight will

be long and arduous, dealing a severe blow to President Petro's peace efforts in the country.

“The war has not given up one inch in its escalation of barbarity. ‘The checkpoints continue, the murders continue. There are people here who have had their farms, houses, everything taken from them. Many do not want to return,’ said a social leader.”

Other leading outlets, such as Spain's *El País*, maintain that the ELN might be attacking with the full support of the Maduro regime in Venezuela.² The outlet notes the years of support lent to the ELN under both Presidents

Chávez and Maduro and cites prominent analysts who believe the ELN is operating in conjunction with the Venezuelan state as retribution for Petro's position during Venezuela's recent election.³ Following Maduro's stolen election, Petro surprised many by refraining from recognizing Maduro as the victor and refused to attend his inauguration in early January.

The explosion of violence in the Catatumbo region is notable for two principal reasons. First, it has likely dealt the final blow to Petro's peace efforts in Colombia. Second, it demonstrates that the Maduro regime still maintains links to these criminal organizations in its border regions, using them as instruments of destabilization and providing them with a permissive operating environment to partake in illicit economic activities.

Colombia's National Liberation Army group has refused to lay down its arms and continues to contest territory in border regions near Venezuela.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brasildefato/45276589195/>; Attribution: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



Source: “Catatumbo, un mes después de que estallara la barbarie: así está la región tras 30 días de confrontaciones armadas (Catatumbo, one month after the barbarity broke out: this is how the region is after 30 days of armed confrontations),” *Semana* (Colombia’s largest weekly news magazine that leans right politically), 16 February 2025. <https://www.semana.com/nacion/cucuta/articulo/catatumbo-un-mes-despues-de-que-estallara-la-barbarie-asi-esta-la-region-tras-30-dias-de-confrontaciones-armadas/202522/>

The confrontations between the ELN and the FARC dissidents have decreased...according to General Rodríguez...the operational objective now is to force these groups to confront the military directly, distancing the civilian population from this criminal activity. However, leaders in the area are not as optimistic as the general. For them, the war has not given up one inch in its escalation of barbarity.

‘The checkpoints continue, the murders continue. There are people here who have had their farms, houses, everything taken from them. Many do not want to return,’ said a social leader...The center of gravity...remains the control of finances derived from drug trafficking. But there is something even more worrying: the forced recruitment of girls, boys, and adolescents.

Source: “Ataca el ELN o ataca Venezuela? (Is the ELN attacking or is Venezuela attacking?),” *El País* (Spain’s daily with excellent regional coverage), 19 January 2025. <https://elpais.com/america-futura/2025-01-20/ataca-el-eln-o-ataca-venezuela.html>

Unfortunately for Petro and for Colombia, the closeness and trust with Maduro is costing Colombia dearly. A painful and bloody bill that we are seeing in the border area with Venezuela. Who knows how far Maduro and his friends will be able to take this frenzy of revenge because the Colombian government did not recognize his election, but on the contrary exposed

his crude dictatorship...In a video that circulated the day the ELN offensive began, a prominent analyst insinuated that these aggressions by the guerrilla have a geopolitical character...The ELN is...doing Maduro a favor, to pressure the Colombian government to recognize the regime as legitimate in exchange for stopping the massacre.

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the paradigm shift in Colombia’s security policies under President Petro, see: Juliana Rubio, “A New Security Paradigm in Colombia,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 31 January 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-security-paradigm-colombia>
- 2 For more information on the historic relationship between the ELN and the Venezuelan government, see: Moises Rendon and Ariana Kohan, “Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela,” CSIS Policy Brief, 22 July 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/identifying-and-responding-criminal-threats-venezuela>
- 3 For more information on the irregularities and likely election theft committed by the Maduro regime in July 2024, 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>

India Begins Developing Armored Active Protection Systems

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

India's inventory of tanks, including the in-development Zorawar light battle tank (LBT), lacks adequate active protection systems (APS) compared to their Chinese counterparts, as reported in the accompanying

excerpted article from India's independent think tank *Observer Research Foundation*. India made the development of the domestically produced Zorawar LBT a high priority following clashes with Chinese forces in May 2020 on the Line of Actual Control

(LAC), India's de facto border with China. India considers the Zorawar a strategic milestone in its efforts to domestically produce weapon systems critical to the country's operational requirements.¹



India's indigenously developed Zorawar light tank passed trials at by maneuvering and firing at high altitudes in December 2024.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Zorawar_high_altitude_firing_trials.jpg; Attribution: Government Open Data License - India (GODLI).

However, India risks falling behind when it comes to active protection systems for its armor—including the Zorawar. The article notes that not only does China have the domestically produced GL5 APS on its tanks deployed along the LAC, but that China recently developed the GL6 APS, which comes with Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems (C-UAS) capabilities. The GL6 is believed to be equipped on Chinese Type-99A main battle tanks, but not on its tanks opposite India on the LAC for now. The author states that India needs to

urgently catch up to China and quickly obtain APS capabilities for its tanks.²

need to import a system to meet an operational requirement.

“India faces two critical technical challenges where China has made significant advances—Active Protection Systems (APS) and the modularity of these systems.”

Finally, the article does confirm that the Indian defense industry has been developing APS, but it isn't clear if it will come in time or if India will again

Source: Kartik Bommakanti, “PLA tanks march ahead with Active Protection Systems,” *Observer Research Foundation* (independent think-tank in India), 20 January 2025 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/pla-tanks-march-ahead-with-active-protection-systems>

Both India and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are either developing or are already operating Medium Main Battle Tanks (MMBTs) and Light Battle Tanks (LBTs). However, India faces two critical technical challenges where China has made significant advances—Active Protection Systems (APS) and the modularity of these systems...

[W]hile Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) have also rendered tanks highly vulnerable, they also perform reconnaissance missions for tanks, which, alongside Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems (C-UAS), through an APS capability are now integrated into Chinese tanks...Yet it is China’s progress in building an APS capability that stands out creating a serious gap in capabilities between the Indian Army (IA) and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Built by China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), the Chinese have two light tank variants—the VT5 and the Type-15...

[C]ommissioned into the People’s Liberation Army (PLAA) in late December 2018, all the Chinese LBTs, especially the Type-15 that weigh roughly between 33-36 tonnes, which are deployed against India, are equipped with APS...the Chinese built sufficiently light APS capabilities going back to 2019 to equip the Type-15. This variant of the GL5 APS has three components—four munitions launchers, four multipurpose millimeter-wave radars, and a computer control system.

The GL6, which is a more advanced variant than its predecessor, was displayed at the 12th International Defence Exhibition and Seminar (IDEAS 2024) in November 2024 in Karachi, Pakistan. This latest variant of China’s APS is also equipped with a C-UAS, capable of taking out drones. China’s most advanced

battle tank—the 58-tonne Type-99A, which is of a higher weight class than the Type-15 LBTs, is believed to be equipped with the GL6....

The GL6’s Counter-Unmanned Aerial System (C-UAS) is based on an open architecture, which means that its Radio Frequency Jammer (RFJ) and drone jammer, Electro-Optical Infrared (EOIR) system, Passive Radio Frequency and Direction Finding (PRFDF), Active Radars (AR) and Mast Configuration can be customised or tailored to the requirements of the user. The GL6 is believed to be similar to the Israeli “Iron Fist” APS geared to intercepting and engaging incoming High Explosive Anti-Tank (HEAT) projectiles, recoilless munitions, loitering munitions and armour-piercing fin-stabilised discarding sabot (APFSDS) rounds from a variety of angles increasing the survivability of the tank...

Yet, the absence of an APS capability is a void that the government and the IA have to fill for the IA’s armoured corps MMBTs and the yet-to-be-built LBTs. Deploying reconnaissance drones as well as C-UAS for all its tanks as part of a comprehensive APS package, especially for its Zorawar LBT, whose developmental trials have only started, will require urgency. The PRC has a significant head start...

As a result of these developments, India needs to hustle to secure APS capabilities for its tanks as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, the indigenous development of several active protection systems, which are underway, has not shown promising results in terms of effectiveness. If ongoing Indian efforts to develop an effective APS flounder, the IA may have to turn to two Israeli APS variants – the “Trophy” built by Rafael or the “Iron Fist” built by Elbit.

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Notes:

- 1 Indian officials noted that its inventory of main battle tanks could not operate as effectively as light tanks in the mountainous terrain along the LAC and thus began development of the Zorawar light tank in 2022. The Zorawar passed initial tests in mountainous terrain in late 2024 and is set to enter service in the Indian army in 2027. For more information on the Zorawar, see: Rahul Singh, "India's new light tank Zorawar carries out maiden firing in mountains," *Hindustan Times*, 12 December 2024. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indias-new-light-tank-zorawar-carries-out-maiden-firing-in-mountains-101734022339600.html>
- 2 Two weeks after this article was published, India issued a Request for Information (RFI) for active protection systems for its inventory of T-90 main battle tanks. RFIs in India are the initial step where potential vendors from the Indian defense industry can become involved in the development of a given project, in this case, the APS for tanks. For more on the recent RFI, see: Snehes Alex Philip, "Lessons from Russia-Ukraine war makes Indian Army seek Active Protection System for T-90 tanks," *The Print*, 4 February 2025. <https://theprint.in/defence/lessons-from-russia-ukraine-war-makes-indian-army-seek-active-protection-system-for-t-90-tanks/2478888/>

Uzbekistan and Turkey Increase Security Cooperation



By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Uzbekistan does not usually publish information about the acquisition of foreign weapon systems. However, the accompanying excerpted article from the Uzbek website *Kun.uz* reports on an agreement in late January to acquire the Turkish Aerospace Industries Anka unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) system. While the article does not mention how many Anka UAVs Uzbekistan may have purchased, it notes several countries have bought the Anka UAVs, including Tunisia and Indonesia.¹ Based on these examples, Uzbekistan likely purchased at least a few of the Anka UAVs.² The article also mentions that Uzbekistan will likely receive training, munitions, and other components, especially considering the current state of Turkey-Uzbekistan security cooperation.³ Lastly, the article hints at how the Turkish UAVs will be used. Uzbekistan's Minister

“Uzbekistan’s Minister of Defense, General Major Shukhrat Kholmukhamedov, informed the Senate of the Supreme Assembly that the army’s training focus was on utilizing unmanned aerial vehicles in modern warfare, improving skills in countering these drones, and mastering new tactical operations.”

of Defense, General Major Shukhrat Kholmukhamedov, stated that training for Uzbekistan's Army is focused on using and countering UAVs. The acquisition of the Anka UAVs aligns with this focus. Overall, the acquisition demonstrates Uzbekistan will go abroad to fill a perceived operational requirement and that Turkey's efforts to engage in security cooperation with Uzbekistan are paying off in a material way.

While Turkish Aerospace Industries' Anka unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) has been typically used for reconnaissance purposes, some variants can carry munitions.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_Anka_Teknofest2019_\(1\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_Anka_Teknofest2019_(1).jpg); Attribution: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Source: “Uzbekistan to purchase military drones from Türkiye – Media,” *Kun.uz* (news website in Uzbekistan), 29 January 2025. <https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/01/29/uzbekistan-to-purchase-military-drones-from-trkiye-media>

Uzbekistan is reportedly set to sign an agreement to acquire ANKA SIHA military unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) produced by Türkiye’s aerospace industry company, TUSAS. Details regarding the number of drones and their purchase price have not been disclosed by the Uzbek authorities.

The deliveries are expected to begin soon, according to a report by SavunmaSanayiST, a Turkish portal specializing in defense industry and military aviation news...The ANKA drones mentioned in the agreement are already in service with the armed forces of several countries, including Algeria, Kazakhstan, Tunisia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Chad, in addition to the Turkish military...

The single-engine ANKA SIHA drone can remain in the air for up to 30 hours and has a payload capacity of 350 kilograms...

According to publicly available information, the export price of the ANKA drone exceeds \$25 million. For instance, in 2020, the Tunisian Ministry of Defense purchased three such drones for \$80 million. In 2023, the Indonesian Ministry of Defense signed a deal to buy 12 ANKA drones for \$300 million. These agreements also include training for military personnel on drone operations, munitions for the drones, and control stations...

Additionally, in December 2024, Uzbekistan’s Minister of Defense, General Major Shukhrat Kholmukhamedov, informed the Senate of the Supreme Assembly that the army’s training focus was on utilizing unmanned aerial vehicles in modern warfare, improving skills in countering these drones, and mastering new tactical operations.

Notes:

- 1 The Kun.uz article notes Kazakhstan, which borders Uzbekistan to the north, is one of the countries that bought Anka UAVs, but does not mention how many. Kazakhstan reached an agreement with Turkish Aerospace Industries in May 2022 for three Anka UAVs as well as a technology transfer to produce a few dozen of the UAVs in Kazakhstan beginning in 2024. See: “Производство турецких дронов в Казахстане планируют начать в 2024 году (The production of Turkish drones in Kazakhstan is planned to begin in 2024),” Inform Buro, 15 October 2023. <https://informburo.kz/novosti/proizvodstvo-tureckix-dronov-v-kazaxstane-planiruyut-nacat-v-2024-godu>
- 2 Uzbekistan’s defense budget is not publicly available, but its GDP and its armed forces are considerably smaller than a country like Indonesia, which purchased a dozen of the Anka UAVs. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based think tank, publishes Military Balance, an annual report on the armed forces of the world. For an overview of Uzbekistan and Indonesia’s armed forces, see: “Uzbekistan,” (2023) Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia, The Military Balance, 123:1, 205-207, and “Indonesia,” (2023) Chapter Six: Asia, The Military Balance, 123:1, 253-257.
- 3 Turkey and Uzbekistan have had good relations since the latter became independent, but the relationship has become closer since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016. Turkey and Uzbekistan signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2022 that has paved the way for current military cooperation. For more on the strategic partnership agreement, see: Hatice Şenses Kurukız, Sefa Mutlu, and Abdulrahman Yusupov, “Отношения Турции и Узбекистана достигли стратегического партнерства (Relations between Turkey and Uzbekistan have reached a strategic partnership),” Anadolu Ajansı, 29 March 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/политика/отношения-турции-и-узбекистана-достигли-стратегического-партнерства/2549621>

Turkey's Defense Ties With the New Syrian Government Impact Region

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Since the sudden fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the Turkish government has actively sought to position itself as the key military backer and security guarantor of the new Syrian government. The rapidly coalescing bilateral defense relationship was on display in late January, when a Turkish delegation led by their defense minister visited Damascus and met with its Syrian counterparts. The Syrian military is essentially being built from scratch, given the formal dissolution of the Assad-era “Syrian Arab Army,” the destruction of most of its heavy weaponry by Israel, and the sidelining of Russia and Iran, its erstwhile military patrons. Although the new Syrian government’s focus has been on bringing the various rebel militias under a single umbrella, the Turkish defense delegation’s visit signals an interest in rebuilding the military’s capabilities. In early February, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa—formerly Abu Mohammed al-Jolani—visited Turkey and reportedly discussed a defense pact with Turkish President Erdogan.¹ The two reportedly discussed Turkey arming and training Syrian forces, as well as the establishment of two Turkish airbases in central Syria.² Although these rumors remain unconfirmed, consensus in Arabic-language media—as illustrated in the two accompanying

excerpts, from *al-Jazeera* and *al-Araby al-Jadeed*—is that close bilateral military cooperation will soon take shape.

“[T]he fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria will change the map of power relations in the Middle East, with the return of Turkey as a regional power that may enter into direct conflict with Israel.”

Deepening Turkish military influence and presence in Syria will have an impact on existing regional geopolitics, particularly as regards Israel, which has itself established new military positions in Syrian territory. For Israel, a Turkish-bolstered Syrian military could be seen as a new threat. As noted in the third accompanying excerpt, from the Saudi daily *Independent Arabia*, Turkish and Israeli interests diverge substantially when it comes to Syria’s future, a divergence that could lead to confrontation if left unchecked. As the article’s author notes, even in the absence of direct confrontation, Turkey will likely seek to cooperate with Arab nations—particularly Saudi Arabia—on a shared vision for Syria’s future, a vision that is unlikely to align with Israel’s interests.



New Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa at a December 2024 meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ahdmed_al-Sharaa_2024_Infobox_crop.jpg Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

Source:

تركيا ومهمة ملء الفراغ العسكري الإيراني في سوريا

“Turkey and the mission of filling the Iranian military vacuum in Syria,” *al-Jazeera* (Qatari news channel), 11 February 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/2/11>

Reports have been circulating in recent days, ahead of Shara's visit to Ankara, that Turkey intends to establish two military bases in Syria and deploy 50 F-16 fighter jets as part of a defense cooperation agreement, which may be concluded soon, to serve as an interim air force for Syria until its air fleet is rebuilt. Commenting on this topic, Mohsen Al-Mustafa, a researcher specializing in military relations at the Omran Center for Studies, believes that these reports are not just speculations, but rather practical steps being implemented, which makes the issue of Turkish military expansion in Syria a matter of time and nothing more...

These Turkish moves raise concerns for Israel, which has been working since the first day of the fall of the regime to expand into Syrian territory and occupy the strategic summit of Mount Hermon, in addition to bombing dozens of military sites belonging to the Syrian army.

In this context, the Israeli newspaper Maariv said that the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria will change the map of power relations in the Middle East, with the return of Turkey as a regional power that may enter into direct conflict with Israel.

Source:

العلاقات التركية السورية: تحالف دفاعي وقواعد عسكرية وتدريب الجيش

“Turkish-Syrian relations: a defense alliance, military bases, and army training,” *al-Araby al-Jadeed* (Qatari-aligned daily), 6 February 2025. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics>

Reuters quoted four informed sources as saying last Tuesday that Erdogan will discuss with Sharaa the possibility of establishing two Turkish military bases and air defense systems at the Tadmur and T-4 aribases during the visit, noting that the discussions include allowing Turkey to use Syrian airspace for military purposes and taking a leading role in training the new Syrian army. Syrian military sources had previously indicated to Al-Araby Al-Jadeed the possibility of deploying Turkish forces in new areas in central and southern Syria in the coming period, stressing that the Turkish forces deployed in the Idlib region, which includes parts of the Aleppo countryside, the Hama countryside, and the Latakia countryside in northwestern Syria, were preparing to transfer part of their military points to the Homs countryside in central Syria, and the Damascus and

Quneitra countryside in western and southern Syria, and that these points will replace the Russian military observation points that were there before the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime...

Turkish media, especially the newspaper “Haber”, indicated that the Syrian administration is working to completely renew the structure of the regime and its military and security doctrine, and that it has submitted a series of demands related to border security, in addition to restructuring the army. The newspaper pointed to other provisions related to a possible defense agreement, including Turkey deploying 50 F-16 fighter jets to these bases to prevent any attack that might target the country's sovereignty, until the Syrian Air Force is completed. Turkish media pointed out that obtaining drones is a basic demand of the Syrian

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government from Ankara, in addition to deploying more radars, electronic warfare systems and integrated

security systems along the border, especially in order to control the border passage with Israel...

Source:

“Türkiye and Israel face to face in Syria,” *Independent Arabia* (Arabic-language daily), 24 January 2025. <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/616380>

تركيا وإسرائيل وجها لوجه في سوريا

But on the other hand, there is an important problem, which is that Israel and Turkey, which belong to the same (Western) camp, are now facing each other in Syria in one way or another, and each of them has different interests and goals, and it is not easy to achieve agreement between them. What Israel wants in Syria is a weak central government divided into various local governments and autonomous regions, such that such it will pose no future threat to Tel Aviv, and Israel could disrupt Syria at any time through these autonomous regions. Moreover, the weak and fragile administration in Damascus would never be able to oppose the Israeli occupation and its territorial expansion in the Golan Heights.

In contrast, what Turkey wants in Syria is a strong nation-state based on a democratic system that includes representation of all ethnic and sectarian groups present in the country. Naturally, Turkey

refuses to include in this government organizations and elements that it classifies as terrorists and accuses of having a separatist agenda, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Kurdish People's Protection Units group...

For Turkey, one of the solutions is to strengthen the alliance with the Arab countries, especially the Gulf states. If Turkey and the Arab countries are on one front, they can pressure the United States, which in turn will force Israel to respect the territorial integrity of Syria. Washington certainly does not want to lose the Arabs and the Turks together. If this happens, Syria may indeed witness an ideal solution that ends with the formation of a democratic system that represents the various ethnic and sectarian components in Syria, which also opens the way for the voluntary return of millions of Syrian immigrants.

Notes:

- 1 This was initially reported by Reuters. See: “Exclusive: Syria’s Sharaa to discuss defense pact with Turkey’s Erdogan, sources say,” *Reuters*, 4 February 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sharaa-discuss-defense-pact-with-turkeys-erdogan-sources-say-2025-02-04/>
- 2 Turkey already has a few military positions within Syrian territory, but they are concentrated in the north of the country, near the Turkish border and on the one-time frontlines between the now-dissolved regime and the one-time rebels now ruling the country. Recent rumors of Turkish deployment are focused on areas in central Syria, closer to the border with Israel.