

OEWATCH

FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

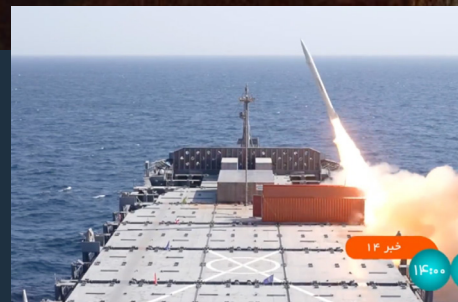
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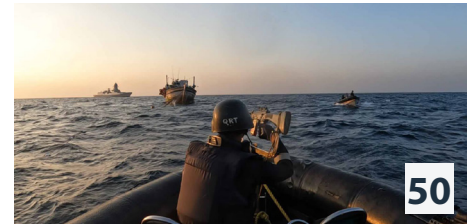
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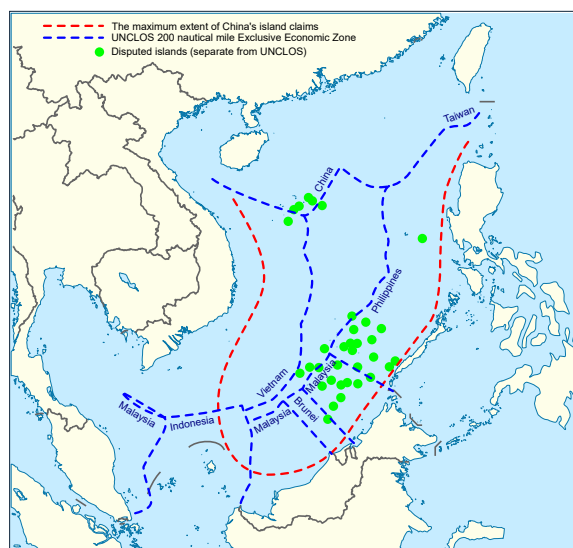
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The Philippines Plans Purchase of First Submarines To Counter China

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

The Philippines recently announced its plans to acquire submarines. According to Japan-based weekly news magazine, *Nikkei Asia*, the plan is the third part of a three-phase military modernization strategy and indicates the Philippines is “taking a more assertive approach to defending its interests beyond its borders.” The first and second phases were focused on bolstering the Philippines’ “land-centric” assets.¹ It is unknown where the Philippines will acquire its submarines but, according to the first article, “Spain, South Korea and Italy have shown an interest in supplying it with submarines.”

While the exact number of submarines the Philippines plans to purchase is unknown, the second excerpted article, published in the pro-independence, Taiwan newspaper, *Liberty Times*, suggests that one submarine is not enough. Ian Story, a senior researcher from ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore argues that the Philippines should purchase three so that one can be operational while another is in training and the last one undergoing maintenance. He also estimates that it could take more than 10 years to acquire and integrate submarines into Philippines’ military capabilities. While other experts agreed with three submarines being an ideal number to start, Joshua Bernard Espeña, vice president of the Philippine think



China’s maritime claim (red), compared to other countries. The Philippines has recently expressed interest in procuring submarines to protect itself against Chinese maritime aggression.

Source: Goran Tek-en, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South_China_Sea_vector.svg; Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

tank International Development and Security Cooperation argued that two to three submarines would not be enough to deter China because China’s southern theater could deploy more

than 30 diesel-electric submarines in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, in response to these plans, Chinese state-controlled *Xinhuanet* went on the offensive, saying that while buying a submarine was the Philippines’ own business, China will not tolerate anything that infringes on its sovereignty “and undermines regional peace and stability.” According to Chinese Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Colonel Wu Qian, the Philippines has already “betrayed its trust, colluded with major powers outside the region, and continued to engage in malicious activities in the South China Sea.” He went on to warn that China will counterattack if the Philippines “insists on going its own way.” However, he did not offer any specifics as to steps China might take.

“China is willing to resolve differences with the Philippines through bilateral dialogue and consultation, but if the Philippines insists on going its own way, China will resolutely counterattack.”

Source: Ramon Royandoyan, “Philippines ‘Breaking From Its Shell’ With Submarine Purchase,” *Nikkei Asia* (major Japan-based English-language weekly news magazine), 2 February 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Philippines-breaking-from-its-shell-with-submarine-purchase>

The Philippines’ plan to buy its first submarine marks a step toward the Southeast Asian nation taking a more assertive approach to defending its interests beyond its borders, analysts say.

On Thursday, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. approved the planned submarine purchase, which is included in the third phase of the military’s modernization strategy....The first and second phases of the military modernization plan focused on bolstering “land-centric” defense assets. Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. said acquisitions under the third phase will focus on stepping up capabilities in domain awareness, intelligence and deterrence in maritime and aerial spaces.

The moves will prepare the Philippines “for future

warfare of multi-domain attacks,” (Chester) Cabalza (founder of International Development and Security Cooperation, a think tank in Manila) added. In December, Manila installed Japan-made radar at an airbase some 300 kilometers from the Scarborough Shoal, the site of recent incidents involving China.

Friction between Beijing and Manila has escalated in recent months, as the Philippines Coast Guard accused a Chinese ship of using water cannons and deliberately ramming maritime vessels to disrupt the Philippines’ resupply missions to its outpost within the disputed waters.

The Philippine Navy on Thursday said France, Spain, South Korea and Italy have shown interest in supplying it with submarines.

Source: Sun Yuqing, “菲律賓擬採購潛艦 專家：至少需要3艘才能嚇阻中國 (The Philippines Plans to Purchase Submarines. Experts: At Least Three Submarines Needed to Deter China,” *Ziyou Shibao* (also known as *Liberty Times*, a highly influential, pro-independence, Taiwan newspaper), 19 February 2024. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/breakingnews/4583036>

The report pointed out that in recent months, tensions between the Philippines and China in the South China Sea have intensified, with military and police officers from both sides having numerous confrontations, and both sides later accusing the other of inciting conflicts. This prompted the Philippine government to decide to promote the modernization of the military. One of the measures is to purchase submarines.

Roy Trinidad, spokesman for the Philippine Navy’s West Philippine Sea Affairs, did not disclose how many submarines Manila plans to purchase, but he said “it will definitely be more than one.”

Ian Story, a senior researcher at the Institute of

Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute) in Singapore Storey said that if one submarine is to be put into service at any time, Manila will need to purchase at least three. He explained that “3 is a magic number” that applies to all types of military equipment, one is operating, one is training, and one is being modified or maintained. For example, Vietnam has 6 submarines, which ensures that at least 2 are operational at any time.

However, since Manila has never operated a submarine, the process of acquiring and integrating the submarines will take at least 10 years, including the construction of infrastructure such as bases,

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docks, dry docks, and other support services. He added that if the Philippines orders two to three submarines, they will not be able to operate effectively until at least the mid-2030s.

However, Joshua Bernard Espeña, vice president of the Philippine think tank International Development

and Security Cooperation, believes that 2 to 3 submarines are not enough to deter China, because China's southern theater may deploy more than 30 diesel-electric submarines in the South China Sea. Power submarine.

Source: “马科斯批准军队建设计划, 包括购买菲律宾第一艘潜艇 (Marcos approves military construction plan, including purchase of Philippines' first submarine),” *Xinhuanet* (Chinese state-controlled newspaper), 2 February 2024. http://www.news.cn/mil/2024-02/02/c_1212332825.htm

According to previous media reports, the Chief of Staff of the Philippine Armed Forces recently stated that the Philippines plans to develop islands and reefs in the South China Sea and purchase more ships and radars. Some analysts believe that the Philippines also intends to build outposts in the South China Sea.

In this regard, Colonel Wu Qian, spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, said on January 25 that whether or not to buy a ship is the Philippines' own business, but China will never allow anything that infringes on China's sovereignty and security and undermines regional peace and stability.

Wu Qian said that China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters, which has sufficient historical

and legal basis. China firmly opposes any form of construction activities carried out by the Philippines on the illegally occupied islands and reefs of China's Nansha Islands. The current difficulties facing China-Philippines relations lie in the fact that the Philippines has betrayed its trust, colluded with major powers outside the region, and continued to engage in malicious activities in the South China Sea. Infringement and provocation harm China's legitimate rights and interests. We ask the Philippines to respect history, recognize reality, and not go down the wrong path. Wu to resolve differences with the Philippines through bilateral dialogue and consultation, but if the Philippines insists on going its own way, China will resolutely counterattack.

Notes:

- 1 The country's plan to introduce submarines to its defense forces, comes in the wake of escalating tensions between Beijing and Manila with the Philippine Coast Guard accusing a Chinese ship of “using water cannons and deliberately ramming maritime vessels” on resupply missions to Philippine outposts within the disputed waters. Over the past months, China has been putting mounting pressure on the Philippines in the South China Sea. In one example of aggression in the South China Sea, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel used a water cannon to redirect an unarmed Philippines Navy supply ship near the Second Thomas Shoal. Despite an international court saying both the shoal and surrounding waters belong to the Philippines, China claims it all owns the area. For more information, see: Carla Freeman et al, “China, Philippines Tensions Risk Wider Conflict that Could Draw in the U.S.,” United States Institute of Peace, 10 August 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/china-philippines-tensions-risk-wider-conflict-could-draw-us>. See also Dodge Billingsley, “China And Philippines Spar Over Grounded Ship In Spratly Islands,” *OE Watch*, 08-2023. <https://fmsso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/china-and-philippines-spar-over-grounded-ship-in-spratly-islands/>

China's Utilization of Domestic Information Operations Tactics

By CPT Yunyi Zhou
OE Watch Commentary

In an effort to advance its goals, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses comprehensive information operations (IO) to influence and shape the global information landscape. The first excerpted article from the official CCP news outlet Xinhua demonstrates a nuanced tactic of CCP's domestic IO—"喧宾夺主" ("the tail is wagging the dog"). On 17 February 2024, Japan's flagship H3 space rocket, jointly developed by Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, successfully deployed two small observation satellites into orbit from the Tanegashima Space Center. While the global media predominantly highlighted JAXA's breakthrough and

“The development of rocket-themed merchandise and culinary offerings has not only diversified Tanegashima’s economy but has also enriched its cultural landscape... “Specialty foods, rocket-themed rice wine, and more have gained popularity among tourists.”

Japan's manufacturing competitiveness, Xinhua's coverage of the event focused on local Japanese infrastructure and tourism, with the economic revitalization of the Japanese Tanegashima Island

taking the center stage. By doing so, the CCP not only obscured the intensified competition in the space race, but also promoted a narrative of fostering a global community united by a shared pursuit of economic growth.

The CCP consistently develops nuanced IO tactics targeting the Chinese people during domestic peacetime, distinct from tactics used to aggressively handle domestic upheavals such as the Hong Kong protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to these efforts is portraying China positively as a peaceful and prosperous nation.¹ Overall, the CCP's approach to global influence carries significant implications for U.S. strategies aimed at countering China's full-spectrum IO campaign.



Models of rockets of JAXA, are shown at the Mitsubishi Minatomirai Industrial Museum. Following the launch of one such rocket, CHN has undertaken information operations to achieve its own goals.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Models_of_rockets_of_JAXA,_at_the_Mitsubishi_Minatomirai_Industrial_Museum.jpg; Attribution: Brakeet, CC0 1.0

Source: Guang Yang and Anzheng Li, “在日本种子岛感受火箭经济 (Experience the “Rocket Economy” in Tanegashima, Japan),” *Xinhua* (official Chinese Communist Party news outlet), 19 February 2024. <http://www.news.cn/world/20240219/79f2ea64434e49b6bc512c4f7f80298a/c.html>

Japan’s recent launch of the H3 rocket from the Tanegashima Space Center in Kagoshima Prefecture, has not only marked a significant milestone in space exploration but has also underscored the burgeoning “rocket economy” transforming the socioeconomic landscape of Tanegashima Island. This report delves into the multifaceted impacts of the rocket industry on Tanegashima, examining its influence on local infrastructure, tourism, economic diversification, and cultural identity...

Situated in the southern part of Kagoshima Prefecture, Tanegashima has experienced a gradual decline in population over recent decades. The emerging of the “rocket economy” has catalyzed economic and social benefits. Economically, investments in infrastructure, satellite research, manufacturing, and space education have bolstered local revenues and generated employment opportunities. For instance, data from the Japan Economic Research Institute reveals a significant increase in revenue and job creation attributed to direct orders from the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and the influx of tourists and business visitors during rocket launch events. Moreover, the social benefits extend beyond economic gains, encompassing talent development, academic research,

and regional image enhancement. Tanegashima’s identity as a “rocket launch island” has garnered widespread recognition, with space-themed attractions, such as the Emi Noe Observation Park, contributing to the island’s allure among tourists and enthusiasts. The influx of visitors from across Japan underscores the island’s newfound prominence as a premier destination for space enthusiasts. Furthermore, the development of rocket-themed merchandise and culinary offerings has not only diversified Tanegashima’s economy but has also enriched its cultural landscape. Souvenirs like rocket-shaped keychains and space-themed delicacies reflect the fusion of space exploration with local traditions, captivating visitors and fostering a sense of pride among residents.

Japan’s H3 rocket launch not only symbolizes advancements in space technology but also serves as a catalyst for socioeconomic development on Tanegashima Island. The convergence of economic opportunities, cultural enrichment, and community engagement underscores the transformative impact of the “rocket economy” on the local landscape. By embracing its newfound identity as a nexus of space exploration, Tanegashima stands poised to chart a course toward a prosperous and vibrant future.

Notes:

- 1 According to a Freedom House report, the CCP is likely to intensify censorship efforts and fortify against the infiltration of Western ideals while launching cognitive warfare to spread authoritarianism in developing countries. See: Sarah Cook, Angeli Datt, Ellie Young, and BC Han, “Beijing’s Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience,” *Freedom House*, September 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience>

China's Strategic Bomber Puts United States and Allies Within Range

By Alpha Ngo
OE Watch Commentary

Eight years after its initial announcement, China's new long-range bomber, the H-20, is about to be realized.¹ The H-20 is planned to replace China's most advanced current bomber, the H-6K. According to the first excerpted article from the Chinese Communist Party affiliated *Global Times*, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) commander Wang Wei announced that the project was moving forward with no "bottlenecks" and all issues resolved. The H-20 will be a significant step up from the **H-6K** in both range and payload. When commissioned, the H-20 will use stealth technologies to avoid detection and will be able to launch a variety of weapons with both conventional and nuclear payloads. The second excerpted article from a Chinese news source, *NetEase*, describes the H-20's utility and assesses the need for a stealth bomber. Notably, the article suggests that the H-20 will have a range up to 10,000 kilometers, giving it the ability to strike intercontinental military targets. An additional, though



Artist's rendering of what China's H-20 strategic bomber could look like.

Source: <https://desarrollodefensaytecnologiabelica.blogspot.com/2020/05/china-presentara-el-bombardero-sigiloso.html>;
Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

“When commissioned, the H-20 will become a new quality combat force, serve as a powerful strategic deterrent and contribute to the safeguard of [Chinese] national sovereignty, security, and development interests, as well as peace and stability in the region and around the world.”

contradictory, statement from the PLAAF notes that the H-20 boasts a range of 8,500 kilometers with a payload of at least 10 metric tons.² Should the H-20 live up to expectations, the H-20 will give China the ability to strike the United

States, Australia, and other Pacific allies while remaining entirely undetected.

Source: Liu Xuanzun, “China’s in-development H-20 bomber worth the excitement: PLA Air Force deputy commander,” *Global Times* (English language newspaper affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party), 11 March 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1308604.shtml>

China’s long awaited first strategic stealth bomber, the H-20, is worth the excitement, as it faces no technical difficulties in development and will

be unveiled to the public soon, said the deputy commander of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force at the two sessions in Beijing.

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The H-6 series, which is China's current main combat bomber that has served for decades, is a medium-range subsonic platform without stealth capability, so despite many upgrades and modernization, the aircraft itself cannot penetrate modern air defense, and relies on launching standoff munitions to attack targets, said experts reached by the Global Times. A next generation stealth bomber, capable of avoiding

hostile detection, will enable the launch of more powerful or more cost-efficient munitions at closer range in larger numbers, experts said. When commissioned, the H-20 will become a new quality combat force, serve as a powerful strategic deterrent and contribute to the safeguard of national sovereignty, security and development interests, as well as peace and stability in the region and around the world.

Source: Yangmen Bojin, “轰20航程或超预期! 中国用一流反隐身能力铸剑, 美应抓紧撤往东太 (The range of the H-20 may exceed expectations! China uses first-class anti-stealth capabilities to forge swords, the United States should hurry up and withdraw to the East Pacific),” *NetEase* (Chinese news site), 15 March 2024. https://m.163.com/dy/article_cambrian/ITAHENIN0553AA62.html

“The H-6 series bombers have serious shortcomings in terms of stealth, speed, and bomb load. In this context, it is very necessary to develop a new strategic bomber. H-20’ bomber’s range is expected to be at least 8,000 kilometers, with a maximum range of more than 10,000 kilometers.”

“The distance from our country to San Francisco is about 9,600 kilometers. If the ‘H-20’ bomber has a range of more than 10,000 kilometers, it can only

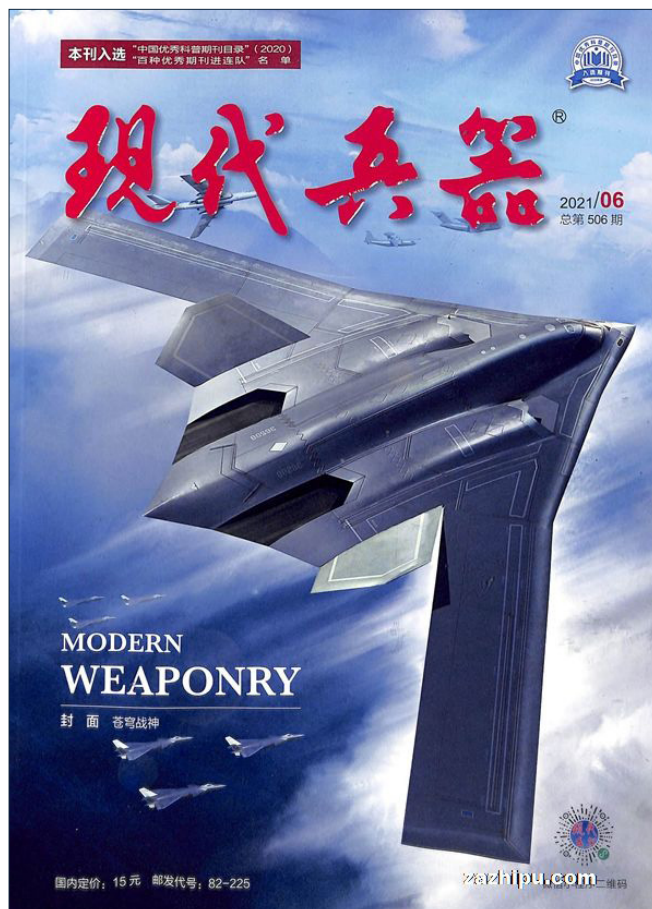
reach Alaska and some islands in the Pacific, as well as the U.S. deployment bases in Australia.”

“It should be pointed out that the reason why my country’s H-20 bomber has not reviled is likely due to it being continuously upgraded. For stealth bombers, the most fatal problem is that the stealth capabilities is seen by the other party. Once the stealth advantage is lost, the stealth bomber is not even comparable to a conventional bomber.

Notes:

- 1 Zhao Lei, “PLA Air Force commander confirms new strategic bomber,” *China Daily*, 2 September 2016. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-09/02/content_26683883.htm
- 2 Liam Gibson, “US Air Force secretary says new planes must intimidate China,” *Taiwan News*, 5 December 2021. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/4365995>

New Details Emerge About China's H-20 Stealth Bomber



The cover of the June 2021 issue of the Chinese military magazine "Modern Weaponry" features an artist's rendition of a next-generation bomber.

Source: <https://www.zazhipu.com/magnews228725.html>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

“Since 2016, details regarding the H-20 have been largely withheld from the public. However, a few small details have gradually emerged.”

By Kevin Kusumoto
OE Watch Commentary

Although China announced the development of its first dedicated strategic stealth bomber, the H-20, in 2016, many details surrounding the aircraft remain a mystery. However, according to the first excerpted article posted on the publicly owned Chinese Internet Platform *Tencent*, Deputy Commander of the People's Liberation Army Air Force, Lieutenant General Wang Wei, stated that the H-20 is “almost here.” This statement was provided at the conclusion of the second session of the 14th National People's Congress in Beijing. Despite external skepticism of the H-20's development and progress, Wei stated that the H-20 currently has not encountered any technological bottlenecks.¹ Wei also noted that after test flights, the H-20 can very quickly enter mass production. When asked how the new H-20 would compare to the United States capabilities (presumably, the B-21 bomber), Wei replied that it is not a matter of comparison between China and the United States. Rather it is a matter to “protect our own security.”²

The second excerpt published by the majority Chinese state-owned television network, *Ifeng*, suggests that the unveiling of the new H-20 will send two significant messages to the outside world. First, the H-20 will elevate China into the top ranks of the world's air powers. Second, the H-20 will serve as an effective deterrent against external forces infringing upon China's national sovereignty and airspace. The source also suggests that the H-20 will enable China to break through the first, and potentially the second, island chain that surrounds the country, thus expanding its strategic space.³ Furthermore, the source suggests that the H-20 will “shock” the forces of Taiwan and constrain their strategic intentions, with the author referring to Taiwan simply as ‘the island.’⁴

Source: Yanbingchang, “时隔8年再获官方确认，空军副司令员“剧透”轰-20：快了，你们等着吧 (After an Official Confirmation Following an Eight Year Hiatus, the Air Force Deputy Commander ‘Spoiled’ the H-20: It’s Almost Here, Just Wait for It),” *Tencent* (a major Chinese platform company that connects users, businesses, and industries with technology and innovation), 11 March 2024. <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20240311A04C1F00>

After the conclusion of the second session of the 14th National People’s Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, a reporter from the Hong Kong Commercial Daily asked Lieutenant General Wang Wei, Deputy Commander of the Chinese Air Force, a series of questions regarding China’s new and upcoming strategic stealth bomber, the H-20. Lieutenant General Wang Wei stated that the H-20 will soon be announced to the public and emphasized that production of the plane would proceed ‘very fast’ following test flights.

The development of the H-20 was publicly revealed in 2016, and details of the aircraft have not been made public since then. There were suspicions that China may have encountered technical bottlenecks during its development. However, Lieutenant General Wang Wei categorically denied this in the interview, stating that there were no such bottlenecks.

Military experts estimate that the H-20 boasts a range of approximately 13,000 kilometers, a combat radius of around 5,000 kilometers, and a bomb load ranging from 30 to 40 tons. Such capabilities would

render the H-20 five times more effective than China’s current most advanced bomber, the H-6K, and enable it to fly directly to the United States.

*Since 2016, details regarding the H-20 have been largely withheld from the public. However, a few small details have gradually emerged. In a 2018 episode by the CCTV Documentary Channel, it was stated that significant progress had been made in the development of the H-20. Additionally, in 2021, a promotional video commemorating the tenth anniversary of the **J-20’s** maiden flight, released by the Aviation Industry Corporation of China, showcased an aircraft featuring a flying wing design. Similarly, an Air Force recruitment video from the same year revealed a winged aircraft being unveiled, as seen through the reflection of a pilot’s visor. Lastly, at the conclusion of a CCTV program on military technology, viewers were shown an image of an object draped with a curtain, its outline strongly resembling a flying wing layout without vertical tail fins, reminiscent of the design of the **B-2** or B-21 bomber.*

Source: Nanyouhui, “轰20将亮相，向外传递两大信号 (The Unveiling of the H-20 will Send Two Messages to the Outside World),” *ifeng.com* (a majority state-owned television network), 12 March 2024. <https://news.ifeng.com/c/8XtHAuKtOs5>

The statements from Deputy Commander Wang Wei regarding the H-20 development send two signals to the outside world. Firstly, they suggest that China is on track to possess a stealth strategic bomber comparable to those of the US Air Force. American experts speculate that the H-20 developed by China

may be akin to the B-2 stealth bomber, boasting a range of more than 8,500 kilometers and capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear weapons. The emergence of the H-20 is poised to rival the American B-2 and position China among the world’s leading air force powers.

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Secondly, the H-20 is expected to significantly enhance the deterrence capability of the Chinese Air Force. In light of efforts by the United States to contain China's rise, including the construction of first and second island chains aimed at restricting China's access to the Pacific, the H-20 represents a strategic asset. With its potential capability to penetrate these containment barriers, the H-20 will serve as a potent deterrent against foreign forces.

The development of the H-20 is not intended to compete against the United States or pursue

world hegemony. Rather, it represents a strategic breakthrough for China, expanding its strategic capabilities. Importantly, once the H-20 is operational, it will significantly impact forces positioned on 'the island'—a reference to territories dependent on American military presence for defense against mainland China. China has consistently demonstrated restraint and tolerance, and the deployment of the H-20 will serve as a deterrent, influencing the intentions of these forces.

Notes:

- 1 Daqiqi, “台媒, 轰-20迟迟没有露面, 是因为研发出了问题, 要走的路还很长! (According to Taiwan Media, H-20 Bomber Has Not Appeared for a Long Time Because It Encountered Development Problems, There Still is a Long Way To Go!),” *NetEase* (a leading Chinese internet and gaming provider centered around premium content), 08 December 2023. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/ILEICUTM05534DZW.html>
- 2 To watch the full interview with Lieutenant General Wang Wei, see Hong Kong Commercial Daily's Weibo video post on 11 March 2024, Weibo (biggest social media platform in China), 11 March 2023. <https://weibo.com/hkcdCN?layerid=5010657889487439>
- 3 Mark Carlin, “China's New H-20 Stealth Bomber Is a Giant Question Mark”, *National Interest*, 15 November 2023. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-new-h-20-stealth-bomber-giant-question-mark-207290>
- 4 Peter Suci, “China's B-21 Raider: The Xi'an H-20 Stealth Bomber is Coming Soon”, *National Interest*, 12 March 2024. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-b-21-raider-xian-h-20-stealth-bomber-coming-soon-209973>

China Accuses United States of Being Largest Proliferator of Space Militarization

By Kevin Kusumoto
OE Watch Commentary

China is downplaying U.S. concerns over Beijing's intentions in the space domain, and instead, claiming that the U.S. is the state most responsible for the militarization of space. The first excerpted article from Chinese state-owned media outlet *The Paper*, reported that General Stephen Whiting, Commander of the United States Space Force, expressed strong concerns about China's rapid development of space military capabilities, describing China as a "major threat" in the space domain and the pace of development as "alarming."¹ The second excerpt from China's Ministry of Defense offers China's official response. Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang, criticized the U.S. for using "so-called threats" from other countries as excuses to expand its own military power in space. Zhang also accused the U.S. as the biggest promoter of space militarization, while firmly asserting that China insists on the peaceful use of space, opposes a space arms race, and urges the U.S. to cease spreading false statements and to refrain from expanding its arms and war preparations in space.

Chinese rhetoric of peaceful space development follows the release of the 2023 "Blue Book" by China's Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation. The document declares China's plans to conduct a record-breaking 100 launch missions in 2024, including



Long March 5 Y7 Carrier Rocket Launch Preparation on 23 February 2024.

Source: <https://xinwen.bjd.com.cn/content/s65d89372e4b03e169cb752d2.html>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

“The United States uses the so-called threats from other countries as an excuse to expand its military power. China is firmly opposed to this.”

70 space mission launches, involving 290 spacecraft, and a series of major carrier rocket tests.² China sent an experimental communication satellite into space on 23 February 2024. The launch marks the eleventh satellite launched by China under a classified military program, with no additional details publicly disclosed by state media, except that the satellite will primarily be used for "multi-band and high-speed communication technology

experiments.”³ In the past six months, China has launched more than 15 Yaogan reconnaissance satellites, primarily to support the People's Liberation Army's Strategic Support Force.⁴ The Yaogan-41, launched on 20 December 2023, involved a military geostationary earth observation/signals intelligence satellite that provides unprecedented capabilities for tracking and identifying U.S. and allied movements in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵

Source: Yan Shanshan, “美高官：在这一领域，中国正以惊人速度发展 (US senior official: In this field, China is developing at astonishing speed),” *The Paper* (official Chinese site), 03 March 2024. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26540782

Stephen Whiting, commander of the US Space Command, testifies to the US SASC that China has “dramatically improved its ability to monitor, track and target US and allied forces on Earth and in orbit.” The top commander declared space as a “expanding security challenge”, with China and Russia identified as the main competitors. Space is now deemed

the “core of security activities in all fields,” and China is committed to making progress in satellite meteorology, manned spaceflights, robotic space explorations, and the ability to track and target US and allied forces. Furthermore, General Whiting said that China “will reach world-class levels in all fields except a few areas of space technology by 2030.”

Source: Ye Mengyuan, “美国是太空军事化战场化的最大推手” (The United States is the biggest promoter of militarization of space),” China Ministry of National Defense (Ministry of National Defense Website), 29 February 2024. <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16289660.html>

Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang, deputy director of the Information Bureau of the Ministry of National Defense and spokesperson of the Ministry of National Defense, responded to a reporter’s question regarding China’s comments on the United States strategic competition in space, long range missiles, and anti-satellite weapons. Senior Colonel Zhang rebuffed the United States as having defined space as “combat territory” and developing and deploying offensive space weapons, organizing military offensive and defensive exercises and technological experiments, and maliciously tracking and dangerously

approaching other countries’ spacecraft which creates risk of collision. He states that the United States is the biggest promoter of the militarization of space and the biggest threat to space security. Furthermore, he claims that China always insisted on the peaceful use of space, opposes a space arms race, and is actively promoting the building of community for mankind. He urges the United States to stop spreading false statements, stop expanding its arms and war preparation in space, and prevent damaging global strategic security and stability.

Notes:

- 1 In his testimony, General Whiting identified both China and Russia as significant space competitors. He urgently raises the need for the U.S. to expand its military power, as well as to sustain and improve its capabilities and strength in the space field to maintain its competitive advantage. Wu Zhichao, “国防部：美国是太空军事化战场化的最大推手 (Ministry of Defense: America is Space Militarization’s Biggest Driver),” *The Paper*, 29 February 2024. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26506145
- 2 Feng Hu, “2024年预计实施100次发射！中国航天科技活动蓝皮书发布 (An Estimated 100 Launches Will Be Carried Out in 2024! China’s Aerospace Science and Technology Activities Released Blue Book),” *China Economic Daily*, 26 February 2024. http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/202402/26/t20240226_38912226.shtml
- 3 Ryan Woo, “China Launches Classified Communication Satellite with Powerful Rocket,” *Reuters*, 23 February 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/space/china-launches-classified-communication-satellite-with-powerful-rocket-2024-02-23/>
- 4 To obtain a list of Chinese satellites and their purpose description, see NASA Space Science Data Coordinated Archive, NASA, 28 March 2024. <https://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/nmc/spacecraft/query>
- 5 Clayton Swope, “No Place to Hide: A Look into China’s Geosynchronous Surveillance Capabilities,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 19 January 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/no-place-hide-look-chinas-geosynchronous-surveillance-capabilities>

China Initiates Push To Establish a Military Base in Gabon



The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation has become a core component of China's promoting its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Source: Stephen Walli https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Forum_on_China-Africa_Cooperation.jpg;
Attribution: CC x2.0

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Gabon has become a key nation for China to expand its political, economic and, increasingly, military influence in Africa. Not only has China become Gabon's primary trading partner, the two countries also upgraded their relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership when their foreign ministers met in Beijing last October.¹ Questions remain about whether China will develop naval bases or station troops in Gabon under Gabon's new leadership, which came to power two months before the foreign ministers' landmark meeting.

On 13 February, the Taiwanese newspaper *Shijie Ribao*, published the excerpted article on Beijing's efforts

“[Transitional President of Gabon] Nguema’s regime may not be transparent and may allow China to establish a permanent [naval] presence in Gabon.”

to station troops in Gabon under the country's former president, Ali Bongo. Had President Bongo not been overthrown by his own presidential guard in August 2023, China may have already been on the path to meeting that goal.² Gabon could, therefore, have become the first country to provide China access to sought-after Atlantic Ocean naval bases.³

The article also claims that although President Bongo's successor, General Brice Oligui Nguema, states he will not allow any Chinese bases in Gabon, he may eventually prove unable or unwilling to resist Chinese pressure. Gabon is a uniquely oil-rich country, which, in addition to its strategic location, could make it more attractive for China to assert its influence beyond its geopolitical position.

China has already built base and port infrastructure in East Africa, such as its naval base in Djibouti. However, stationing troops in West Africa has remained elusive. Should a Chinese naval base be built in Gabon, it would represent a victory for China's global Belt and Road Initiative.⁴

Source: “美中非洲角力 传北京拟于加蓬驻军未果 (U.S.-China rivalry over Africa: Beijing plans to station troops in Gabon but fails),” *worldjournal.com* (Largest Chinese-language newspaper in the U.S, which is moderately critical of the Chinese Communist Party), 13 February 2024. <https://www.worldjournal.com/wj/story/121480/7767824?zh-cn>

Bongo, the former president of Gabon, revealed he promised Beijing to station its troops [in Gabon], but Bongo was later overthrown by his own presidential guard.

According to the Chinese government, Chinese companies have constructed around 100 commercial ports in Africa since 2000, from Mauritania on the western end of Africa to Kenya on the Indian Ocean coast. But there is currently only one African port that has been built as a permanent base that can

dock Chinese ships and troops. This was built by the People’s Liberation Army in Djibouti seven years ago. Aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines can dock at this Chinese base.

Even though Nguema states that he understands the U.S.’s concerns, senior U.S. officials also expressed concerns that Nguema’s regime may not be transparent and may allow China to establish a permanent presence in Gabon.

Notes:

- 1 Fmprc.gov.cn, “Wang Yi Meets with Gabonese Foreign Minister Hermann Immongault,” October 7, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202307/t20230725_11117519.html#:~:text=In%20April%20this%20year%2C%20President,the%20development%20of%20bilateral%20relations.
- 2 The overthrow of Ali Bongo on 30 August 2023 was related to the overthrow only five weeks earlier of Niger’s president Mohamed Bazoum by his own military entourage. Ali Bongo had been officially declared the winner of Gabon’s presidential election for his third term in office. However, a group of military officers, who were influenced by the events in Niger and were displeased with Ali Bongo’s attempt to continue his tenure as Gabon’s leader, announced his removal from office, arrested him, and suspended the constitution. Besides Niger, Guinea (September 2021), Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Burkina Faso (January 2022) had also underwent coups before Gabon’s, which made attempting a coup in Gabon more palatable in the region, and especially among other post-coup countries. See “Question Time: Situation in west and central Africa in the light of the recent coups d’état,” European Parliament, Plenary—September 2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751465/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)751465_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751465/EPRS_ATA(2023)751465_EN.pdf)
- 3 On Beijing’s plans to establish a naval base in Gabon, see North Africa Post, “Ousted Ali Bongo nodded to establishment of Chinese military base despite concerns of France, U.S.A.,” September 8, 2023, <https://northafricapost.com/71098-ousted-ali-bongo-nodded-to-establishment-of-chinese-military-base-despite-concerns-of-france-u-s-a.html>
- 4 For more information on the BRI’s previous expansion, see Les Grau, “China Belt and Road Initiative Test on Trans-Eurasian Rail,” *OE Watch*, September 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/360893>

Details Emerge on the Russian Medical System in Ukraine

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

Since the beginning of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, there has been little, if any, information released from Russian sources about the workings of the Russian military medical system in general, and Russian casualty rates in particular.¹ The accompanying excerpted article from the official medical journal of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), *Voyenno-Meditsinskiy Zhurnal*, is the first publicly released information about the inner workings of the Russian military medical system during the special military operation. Although this detailed 17-page account does not mention specific casualty numbers, some idea of the magnitude of Russian casualties can be postulated by the information it provides about the increases in various types of Rus-

sian military medical facilities, including long-term rehabilitation, palliative, and prosthetic care. The article also lays out the four stages of Russian military medical treatment consisting of forward treatment, treatment at Military District facilities, treatment at centralized MoD military medical facilities, and rehabilitation centers.

Unsurprisingly, there is considerable effort in placing medical treatment as close to the line of contact as possible to increase positive outcomes. This is being accomplished not only by placing medical units further forward, but also by placing various medical capabilities/personnel at lower echelons than

“The high professionalism of military doctors allowed them to reduce disabilities of military personnel, but most importantly, to reduce their hospital mortality rates, the lowest in history military medicine.”

have historically occurred. In sum, the article does not provide Russian casualty figures but does support the premise that Russia has suffered large numbers of casualties in the operation and is adapting in response. The article highlights what the U.S. military medical community may expect if the U.S. engages in Large Scale Combat Operations on the modern battlefield.

A Russian medic applying first aid. While Russia has released very little information about its casualty rate, a newly-released report offers some initial insights.

Source: https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12403874@egNews; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.



Source: D.V. Trishkin, “Итоги деятельности медицинской службы Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации в 2023 году и задачи на 2024 год (Results of the medical service activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in 2023 and goals for 2024.),” *Voyenno-Meditsinskiy Zhurnal* (official medical journal of the Russian Ministry of Defense) January 2024. <https://voenmed.ric.mil.ru/upload/site229/3JSanq38G6.pdf>

The results of an analysis of the medical service activities of the Armed Forces in 2023 in its main areas are presented. Particular attention is paid to the organization of medical care and treatment of the wounded during a special military operation. The multi-level system of staged medical care has proven its effectiveness. The following results were achieved: the time for providing first aid was reduced by 3 times (to 10 minutes), providing medical care to a serviceman from the moment of injury – by 2 times (to 1 hour); 98% of military personnel were discharged upon recovery after treatment for wounds and injuries; mortality at the stages of

medical care was 0.43%, disability – 2.1%. First aid training for personnel resulted in a potentially preventable mortality rate of 5.2%. The main task facing the medical service in 2024 will be the timely and high-quality provision of medical care to the wounded and sick when performing tasks in a special military operation...

The main efforts of military medicine were aimed at organizing medical support for the special military operation. The enemy’s use of modern types of weapons and ammunition during military operations determined the prevalence of combined, combined lesions and shrapnel wounds. Taking into account these factors, it was formed a medical care system in which there are 4 main stages for the provision of medical care and treatment to special military operation participants:

— the stage of providing qualified medical care, which is represented by mobile medical units;

— the stage of providing specialized medical care, consisting of stationary military hospitals of military district subordination;

— the stage of providing high-tech medical care, at central military medical facilities;

— the stage of medical rehabilitation at rehabilitation centers and military sanatoriums...

One of the most important aspects in the system medical treatment and evacuation support is the stage of providing qualified medical teams and medical battalions directly in area of the special military operation ...medical units are put as close as possible to the line of contact. At the same time, the medical detachments and battalions have been strengthened with surgeons and traumatologists from central hospitals that are capable of performing surgical procedures that were previously not typically conducted at this stage...

The next stage of treatment involves the wounded being treated at military district hospitals...The tactics of “damage control” [«контроля повреждений»] are widely used to providing specialized medical care with the goal of minimizing the volume of surgical interventions in the seriously wounded and performing definitive surgical treatment after stabilization of their condition.

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In central hospitals, the basis for the provision of high-tech medical assistance is based on a multidisciplinary approach to the treatment of patients by specialists with different specialties within one military hospital. Multidisciplinary teams include resuscitators, vascular surgeons, traumatologists, general surgeons and extracorporeal detoxification specialists....

[T]he medical system evacuation, includes mass casualty aviation evacuation to district and central military hospitals, and medical evacuation by ambulance, sea, and rail transport...

[T]he quality of medical care provided remains sufficiently high level. The high professionalism of military doctors allowed them to reduce disabilities of military personnel, but most importantly, to reduce their hospital mortality rates, the lowest in history military medicine.

At the same time, in order to prevent a decline in the quality of medical care, the leadership of the medical service of the RF Armed Forces has taken a number of measures aimed at increasing the number of military and hospital medical specialists and units to prevent staffing and medical unit shortages in the special military operation, including:

Notes:

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

— forming separate medical battalions, medical companies and medical posts for formations [объединение], large units [соединение], and units [часть];

— 4 additional medical billets in the staffs of the combined arms armies;

— Branch Clinic No. 4 was added to the 1602nd Military Clinical Hospital (Lugansk) with 300 beds;

— construction of military hospitals is underway in Ryazan, Belgorod, Bryansk, Makhachkala, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Mirny, Vladikavkaz, Kursk, Sevastopol, new 100-bed medical buildings are in Samara, Pskov, Krasnoznamensk, Kostroma, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Ivanovo;

— major and ongoing repairs of military hospital facilities are underway in Rostov-on-the-Don, Chita, Polyarny, Volgograd, Novosibirsk, Stavropol, Khabarovsk, Selyatino;

— a medical detachment (reserve) has been formed and successfully performs its tasks with citizen volunteers that have medical training (currently a decision is being made to form a second detachment from among the volunteers).

The Race to Incorporate Artificial Intelligence Into Attack Drones in Ukraine



Russian military prepares Orlan-10 drones for launch during Russia's Vostok-2018 Maneuvers.

Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8d/Vostok2018-11.jpg>; Attribution: CC BY 4.0

Paris Gordon
OE Watch Commentary

The Russian Defense Ministry has announced that it will incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) into its attack drones to increase their accuracy and precision. According to the excerpted article published by the government news agency RIA News, Russia conducted around 700 successful drone attacks on Ukrainian targets in Avdiivka during the first half of February 2024. The article states that Russia plans to introduce AI to further refine its attack drones as part of a wave of military modernization incorporating more advanced technology and electronics into military systems. The aim is to allow AI to control the drones, increasing the battlefield efficacy of Russia's drone complex.

However, it is important to note that Ukraine is also working to incorporate AI

capability in its attack drones. According to the second excerpted article from private Ukrainian media outlet Focus Media, Ukraine's effort to implement AI on the battlefield has support from the West as well as internally from Ukrainian technology developers. In addition to testing AI-capable drones from the United Kingdom, the Ukrainian Minister for Technology Development reports having more than 20 different teams developing similar technologies. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry believes that AI-capable attack drones could overwhelm Russian positions, while Russia believes the same to be true in reverse. Thus far, Ukraine has developed two AI-capable drones approved for battlefield use, the Saker Scout¹ and SkyKnight2.² While neither Russia nor Ukraine have fully implemented AI into their drone fleets, they are racing against each other to gain this

advantage. Should Russia succeed in its goal of increased tactical efficacy in attack drones, it may be able to set a pace of sky-borne destruction that cannot be countered by the Ukrainian and Western technologies currently being employed in the war effort.³ AI integrated into attack drones will provide Russia with a technological advantage that is unmatched by regional forces.

“The Russian Army will receive weaponized drones, operated with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) - their delivery to the troops in the Special Military Operation (SMO) zone is already planned.”

Source: “Армию России вооружают беспилотниками с искусственным интеллектом (The Russian Army will be armed with drones with artificial intelligence),” *RIA News* (one of the largest Russian government news agencies), 24 February 2024. <https://crimea.ria.ru/20240224/armiyu-rossii-vooruzhayut-bespilotnikami-s-iskusstvennym-intellektom-1135183675.html>

The Russian Army will receive weaponized drones, operated with the help of artificial intelligence (AI) - their delivery to the troops in the Special Military Operation (SMO) zone is already planned. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced this during an inspection visit to the Russian central grouping of troops. His words are quoted by the Ministry of Defense. “We have come to this point. This is becoming a pretty serious weapon.” - said the minister, noting that the deliveries of the latest unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Russian troops will increase the effectiveness of their application.”

... in the last two weeks of February attack drones have destroyed upwards of 700 different enemy targets

*in Avdiivka, including armored vehicles, artillery systems, radar facilities, and enemy manpower. In particular, during the liberation of Avdiivka the reconnaissance UAV complex, **Orlan-30**, proved itself well...*

Based upon the results of the report, Shoigu set the task to further strengthen the Russian central grouping of troops via electronic warfare, chiefly at the tactical level.

A few days prior, the head of the Russian government Mikhail Mishustin gave instructions to maximize the process of modernizing combat systems used as a part of the SMO and to expand their combat capabilities.

Source: Alexander Zalata, “Украина вооружается дронами с ИИ: чем лучше обычных и когда массово появятся на фронте (Ukraine is arming itself with AI drones: better than the usual and when will they appear en masse on the front),” *Focus Media* (a privately-owned Ukrainian media company), 22 February 2024. <https://focus.ua/digital/628357-ukraina-vooruzhaetsya-dronami-s-ii-chem-luchshe-obychnyh-i-kogda-massovo-poyavyatsya-na-fronte>

More than 20 teams are already working on artificial intelligence (in drones) and many of them are already in the final stages, but before launching it must be ensured that the UAVs don't attack everyone.

*In his article, published on the site *Ukrainian Truth*, the Minister for Technology Development Mikhail Fedorov, wrote that currently around 20 companies are working on developing AI for implementation in UAVs, in particular, the computer vision technologies (CV) for additional guidance. As the official explained, they will allow UAVs to analyze video streams in real-time, to find and identify objects, such*

as Russian vehicles, manpower, and artillery.

At the beginning of autumn, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry stated that one of these drones, the Saker Scout, had been approved for use in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Specialists assure that thanks to the newest optical system this drone can independently recognize and record the coordinates of the enemy's equipment... Later the Defense Ministry allowed yet another Ukrainian-made UAV to be used in the armed forces that is equipped with artificial intelligence and an autonomous flight system - the SkyKnight2.

“And this will already be a decisive advantage,

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because then we can send a swarm of drones either on their own or with a queen, and they will perform the function of an assault unit. There are many problems,

but everyone is moving in that direction,” said Alexey Teplukhin.

Notes:

- 1 For further information on the AI-enabled Saker Scout drone, from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense’s *Telegram*, 4 September 2023. https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/7951?single
- 2 For further information on the AI-enabled SkyKnight2 drone, from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense’s *Telegram*, 19 August 2023. https://t.me/ministry_of_defense_ua/7884
- 3 Kristen Thompson, “How the Drone War In Ukraine Is Transforming Conflict,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 16 January 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-drone-war-ukraine-transforming-conflict>

Russia Bids Farewell to the Northern Military District

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

The Russian Northern Military District is deactivated and the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts are back—albeit with changes to reflect Russia’s current security situation. According to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, the restructuring of the Russian Northern Military District to the Leningrad and Moscow Military Districts comes in response to Finland and Sweden joining NATO.¹ With the move, the Northern Fleet, headquartered in Murmansk, is now “officially absorbed into a renewed Leningrad Military District.” St. Petersburg, Russia is again the command center of the ex-

“Given NATO’s desire to build up military potential near the Russian borders, as well as to expand the North Atlantic Alliance at the expense of Finland and Sweden, retaliatory measures are required to create an appropriate grouping of troops in Northwest Russia.”

tended Leningrad Military District.² According to a defense expert quoted in the article, “as seen by Russia, it is necessary to improve the ability to fight full-scale land operations along the Finnish border and in the Baltic theatre of military operations.” The Northern Fleet will be subordinate to the Moscow Military District. These recent changes are more than just a

re-ordering, as Russia continues its military reform and restructuring to give Russia an advantage in Ukraine and strengthen its position vis-a-vis a much longer frontier with NATO given the inclusion of Sweden and Finland.

Source: Thomas Nilsen “Putin signs northwestern regions into Leningrad military district,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 26 February 2024. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2024/02/putins-signs-northwestern-regions-leningrad-military-district>

Vladimir Putin on Monday signed a decree reestablishing the Soviet-era Moscow and Leningrad military districts which means an end to the Northern Fleet as a military district.

With the move, the Northern Fleet is now officially absorbed into a renewed Leningrad Military District. The Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command was given the status of a military district on 1 January 2021, a move seen to mirror the importance of Russia’s Arctic regions. In geographical size, the Northern Fleet was until today the third largest of Russia’s five military districts. At the same time, what was the Western Military District is now split into the new

Moscow and Leningrad districts.

The Leningrad Military District includes the Republic of Karelia, the Komi Republic, and the oblasts of Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Novgorod and Pskov, as well as the Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the City of St. Petersburg.

Dictator Putin’s decree was signed the same day as the Hungarian Parliament voted to ratify Sweden as NATO’s 32nd member state.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu last December said “retaliatory measures are required” as both Finland
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and Sweden join NATO.

“Given NATO’s desire to build up military potential near the Russian borders, as well as to expand the North Atlantic Alliance at the expense of Finland and Sweden, retaliatory measures are required to create an appropriate grouping of troops in Northwest Russia,” Shoigu said.

Katarzyna Zysk, a professor with the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS), agrees that the ongoing restructuring is linked to the fact that Russia has got a much longer land-border with NATO.

“The dividing of the Western Military District into the Moscow Military District and Leningrad Military District, as well as possibly subordinate the Northern

Fleet to the latter, is a response to NATO enlargement in Northern Europe and expected further changes in allied defense posture,” Zysk previously said to the Barents Observer. She explains that seen with Russian eyes, it is necessary to improve the ability to fight full-scale land operations along the Finnish border and in the Baltic theatre of military operations.

In addition to the new Leningrad- and Moscow military districts, Putin’s decree also adds the illegally occupied Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhye and Kherson as part of the Southern Military District. The changes in Russia’s military districts take effect from March 1, Putin wrote in his decree.

Notes:

- 1 For an additional European perspective on the restructuring of its military districts, see: “Russia Restructures Military Districts Amid Warnings of NATO War,” *Euronews*. 27 February 2024. <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/27/russia-restructures-military-districts-amid-warnings-of-nato-war>
- 2 After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the city of Leningrad was renamed St. Petersburg, but the regional oblast designation remained Leningrad.

Russia Invoking Heroic Military Heritage To Frame Current War

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Russia continues to use memories of past battles and heroic sacrifice to fuel domestic support for its war in Ukraine. According to the excerpted article published by Russian news outlet RTVI, a detachment of Russian soldiers recently conducted a “daring raid” across the Dnieper River, attacking Ukrainian troops near Kherson before retreating across the Dnieper River. Although this story is barely newsworthy considering the larger and more significant battles for Mariupol, Bakhmut, and Avdeevka, it illustrates Moscow’s determination to attach Russia’s rich and heroic military history to the current conflict in Ukraine. Sources quoted in the article claim, “up to 30 [Ukrainian] personnel lost,” and that Russian troops returned “without irreparable losses.” However, the article compares the raid to the strategic seizing of Kherson from the Germans in March 1944 by General Margelov and the 49th Guards Rifle Division. The 49th was awarded the title “Kherson” an honorific denoting the unit’s role in liberating the city from the Germans, while Margelov was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Margolev was later instrumental in developing Soviet paratroop forces and became known as the father of Russian airborne forces.¹ The reference to Margelov in the article was to connect Russian actions on today’s Ukrainian battlefields with past Russian battlefield heroics.



“This is how our valiant warriors reminded the invaders that victory will be ours, just like 80 years ago.”

This particular historical comparison augments the recent renaming of the Northern Military District to be the Leningrad Military District, and the renaming of Arctic icebreakers to honor Lenin and Stalin.² This is part of a broader Russian effort to use its military history, and Russia’s ongoing heroic fight for survival, to strengthen Putin’s position on Ukraine domestically.³ It is not for nothing that Russia refers to the Second World War as The Great Patriotic War. Indeed, Russian invocation honoring the past appears to be an integral part

▲ The city cemetery of Kherson contains a military plot with 122 Soviet graves from the Second World War. The soldiers buried here, belonging to the 49th Guards Rifle Division and the 295th Infantry Division, fell while liberating the city in 1944.

Source: *TracesofWar.com*, <https://www.tracesofwar.com/sights/9948/Soviet-War-Graves-Kherson-City-Cemetery.htm>; Attribution: CC BY SA

of Moscow’s IO campaign surrounding its special military operation in Ukraine. Using Margolev as an example illustrates Russia’s position that this land has been fought for and liberated once before and belongs to Russia.

Source: “Сальдо рассказал о «дерзком рейде» на подконтрольный ВСУ правый берег Днепра (Saldo spoke about the “daring raid” on the right bank of the Dnieper controlled by the Ukrainian Armed Forces),” *RTVI* (Russian news service), 13 March 2024. https://rtvi.com/news/saldo-rasskazal-o-derzkom-rejde-na-podkontrolnyj-vsu-pravyj-bereg-dnepra/?utm_source=24smi&utm_medium=referral&utm_term=10949&utm_content=6021008&utm_campaign=14335&utm_referrer=24smi.info

On the night of March 13, an assault group of employees from the Dnepr group of troops conducted a “daring raid” on the right bank of the Dnieper River, said the governor of the Kherson region, Vladimir Saldo. According to him, the Armed Forces of Ukraine suffered losses.

“Last night, a joint assault group of fighters from the Dnepr group of troops carried out a daring raid on the right bank of the river,” Saldo wrote in his Telegram channel.

According to the governor, marines, paratroopers and volunteers disembarked from watercraft at the base of the Antonovsky Bridge, “the enemy did not have time to react in time.” The military destroyed several positions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces,

“including a UAV control center and an electronic warfare station, observation, communications and temporary concentration of manpower points,” Saldo wrote.

He added that the Russian military after this “managed to retreat to the left bank without irreparable losses,” and the Ukrainian side lost up to 30 military personnel.

Saldo emphasized that “the landing force landed at the same place where in 1944 Margelov’s soldiers captured the first bridgehead on the right bank of the Dnieper, which became the key to breaking the fascist defense.” “This is how our valiant warriors reminded the invaders that victory will be ours, just like 80 years ago,” the governor is confident.

Notes:

- 1 See: “Troops of Uncle Vasya. Why General Margelov is called the father of Airborne,” *Rusreality*, 27 Dec 2018. <https://rusreality.com/2018/12/27/troops-of-uncle-vasya-why-general-margelov-called-the-father-of-airborne/> and also Vasily Margelov, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasily_Margelov
- 2 See Les Grau, “Russia Changes Arctic Icebreaker Names To Honor History,” *OE Watch*, 02-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/russia-changes-arctic-icebreaker-names-to-honor-history/>
- 3 Multiple western organizations track Russian use of its history to maintain domestic popular support. A RUSI publication noted that “Kremlin narratives about the Soviet Union’s role in the Second World War are uncritical, mythologised by the authorities. They have become an identifying feature of Russia’s foreign and domestic policy, based mostly around the Soviet Union’s heavy losses and military greatness.” See: Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), 27 July 2022. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-russias-narratives-ukraine-reflect-its-existential-crisis>

Russia Celebrates 10th Anniversary of Crimean Annexation

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

On 18 March, Russians celebrated the tenth anniversary of their “reunification” with Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. One of the Kremlin’s major priorities for the peninsula was the construction of a \$2.5 billion land bridge, known as the Kerch Bridge, to link the annexed region with the Russia-controlled provinces of eastern Ukraine. At 19 kilometers (11.8 miles), the bridge is Europe’s longest. The excerpted feature article in pro-Kremlin newspaper *Kommersant*, celebrated Russia’s modernization of the peninsula, including a gleaming new \$350 million international airport at Simferopol shaped like a sea wave; the extension of a new water pipeline; a large mosque for Crimea’s Tatars; and refurbished statues to commemorate what Russians call the “Crimean Spring.” The article notes that the Kerch Bridge has come

under attack by Ukraine at least twice during the special military operation. As an insurance policy—announced at a rally on Red Square to honor President Vladimir Putin’s March presidential victory and the 10th anniversary of the annexation of Crimea—Russia will restore a railway linking Rostov-on-Don with Donetsk and Mariupol, eventually reaching Sevastopol, according to the excerpted article in nationalist online newspaper *Lenta.ru*. The announced railway connection could suggest that the Russian authorities are concerned about the vulnerability of the Kerch Bridge to attack. Some Western analysts have called on Ukraine’s military to target it with advanced missiles¹ The railway extension project could simply be meant to symbolize the connection of mainland Russia with its annexed peninsula. Either way, the Ukrainian military will have an additional target

“[The railway] will be another, alternative road instead of the Crimean Bridge,” said President Vladimir Putin.

as it seeks to take back Crimea and weaken Russia’s grip on the peninsula.

A view of the Crimean (Kerch) Bridge, linking Crimea to Russia.

Source: Rosavtodor.ru [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Crimean_Bridge#/media/File:Крымский_мост_13_сентября_2019_года_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Crimean_Bridge#/media/File:Крымский_мост_13_сентября_2019_года_(1).jpg); Attribution: CC By 4.0



Source: “Крым десятилетней выдержки: Как обжился полуостров в составе России, (Crimea after 10 Years of Improvements: How the Peninsula has Taken Shape within Russia),” *Kommersant.ru* (center-right Kremlin newspaper), 17 March 2024. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6535646>

After the “Crimean Spring” the peninsula was in a land blockade, so the construction of a transport corridor through the Kerch Strait was declared a priority. On March 19, 2014, President Vladimir Putin instructed to connect new entities with the “big land” by rail and roads. The construction of the bridge

worth 228 billion rubles began in February 2016 and lasted a little more than two years. The 19 km long structure was the longest in Europe. After the start of the special operation, the crossing was twice attacked by Ukraine.

Source: “Путин анонсировал появление альтернативы Крымскому мосту” (Putin announced the emergence of an alternative to the Crimean Bridge), *Lenta.ru* (right-wing nationalist online newspaper), 18 March 2024. <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/03/18/putin-anonsiroval-poyavlenie-alternativy-krymskomu-mostu/>

The restored railway from Rostov-on-Don to Donetsk, Mariupol and Berdyansk will be an alternative to the Crimean Bridge. Its appearance was announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin at a rally-concert in honor of the tenth anniversary of the reunification of Crimea with Russia, his words are quoted by the TASS agency.

The Head of State noted that the country will continue to restore the railway, which goes from the Rostov region through Donbass and Novorossiya. The President promised that the railway trains would soon go to Sevastopol. “And it will be another,

alternative road instead of the Crimean Bridge,” he added. Putin also stressed that Russia and Crimea will go together and further hand in hand. He pointed out that this will be proved not in words, but in deeds, which will only make the country and the peninsula stronger.

In November, Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin reported that the new railway from the Rostov region to Crimea, which will become an alternative to the route along the Crimean Bridge, is at the design stage.

Notes:

- 1 Ben Hodges, Led Klosky, Robert Person, Eric Williamson, “Putin’s Weak Link to Crimea: Kyiv Should Target the Kerch Bridge—but Needs Missiles to Take It Out,” *Foreign Affairs*, 5 December 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/putins-weak-link-crimea>

Iran Navy Upgrades Bell-212 Helicopters

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

Iran's Navy has announced that it will equip its **Bell-212** helicopters with both SONAR and air to ground missiles, copies of the U.S. made Hellfire missiles. While it appears to exaggerate its mastery of SONAR, its reverse engineering of the Hellfire appears real.

As the Iranian Navy expands its footprint, it relies increasingly on helicopters to project power.¹ The excerpted article from the news portal *Khabar Online*, describes a Defense Ministry exhibition of new products held at the Iran Helicopter Support and Renovation Company. Headlining the exhibit was an upgraded Bell-212 helicopter, modified to conduct anti-submarine operations and to carry Ghaem-114 missiles, an Iranian copy of the U.S.-made AGM-114 Hellfire air-to-ground missile.

SONAR is important to Iran. Even though the Persian Gulf is both narrow and shallow with an average depth of 100 feet and a maximum depth of just 295 feet, Iranian defense officials worry that enemy submarines can approach their shores and ships

“This new missile was nicknamed the Iranian Hellfire.”

without detection. Should war erupt between Israel and Iran, for example, submarine-launched missiles would be a major component of any Israeli attack on Iran. Detecting submarines and developing anti-submarine warfare is increasingly important to the Iranian Navy as it operates farther from its shores. The distance between the Iranian naval base at Bandar Abbas and the Bab el-Mandeb, a strategic waterway between Yemen and Djibouti where Iran currently operates, for example, is nearly 1,700 nautical miles. This is outside the defensive layers of speedboats and shore-based missiles the Iranian Navy rely upon closer to its shores. It is unclear, however, if the Iranian announcement of its helicopter-borne SONAR system is real. While Iranian press photos showing the helicopter at the Tehran exhibit are new, photographs

accompanying Iranian media coverage depicting a Bell-212 deploying SONAR at sea are two years old and depict a U.S. Navy helicopter. As such, Iranian Navy helicopter-equipped SONAR is more likely in development.

The Ghaem-114 missile likely represents a truer capability, albeit one that is not new. In July 2021, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Forces unveiled a helicopter-launched Ghaem-114 Hellfire copy that it billed as an anti-tank missile with a range of six miles. In April 2023, the regular Iranian Army unveiled the “Shafagh” missile that it also likened to the U.S. manufactured Hellfire.² The current announcement likely reflects the standardization of the Ghaem-114 across Iranian services. Iran also claims that its Ghaem-114 has both thermal and laser guidance with a 50-kilogram warhead.



Iran Helicopter Support and Renovation Company display of upgraded Bell-212, in Tehran in March 2024. Iran's Navy has announced that it will equip its Bell-212 helicopters with both SONAR and knockoffs of Hellfire missiles.

Source: <https://media.khabaronline.ir/d/2024/03/04/4/6000265.jpg?ts=1709559703000>; Attribution: KhabarOnline.ir

Iranian production of a Hellfire knock-off could have substantive tactical ramifications across the region. While Hamas and the Houthis do not have helicopters, the Iranian military could use lifting or non-enforcement of sanctions to provide these groups helicopters that could fire Ghaem-114s. The Houthis could equip drones with Ghaem-114s, while

both Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah, both of which operate helicopters, could immediately introduce the Ghaem-114 to the Israeli frontier and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Source: “مئاق كشموم و رانوس هب شت را درگلاب نیا زی هجت” (Equipping this [Bell-212] Helicopter with Sonar and Ghaem-114 missiles),” *KhabarOnline.ir* (general news website affiliated with reformist political factions), 4 March 2024. <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1880466>

Iran Helicopter Support and Renovation Company hosted an exhibition of Iran Ministry of Defense achievement. During this exhibition, the Ministry of Defense displayed some achievements in helicopters, including upgrading Iranian Navy [Bell-] 212 helicopters.

One of these achievements was upgrading the Iranian Navy’s [Bell-] 212 helicopters to equip them with sonar to detect submarines and deal with surface vessels.... Sonar technology enables the identification of ships and submarines through the emission of underwater soundwaves and determines their direction and distance. Submarines, surface ships, helicopters and maritime and anti-submarine patrol aircraft use sonar to discover their targets underwater.

Iran has SH-3 specialized anti-submarine helicopters in its air fleet that it purchased before the [1979 Islamic] Revolution and they can both detect all

types of submarines and launch Mark 46 torpedoes. In addition, the [Bell-] 212 helicopters have been equipped with Ghaem-114 missiles to neutralize surface vessels and an electro-optical system to detect and targets vessels night and day....

In January 2020, during the delivery of overhauled helicopters to the armed forces, the Aerospace Force of the Army of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps displayed [Bell-] 214 helicopters with Ghaem-114 missiles, similar to Hellfires. Although no detailed information about this missile was published, this new missile was nicknamed the Iranian Hellfire and many observers saw the development of this missile in the context of the design of new air-to-ground missiles....

Equipping Navy helicopters with Ghaem-114 missiles increases the ability of this force to support amphibious operations seeking to capture the enemy coast and to counter small and fast enemy vessels or to deal with piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

Notes:

- 1 Iran has no aircraft carriers, but it designs its frigates to accommodate helicopters as a means both to project power onto land from sea and to defend Iranian ships. For discussion of upgrading and rehabilitating Iranian helicopters, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: Reconstruction and Overhaul of Helicopters,” *OE Watch*, 03 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/382672>
- 2 For discussion of Shafagh missile unveiling see: Michael Rubin, “Iran Installs New Precision Missiles On Army Helicopters,” *OE Watch*, 05 2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/iran-installs-new-precision-missiles-on-army-helicopters/Notes>

Iranian Self-Sufficiency in Aircraft Spare Parts May Benefit Sanctioned States

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

Iran’s air transportation industry is under stress due to international sanctions.¹ In response to the sanctions, the *Mehr News Agency* reports that Iran’s Ministry of Defense has developed the industrial and technical capacity to develop spare aircraft parts and conduct maintenance on critical systems like aircraft engines.² While this follows a known pattern of Iranian claims to immunize themselves from international sanctions, the current iteration differs because Iranian officials openly say they will use their new capacity to help other countries subject to international sanctions.

The willingness to help Russia or other countries evade sanctions, for

example, by shipping drones to Russia, signals both a sense of impunity among Iranian officials but could also reflect growing substance to Iran’s alliances with other states that find themselves international pariahs. For Iran to help Russia service its leased Boeing or Airbus aircraft fleshes out bilateral relations beyond simply a one-way drone trade.

“Some countries that were sanctioned... are coming to Iran and entrusting their planes to Iranian experts.”

Iran’s stated willingness to bypass sanctions to maintain or potentially upgrade Russian aircraft can have

broad ramifications on the operational environment, not only in the Middle East but elsewhere around the world. First, Iranian efforts to help subjected states bypass sanctions blunt a major tool of international diplomacy meant to deter rogue or aggressive behavior. Second, supplying sanctioned states much-needed aviation hardware would be a boon to Iranian defense industries both financially and by allowing them greater opportunities to reverse engineer platforms such as the Sukhoi-35S.³ Finally, money earned by Revolutionary Guard-run factories could also help support or subsidize Revolutionary Guard or proxy activities across the region.



Inspecting Airbus jet engines, April 2022.

Source: <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2024/03/08/3/4894679.jpg?ts=1709893408775>; Attribution: Mehr News Agency

Source: “ی‌ربرف‌اس‌م‌ی‌ا‌ه‌م‌پ‌ا‌و‌ه‌ت‌ا‌ع‌ط‌ق‌ت‌خ‌اس‌ر‌د‌ن‌اری‌ی‌ی‌ا‌ف‌ک‌د‌و‌خ” (Iran’s self-sufficiency in the manufacture of passenger plane parts), *Mehr News Agency* (semi-official news agency owned by Iranian government’s Islamic Development Organization), 9 March 2024. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6049371>

In an interview with Mehr, Javad Mashayekh, with reference to Iran’s self-sufficiency in the field of manufacturing passenger aircraft parts that researchers and specialists in knowledge-based companies have achieved, stated, “In the field of commercial and passenger planes, Iran was once dependent on procurement of aircraft parts, even for maintenance but because of sanctions,

we were unable to procure parts from other international suppliers. The deputy of the scientific department of knowledge-based economy development added, “This is what happened after the imposition of sanctions: Some of Iran’s knowledge-based companies used their power to develop car parts, and repair and maintenance of aircraft engines locally.” Mashayekh also said that the most complex part of an aircraft is

its engine and, he noted, maintenance requires a high degree of technical knowledge. We promise that in these fields, our country has achieved self-sufficiency so we do not need to send out planes to foreign countries for almost any kind of repair or to have maintenance done there.

He continued, “In fact, we are currently witnessing that some countries that were sanctioned for various reasons and are not able to supply parts and get maintenance services are coming to Iran and entrusting their planes to Iranian experts.... For example, Russia has suffered many sanctions in the aviation sector due to the Ukraine crisis, and for this reason, it has concluded good contracts for maintenance services with Iranian knowledge-based companies.”

Notes:

- 1 In 2016 Iran sought to purchase nearly 200 passenger jets split between Boeing and Airbus. At the time, the Iranian government justified the deals as an air safety matter. However, ambitions for a new fleet faltered as seating capacity of the new jets outstripped Iranian passenger traffic projections. Critics claimed the proposed deals were meant to provide spare parts to keep Iran’s military aircraft aloft. While Boeing and Airbus planes do not contain parts suitable for jet fighters, passenger jets and military cargo planes can share many parts. Boeing ultimately cancelled its deal, while Airbus delivered only four planes.
- 2 For discussion of Iranian turbojet engine development, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: New Heavy Engines on the Drawing Board,” *OE Watch*, November 2016. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/195245/download>
- 3 For discussion of the Iranian desire for Sukhoi-35s, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran Wants Sukhoi-35 Fighters From Russia,” *OE Watch*, 10-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/iran-wants-sukhoi-35-fighters-from-russia/>

Iranian Navy Conducts Ballistic Missile Launches From Warship

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

Iran has successfully test-fired two unidentified long-range ballistic missiles with a range of 1,700 kilometers (1,056 miles) from the *Shahid Mahdavi*, a converted cargo ship operating in the Gulf of Oman. According to the excerpted article published by the news outlet *Mehr News Agency*, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami commented on the first-time launches with a warning: “Nowhere is safe for powers who seek to threaten our security.” The *Shahid Mahdavi* functions as a multipurpose aircraft carrier capable of carrying an array of military hardware, including air defense systems, drones, radars, and missiles.¹ The ballistic missiles

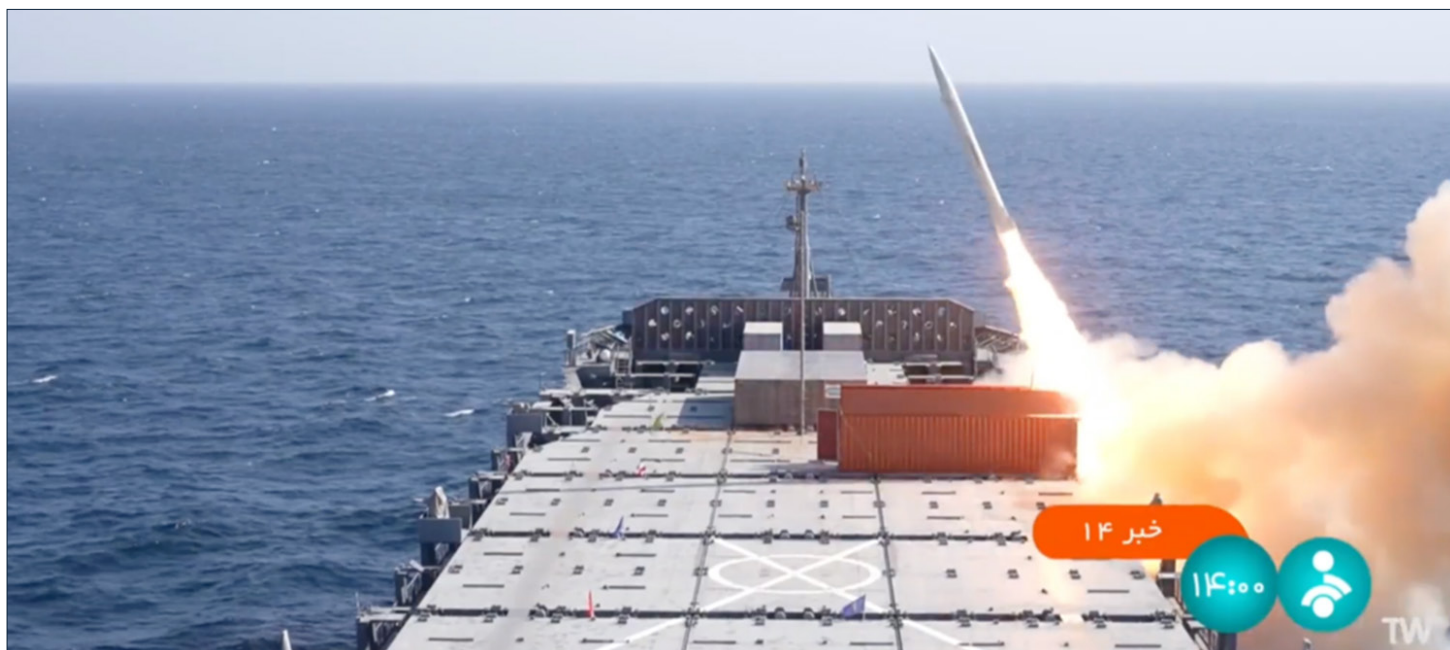
“Nowhere is safe for powers who seek to threaten our security.”

reportedly hit targets in the Kavir Desert in central Iran.

Iran has the most extensive and diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East and North Africa. It is also the only country to possess a 2,000-kilometer range missile without a nuclear weapon capability.² Iranian officials maintain that Tehran’s decision to acquire ballistic missiles was prompted by the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) in order to deter future missile attacks by enemy countries.³ Calling the launch a “success,” Salami was quoted in the first excerpted article as saying that “the

range of influence of [Iran’s] sea power has increased to any desired point.”⁴ The second excerpted article from the Iranian media source *Khabar Online* reports that Salami highlighted that the IRGC is “determined to powerfully defend national security, national interests, and the achievements” of Iran.

As tensions in the region remain elevated as part of the Gaza war, and as Iran-backed Houthi rebels continue to attack ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, this new development underscores what happens when Tehran is unchecked by the international community.



“The moment the Dezful ballistic missile is fired from the Shahid Mahdavi warship in the form of a launch container,” *Telegram* video screenshot, 13 February 2024.

Source: <https://t.me/SEPAHCYBER/83945>; Attribution: IRGC Cyber Telegram Channel

Source: “ہاپس یگنجان وان زا دربرود کیست سلاب کشوم کیلش” (Launch of long-range ballistic missile from IRGC warship), *Mehr News Agency* (semi-official news agency owned by Iranian government’s Islamic Development Organization), 12 February 2024. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6022735>

Referring to the strength of the IRGC Navy, Major General Salami stated: Our offensive power and naval defense, with the arrival of a multitude of drones, cruise missiles, and even ballistic missiles with the ability to target combat vessels at sea, are very complex and show an interweaving of a combination of up-to-date, advanced, and modern capabilities.

He continued: “In the IRGC Navy, we had new achievements. The first issue was the joint work between the Air Force and IRGC Navy with the launch

of a long-range ballistic missile from a warship that was successfully achieved, and with this new success, the range of influence of our sea power has increased to any desired point.”

The IRGC commander-in-chief, also referring to the other capabilities of the IRGC Navy, emphasized: “The oceanliner (warships) can appear anywhere in the oceans, and naturally, when they can launch missiles, nowhere is safe for powers who seek to threaten our security.”

Source: “ہب یگنجان وان کی یور زان ارادس اپ ہاپس دربرود کیست سلاب کشوم کیلش” (Firing a Revolutionary Guards long-range ballistic missile on a warship according to General Salami), *Khabar Online* (Iranian news website affiliated with reformist political factions), 12 February 2024. <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1872279>

According to Khabar Online News Agency, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander-in-Chief General Hossein Salami said in a televised interview with the Revolutionary Guards program on Channel One: “In the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, we are always ready to give our lives for the great

Iranian nation and are determined to powerfully defend national security, national interests, and the achievements of the Islamic revolution and must stand against all threats and dangers with all our strength and prevent the formation of new equilibriums in the field of the country’s national security.”

Notes:

- 1 The test launch on the Shahid Mahdavi, which was released on video, was a joint project between the IRGC Navy (IRGCN) and Air Force. The type of ballistic missiles used in the exercise was not verified, as several state media outlets have named various missiles with an array of ranges.
- 2 Michael Elleman, “Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program,” *Iran Primer*, 13 January 2021. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>
- 3 Kamran Taremi, “Ballistic Missiles in Iran’s Military Thinking,” *Wilson Center*, 14 October 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/ballistic-missiles-irans-military-thinking>
- 4 United Nations Security Council Resolution, UNSCR 2231, which once constrained Iran’s ballistic missile-related tests and transfers, expired in October 2023. For additional information, see: “Arms embargo on Iran expires despite US opposition,” *Al Jazeera*, 18 October 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/18/arms-embargo-on-iran-expires-despite-us-opposition>

Iran Vaunts Benefits of State-Owned Construction Company

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

Iran claims it has been able to circumvent sanctions thanks to an infrastructure entity blacklisted by the United States: the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Company (KAA). In an address published by state-aligned outlet *Moniban News*, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Hossein Salami cheered: “The enemy wanted to prove that ‘we can’t,’ and we had to prove that ‘we can,’ therefore, we were able to overcome the sanctions policy with the power of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters.”

Established during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), KAA functions as the IRGC’s lead contractor for civilian construction projects as well as its nuclear and ballistic missile projects. This resulted in its blacklist designation by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2010, given that its subsidiaries are known to funnel money to the IRGC and are

“The enemy wanted to prove that ‘we can’t,’ and we had to prove that ‘we can,’ therefore, we were able to overcome the sanctions policy with the power of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters.”

used to fund its activities at home and abroad.¹ In the first excerpted article Salami noted that the KAA has helped the country be more independent and is a “powerful response” to sanctions playing a role in at least thirty sectors, including road and urban development, energy, marine, and oil sectors, and hospital construction. The KAA is considered one of the three main pillars of the IRGC-run economy. (The others are the Basij Cooperative Foundation and IRGC Cooperative Foundation.)

Beyond its ability to help Iran circumvent sanctions, KAA has played an important role related to educational and employment opportunities. As per the second excerpted article from the Iranian state-run *Entekhab News*, Salami also emphasized that KAA has provided opportunities for university students not just in the field of engineering but all higher degrees. Additionally, it has prevented brain drain, a historic problem for Iran that has only increased in recent years due to the dire state of the Iranian economy due to U.S. sanctions and systemic mismanagement and corruption. While Iranian officials tend to fluctuate on whether U.S. sanctions on the country have impacted the economy, the recent comments by the IRGC Commander about the KAA seem to confirm that the punitive measures are not putting the necessary strain on the clerical establishment to change its behavior in the region.



◀ IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami and Commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters Brigadier General Abdolreza Abed touring preparations for the Grand Mosalla Mosque of Tehran, IRNA (State Media) in March 2024.

Source: <https://www.irna.ir/news/85406994>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

Source: “میدرک روبع میرحت زا (ص) ایبنالامتاخ یگدنزاس هاگزارق تردق لیلدب: میالس رادرس” (General Salami: Due to the strength of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, we overcame sanctions),” *Moniban News* (State-aligned news outlet), 3 March 2024. <https://www.moniban.ir/>

Major General Salami added: One of the biggest things the construction headquarters did was refuting the enemy’s particular thinking in this regard. The enemy wanted to prove that ‘we can’t’, and we had to prove that ‘we can,’ therefore, we were able to overcome the sanctions policy with the power of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters and jihadist bodies like the headquarters.

In explaining the hostile sanctions of Iran’s enemies, the IRGC commander stated: The sanctions policy was not a subjective and unrealistic policy, but rather an operational policy of the enemy, and it was completely objective, real, and tangible. But Islamic Iran, with the jihadist forces of Khatam al-Anbiya, was able to surpass and defeat the enemies of the Iranian nation.

In explaining the ethos of the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, he said: The ethos of the Khatam headquarters is not just providing technical

work, but rather this headquarters is the heart of the revolution and its ethos is to preserve the political independence of the country, to restore the national self-confidence, and actually making the country not rely on the presence of foreigners, and follows this policy text in its basic actions, and for this reason, it undertakes great works and accepts risks...

Today, the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters is playing a role in at least thirty various sectors: road and urban development, energy, marine, oil, hospital construction and unique buildings, and the subway.

The commander-in-chief of the IRGC states: The Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters has expanded in various specialized fields, which is a powerful response to the enemy’s sanctions.

Source: “تفرگ ار اهزغم رارف یولج ایبنالامتاخ هاگزارق: هاپس لک هدنامرف” (IRGC Commander-in-chief: Khatam al-Anbiya Headquarters prevented the minds from escaping),” *Entekhab News* (state-run media), 3 March 2023. <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/768073>

General Salami emphasized that the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters has prevented elite minds from leaving the country. He said: The Khatam headquarters has provided a wide and modern field for technical and industrial elites of our country,

and every engineer and doctor with any degree of education can fulfill their dreams during their time at university at the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters.

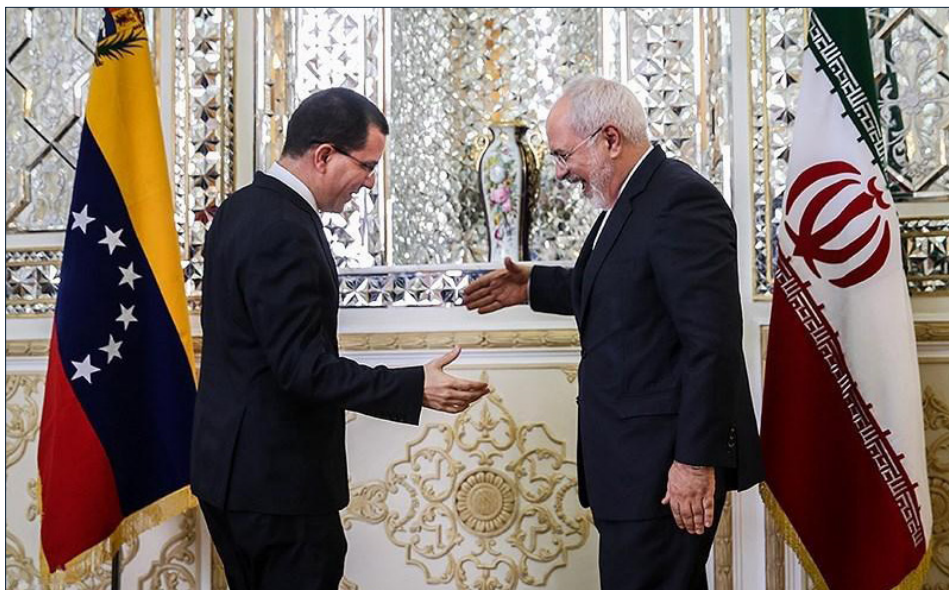
Notes:

1 The Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters was designated in 2010 by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. See: “Treasury Targets Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, 10 February 2010. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg539>

Venezuela Seeks To Rectify Deteriorating Relations With Iran

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Once considered to be one of the Maduro regime's staunchest allies, the Venezuela-Iran relationship has entered a rocky period.¹ Beyond military cooperation, Iran has long provided critical support to the Maduro regime in the areas of sanctions evasion and diluents for crude oil refining. According to the first excerpted article from the Venezuelan daily *El Nacional*, the bilateral relationship began to deteriorate when the West partially lifted oil sanctions on Venezuela following pledges for freer and fairer presidential elections this year. The article reports that the Maduro regime shifted production and export to Western markets, falling woefully behind in its scheduled oil deliveries to Iran. The article also details that part of an earlier three-year agreement aimed at sanctions evasion saw Iran offload much of Venezuela's sanctioned crude.² The second excerpted article, from the business-focused Venezuelan news outlet *Banca y Negocios*, cites people familiar with the deal that helped boost Venezuela's crude exports and mitigate fuel shortages while under previous sanctions. Under the deal, Iran also committed to renovating several of Venezuela's large oil refineries. The Maduro regime's decision to abandon the terms of its agreement with Iran has irked Iranian officials, according to the reporting by *Banca y Negocios*. At the same time, it speculates that the



Venezuela's former Foreign Minister, Jorge Arreaza, visits Iran.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venezuela%E2%80%99s_Top_Diplomat_Visits_Iran-9.jpg; Attribution: CC-BY-4.0.

“Venezuela is rushing to meet the terms of a three-year alliance that has involved hundreds of millions of dollars in oil trades and contracts.”

Maduro regime is motivated to return to the Iran deal as it anticipates the return of Western sanctions, having failed to comply with its prior commitments toward freer and fairer presidential elections. Returning to this agreement with Iran will be critical for the Maduro regime to survive the possible reimposition of Western sanctions on its oil sector.

Source: “Venezuela se apresura a mejorar su relación con Irán mientras se avecinan sanciones de EEUU (Venezuela rushes to improve its relationship with Iran as US sanctions loom),” *El Nacional* (Venezuelan daily focused on the politics of the Maduro regime), 13 March 2024. <https://www.elnacional.com/economia/venezuela-se-apresura-a-mejorar-su-relacion-con-iran-mientras-se-avecinan-sanciones-de-ee-uu/>

Iran and Venezuela are trying to rebuild an oil alliance that began to crumble last year after Venezuela fell behind in oil trades...A review of PDVSA data and shipping documents shows that Venezuela fell behind on payments to Iran, a shortfall that worsened when the United States began issuing licenses in late 2022. Those authorizations led

the state firm to reallocate shipments...to save the partnership, Venezuela is rushing to meet the terms of a three-year alliance that has involved hundreds of millions of dollars in oil trades and contracts. Nicolás Maduro’s government is trying to settle outstanding debt by accelerating deliveries of heavy crude oil and fuel shipments to Iran.

Source: “Venezuela busca mejorar su relación con Irán tras presentar retrasos en el intercambio petrolero (Venezuela seeks to improve its relationship with Iran after presenting delays in the oil exchange),” *Banca y Negocios* (a Venezuelan digital portal focused on financial and economic reporting), 12 March 2024. <https://www.bancaynegocios.com/venezuela-busca-mejorar-su-relacion-con-iran-tras-presentar-retrasos-en-el-intercambio-petrolero/>

Six people familiar with the matter stated that the agreement between both nations helped boost crude oil exports and alleviate the fuel problem that Venezuela suffered...the possible reimposition of sanctions by the United States would make the alliance between Venezuela and Iran essential to

keeping the Venezuelan oil sector afloat...Venezuela is rushing to comply with the agreement and pay off the debt, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars in oil exchanges and contracts, by accelerating the delivery of heavy hydrocarbons and fuel to the nation located in the Middle East.

Notes:

- 1 For more historical background on the importance of the bilateral relationship, see: Moises Rendón and Claudia Fernandez, “The Fabulous Five: How Foreign Actors Prop Up the Maduro Regime in Venezuela,” *CSIS Policy Brief*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fabulous-five-how-foreign-actors-prop-maduro-regime-venezuela>
- 2 For more information on the deal signed between Iran and Venezuela, see: Deisy Buitrago and Vivian Sequera, “Iran, Venezuela Eye Trade Increase, Sign Petrochemical Deal,” *Reuters*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/iranian-president-caracas-kicking-off-regional-tour-2023-06-12/>

Mexico's Cartel-Related Violence Spikes as Elections Approach

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Mexico has long suffered high levels of violence related to its powerful drug cartels. Violence often spikes during election season, as cartels seek to elect politicians aligned with their agendas and eliminate those opposed. According to the Spanish daily *El País*, recent assassinations in Mexico have contributed to growing fears that the country's upcoming elections could witness more violence than in many previous election cycles.¹ The paper

reports on two mayoral candidates in the municipality of Maravatío recently assassinated within hours of one another. The article mentions that earlier in the campaign season, cartels abducted and killed a third mayoral candidate from Maravatío. This area of the country features three powerful cartels contesting territory: the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, the Michoacán Family, and the Knights Templar. According to the second excerpted article by *Diario de México*, which highlights the

research of NGO group *Data Cívica*, 36 aspirants to public office or members of their families were assassinated in January and February alone.² Mexico's cartels continue to accrete power, and during election season, seek to play a primary role in the selection of candidates. While candidates for federal office receive security protection from the government, local candidates do not. In Mexico, it is often control of local candidates that proves most important for cartel operations.



“No more than 12 hours passed between the shooting of the Morena precandidate Miguel Ángel Zavala Reyes, and the shooting of the PAN precandidate, Armando Pérez Luna.”

◀ Mexico has responded to security threats by deploying its army on the streets.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/isan/3740048960/>; Attribution: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 DEED.

Source: “El terror en Maravatío: asesinados dos precandidatos a la alcaldía en menos de 12 horas (Terror in Maravatío: two mayoral candidates murdered in less than 12 hours),” *El País* (Spanish daily with excellent regional coverage), 27 February 2024. <https://elpais.com/mexico/elecciones-mexicanas/2024-02-27/el-terror-en-maravatio-asesinados-dos-precandidatos-a-la-alcaldia-en-menos-de-12-horas.html>

No more than 12 hours passed between the shooting of the Morena precandidate Miguel Ángel Zavala Reyes, and the shooting of the PAN precandidate, Armando Pérez Luna; two of the people who were seeking to become the next municipal president of Maravatío, a municipality of 80,000 inhabitants in

the State of Michoacán...According to the group Data Cívica, ‘In Mexico, electoral violence has become a tool of organized crime to influence the public life of states and municipalities’...During the month of January, at least five candidates or aspirants for elected office were murdered in Mexico.

Source: “Febrero fue letal para aspirantes a cargo de elección popular: ONG (February was lethal for candidates for popular election positions: NGO),” *Diario de México* (one of the country’s oldest dailies), 15 March 2024. <https://www.diariodemexico.com/mi-nacion/febrero-fue-letal-para-aspirantes-cargo-de-eleccion-popular-ong>

At least five candidates or aspirants for elected office were murdered in Mexico during February, bringing the total to 10 in the first two months of the year, the non-governmental organizations Data Cívica reported this Friday. The number of homicides related

to political violence rises to 36 when public officials and relatives of politicians are also considered, which are detailed in the report ‘Voting between bullets’ in February.

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the potential criminal realignment in Mexico’s elections, see: Parker Asmann, “Mexico’s 2024 Election Could Spark Violent Criminal Realignments,” *InSight Crime*, 15 January 2024, <https://insightcrime.org/news/mexico-2024-election-violent-criminal-realignments/>
- 2 To read more about the project to track election violence by *Data Cívica*, see: “Voting Between Bullets, Understanding Criminal-Electoral Violence in Mexico,” <https://votar-entre-balas.datacivica.org/>

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Names New Leader



Sana'a, capitol of Yemen at Night.

Source: <https://openverse.org/image/c4b13d0f-5ffa-44fc-9a82-518d08dbfbc0?q=yemen>; Attribution: CC BY-SA 2.0

By Christopher Betts
OE Watch Commentary

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) named a successor after the recent loss of its leader. According to the first excerpted article from the Saudi state-owned international news outlet *Al Arabiya*, Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, aka “Abu al-Laith,” a Yemeni national, has been named the new leader of AQAP. The organization’s official, Ibrahim al-Qusi, confirmed in a broadcast recording that the group’s former leader had been killed, declaring that “Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki is the new leader of the organization in the Arabian Peninsula.”¹ The new AQAP leader, Al-Awlaki, reportedly had direct ties to former al-Qaeda leader Usama bin Laden and was repatriated to Yemen by Bin Laden. Al-Awlaki is reported to also have originated from the same tribe as former al-Qaeda spiritual leader

Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in 2011. There is a \$6 million reward from the U.S. State Department for information about the new AQAP leader, who has “publicly called for attacks on the U.S. and its allies.” The U.S. has designated AQAP as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since 2010.²

“Despite its decline in the Arabian Peninsula, [AQAP] remains the most effective terrorist group in Yemen, with the intent to launch attacks in the region and beyond.”

The second excerpted article from the Jeddah-based Saudi daily newspaper *Okaz*, provides some perspective on the current status of AQAP, as well as

the potential effect of Al-Awlaki as the group’s new leader. The article notes that the al-Qaeda affiliate has struggled for a multitude of reasons, including the loss of several key leaders, financial challenges, and internal disputes that have led to structural issues. The article also states that Al-Awlaki could be a unifier for AQAP due to his extensive background in the terrorist network, experience in the al-Qaeda leadership council, and previous position as Emir in the Shabwa Province.

While there has been a shift in the West to focus on great power competition with China and Russia, and persistent challenges from Iran, the ongoing threat from international terrorist organizations cannot be discounted, especially with new leaders who have openly called for attacks against the United States.³

Al-Awlaki is considered one of the founding leaders of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and he served as a member of the leadership council of Al-Qaeda. He was born in the 1980s. He joined the organization in 2010, and assumed the position of Emir of Shabwa

Province until 2014, then he was appointed a member of the organization's Shura Council, which is responsible for Managing operations, and he was called the second man in Al-Qaeda in Yemen.

Notes:

- 1 Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was initially created in 2009 after the Saudi and Yemeni branches merged forces. The group is currently assessed to be one of the most lethal al-Qaeda affiliates. The Council on Foreign Relations published a backgrounder on AQAP, see: "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 June 2015. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap>
- 2 For a complete list of designated terrorist organizations by the United States Government see: "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *U.S. Department of State*, Accessed 12 March 2024. <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>
- 3 The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community further notes that, "Al-Qaeda's regional affiliates on the African continent and Yemen will sustain the global network as the group maintains its strategic intent to target the United States and U.S. citizens." The entirety of the most recent unclassified annual threat assessment issued by the United States Intelligence Community can be located here: "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, 5 February 2024. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

Hamas and Houthis Target Youth as New “Islamic Resistance” Movement Emerges

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

Hamas, and the Houthis in Yemen, both of whom have seen their popularity grow since 7 October, are capitalizing on conflict in Gaza to recruit new generations of young men into their culture of “Islamic Resistance.”¹ According to the first accompanying excerpt from an op-ed published recently in the *Qatari-aligned al-Araby al-Jadeed*, Hamas’s prior youth training efforts have been critical to its ability to withstand the Israeli campaign. The author mentions the “Futawwa” (youth) training program, which allowed Hamas to spread its “resistance” ideology across Gaza throughout the 2010s.² The second and third accompanying excerpts, from the prominent Saudi dailies *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *al-Watan*, respectively, illustrate how both Hamas and the Houthis have used their growing popularity since 7 October to launch

recruitment campaigns, especially targeting the youth. Youth indoctrination is critical for both groups, and both have put substantial efforts into it over the past decade.³

“Houthi vehicles carrying slogans of supporting Gaza roam the villages with forms to register children and youth into these training courses.”

The Houthi Movement and Hamas in Gaza share much in common. They are both mobilized movements with Islamic ideological underpinnings that act as de facto governments in their respective regions despite not formally being recognized as such by the international community. The key difference between them is doctrinal—the former are adherents of the Zaydi

branch of Shia Islam while the latter is a Sunni, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movement. For both groups, though, “the culture of resistance” is a critical component that arguably supersedes sectarian differences. Perhaps to a greater degree than previously, a focus on sectarian differences seems secondary and increasingly irrelevant in the current context. Instead, Hamas and the Houthis—alongside Shia-majority Lebanese Hezbollah and the “Islamic Resistance of Iraq”—may coalesce into a transnational, cross-sectarian “Islamic Resistance” movement that should be thought of as distinct from the 2010s, Iran-led “Axis of Resistance.”⁴ Both on the Sunni and the Shia side, the new generation of fighters coming of age in the shadow of conflict in Gaza will presumably be less interested in sectarian differences or other intra-Islam disputes than in the fight against Israel.

Source: اذامل و-ةزغ تدمص فيك “How and why has Gaza held out?” *al-Araby al-Jadeed* (Qatari-aligned daily <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/اذامل-و-ةزغ-تدمص-فيك>)

What is the secret of this resilience? ... After the attempted coup against the Hamas government and the separation of Gaza from the West Bank, the Gaza Strip fell under a tight siege, and the local “Gaza Authority” found itself under a unique state of “independence.” It was able to make whatever

decisions it wanted regarding its society, especially in the fields of education and curriculum making... Specifically, the Hamas Authority introduced the “Futawwa” program into the curricula of its schools, aiming to train students specifically in weapons use and field skills.

Source: *ان ببل تاميخم يف فزغ برح رامثتس لواح ت س ام ح* “ *Hamas seeks to exploit the Gaza war in the Lebanese camps,*” *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (prominent Saudi daily), 4 December 2023. <https://aawsat.com>

On Monday, the Lebanese branch of the Hamas movement announced the establishment of the “Vanguards of the Al-Aqsa Flood.” This is an organization with military dimensions, as the statement suggested...

In a statement, the movement called on “young and heroic men” to join the “vanguard of the resistance.” The movement’s sources explained that “this project is linked to Lebanon and does not aim exclusively to gather more fighters, but rather

to include more individuals in Hamas who are active in more than one sector.” A statement issued by the movement linked the establishment of these vanguards to “affirming the role of the Palestinian people, wherever they are, in resisting the occupation by all available and legitimate means,” and to “complementing what Operation Al-Aqsa Flood achieved, and benefiting from scientific and artistic energies and capabilities.”

Source: *ا فظ ل ا دن جي ي ث و ح ل ا* “*Houthi recruit children through seminars on war in Gaza,*” *al-Watan* (prominent Saudi daily), 18 November 2023. <https://www.alwatan.com.sa/article/1137388>

A Yemeni source in Sanaa said that the most rejoicing over what is happening in Gaza is among the Houthi militias, who rose up directly to restore their dilapidated ranks and support their disintegrating fronts... The source stated that Houthi vehicles carrying slogans of supporting Gaza roam the villages with forms to register children and youth into these training courses, a method that does not differ from

previous methods of recruitment. However, the Houthis have developed new tricks to entice children and youth to enroll in these malicious courses. This includes sending young graduates to the streets to talk about their participation in previous courses, graduating them without any assignments, and giving them monthly salaries.

Notes:

- 1 Several opinion polls confirm these groups’ rising popularity, including: “Wide public support for Hamas’ offensive on October the 7th, but the vast majority denies that Hamas has committed atrocities against Israeli civilians,” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 13 December 2023. <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/963>; “How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views,” *Arab Barometer*, 14 December 2023. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/media-news/how-the-israel-hamas-war-in-gaza-is-changing-arab-views/>; “New Poll Sheds Light on Saudi Views of Israel-Hamas War,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 21 December 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-poll-sheds-light-saudi-views-israel-hamas-war/>; “Arab Public Opinion about the Israeli War on Gaza,” *Doha Institute*, 10 January 2024. <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/arab-opinion-war-on-gaza-press-release-en.pdf>
- 2 Much has been written on the program over the past decade. See for instance: “Gaza teens graduate from Hamas military school,” *Ynet News*, 24 January 2013. <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4336807,00.html> and “Training Fighters of Future Across Gaza,” *New York Times*, 14 January 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/training-fighters-of-future-across-gaza.html>
- 3 For more on Hamas youth recruitment, see: “The Road to October 7: Hamas’ Long Game, Clarified,” *CTC Sentinel*, October/November 2023. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-road-to-october-7-hamas-long-game-clarified/>; For the Houthis, see: “Yemen: Houthis Recruit More Child Soldiers Since October 7,” *Human Rights Watch*, 13 February 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/13/yemen-houthis-recruit-more-child-soldiers-october-7>
- 4 The idea of an “Islamic Resistance” axis is not new. However, it bears distinguishing the emergent post-7 October Islamic Resistance from the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance.” The latter coalesced in the early 2010s, during the fight against ISIS and in support of the Syrian regime, and at a time when Hamas was estranged from Iran and its proxies. As such, the Axis of Resistance emerged as a primarily Shia organization focused on countering Sunni extremism in Syria and Iraq (or, for the Houthis, fighting against Saudi Arabia and its Yemeni allies). Israel remained part of the discourse, but it was not the axis’s primary focus.

Armenia Distances Itself From Instruments of Russian Security



“The CSTO, instead of fulfilling its obligations to Armenia in the field of security, on the contrary, creates security problems. And this position, I say frankly, is a threat to the national security of Armenia.”

◀ An image of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan from 2023. Armenia is currently taking steps to distance itself from both the CSTO and Russia. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nikol_Pashinyan_-_2023_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nikol_Pashinyan_-_2023_(cropped).jpg); Attribution: CCA 2.0

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Armenia has been critical of both Russia and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) over their responses to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and the subsequent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Some Armenian officials have even called for the country to leave the CSTO and limit cooperation with Russia, though Armenia has continued to engage with both since the end of the 2020 war because of a lack of other options.¹ The accompanying excerpted article from the independent news website *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, reports that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced on 22 February 2024 that Armenia had ended its participation in the CSTO, though he did not go as far as to say that Armenia is

leaving the organization. The article notes that the decision is based on the CSTO’s responses to the 2020 war and the numerous clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan since then. The article also relays that Armenia has been critical of the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh for not favorably dealing with Azerbaijan’s blockade of the breakaway region and not preventing Azerbaijan’s operation in September 2023, which ended with Azerbaijan regaining full control of the region. The article ends with a statement from Pashinyan, who claims that the CSTO is a threat to the national security of Armenia. Based on this statement, it is possible that Armenia will leave the CSTO, but the country will still be home to a Russian military base and Russian border guards in its territory for the foreseeable future.²

In a seemingly related development, the second excerpted article, from the Armenian news website *News.am*, reports that Armenia has notified Moscow that Russian border guards will need to be removed from the Zvartnots International Airport. Armenia’s Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan commented that Armenian border guards are capable of taking over duties at the airport. The article clarifies that Armenia is not asking the Russian border guards to leave their positions on the border with Turkey or Iran, but only to leave the airport. While this development has yet to play out, it is one step Armenia has taken to rely less on Russia.

Source: “Главное о критике Арменией ОДКБ и Кремля (The heart of Armenia’s criticism of the CSTO and the Kremlin),” *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (independent news website reporting on the Caucasus), 29 February 2024. <https://www.caucasianknot.com/articles/386973>

After Russia’s refusal to intervene in the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, Armenia’s confidence in the benefits of participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization weakened to the point of threats to leave the CSTO. The “Caucasian Knot” has prepared a report on how the degree of Armenia’s unfriendly rhetoric towards Russia increased and what steps Armenia took in its attempts to look for an alternative to the CSTO...

During the escalation of the Karabakh conflict in 2020, Armenia turned to the CSTO for help. Moscow responded by saying that it could not help, since the borders of Armenia were not violated and the war took place on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh...the Kremlin limited itself to political support for Yerevan, and after that it sent peacekeepers to the Karabakh... conflict zone.

At a meeting with Putin on December 27, 2022, the Armenian prime minister again recalled the responsibility of Russian peacekeepers. “The Lachin corridor has been blocked for almost 20 days. This is the area of responsibility of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. And I want to remind you that according to the trilateral statement of the presidents of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia, the Lachin corridor should be under the control of Russian peacekeepers,” said Pashinyan...

On September 21, 2023, the day after the end of hostilities in Karabakh, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan sharply criticized Russian peacekeepers. “The Russian peacekeeping contingent was supposed to guarantee the safety of the civilian population...We bear our share of responsibility. But I don’t think that we should turn a blind eye to the failures that the Russian peacekeeping force had contingent,” he said...“Due to the inaction of the Russian peacekeeping contingent, over 100 thousand Armenians left their homes and native places in Nagorno-Karabakh in a week,” Pashinyan said...

On February 22, 2024, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, in an interview with France 24 TV channel, stated that the CSTO reaction did not correspond to reality in relation to the Republic of Armenia, in particular in 2021 and 2022. “And, obviously, this could not go unnoticed by Armenia. Today, in practice, we have actually frozen our participation in this agreement in this organization,” said the Prime Minister of Armenia...

On February 28, 2024, answering questions from deputies in the Armenian parliament, Nikol Pashinyan stated that “The CSTO, instead of fulfilling its obligations to Armenia in the field of security, on the contrary, creates security problems. And this position, I say frankly, is a threat to the national security of Armenia...”

Source: “Armenia FM comments on Russian border guards’ presence on Turkey border,” *News.am* (Armenian news website), 7 March 2024. <https://news.am/eng/news/811212.html>

Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan explained how Yerevan informed Moscow about the matter of the Russian border guards at Zvartnots International Airport of the Armenian capital city of Yerevan.

At Thursday’s press conference, the FM confirmed the statement by the secretary of the Council of Armenia regarding the aforementioned matter, and stated that the Russian side was informed about the initiative to remove the Russian border guards from Zvartnots airport...

“Now we believe that Armenia is institutionally

capable of independently implementing border guard service at the [Yerevan] airport, about which we have informed the Russian side. I believe that this will be enough for the Russian side and the matter will be over,” Mirzoyan noted, adding that it is about the entire package of jurisdiction at the airport...

To the question about the presence of Russian border guards in other places in Armenia, for example on the Turkish border, the minister responded that the matter is only about Zvartnots airport. “Therefore, we are talking only about the airport,” added the Armenian FM.

Notes:

- 1 Russia and the CSTO have had separate responses to the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and subsequent clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia deployed a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the ceasefire agreement, but the peacekeepers are not affiliated with the CSTO. The CSTO declined to intervene in the 2020 war or the clashes on the grounds that the organization stated Armenia itself was not attacked in any of the instances and thus, does not necessitate a collective defense response from the organization.
- 2 Russia’s 102nd Military Base is located near the city of Gyumri, Armenia with an estimated 3,000 soldiers garrisoned there, while Russian border guards provide security on Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Iran as well as operating at the Zvartnots International Airport outside of the capital Yerevan.

India's Plan To Counter China and Sustain Maritime Sphere of Influence

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

As China seeks to gain more prominence in the Indian Ocean, India is pushing back with a number of its own efforts to sustain its sphere of influence. According to the excerpted article from the Indian nationalist publication *Hindustan Times*, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh recently announced the inauguration of naval bases, which will be on islands in the Indian territory of the Lakshadweep archipelago, near the states of the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The article describes the bases as a “game-changer” and notes how they are part of a broader strategy of the Modi administration to project power

into the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, according to the article, India seeks to counter the Chinese Navy and make it “think twice” about hostile actions towards India.

India considers China’s “String of Pearls” strategy in the Indian Ocean as an attempt to encircle and contain India, including with Chinese naval bases in Cambodia, Sri Lanka,¹ and Pakistan and a port in Myanmar, which can be converted to a base in the future. China can use naval bases to monitor India’s Navy and naval training exercises and, in the event of war, strike Indian ships capable of firing nuclear weapons, which would limit India’s nuclear deterrent.² China claims that India is exaggerating

the threat from China and is interfering in the sovereignty of India’s neighbors in the Indian Ocean, such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives, by pressuring them to disallow even Chinese “scientific research vessels”³ to dock at their ports.⁴

However, India disregards China’s claims. Rather, to meet the threat India perceives from China, the least India can do is to increase own naval bases to match, if not necessarily even exceed, the Chinese port and base presence in the Indian Ocean. India considers the Indian Ocean its own sphere of influence and is, therefore, building up its naval infrastructure to meet its security needs.



“Modi government’s strategy [is] to use [Indian] island territories to project power in the Indo-Pacific in support of maritime security of the region.”

The Indian Navy has been deployed in in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Gulf of Aden, but the former is increasingly seeing competition with China.

Source: Government of India https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Navy_QRT_deployed_in_North,_Central_Arabian_Sea_and_Gulf_of_Aden.jpg; Attribution: CCx2.0

Source: “India to build naval bases in Agatti and Minicoy Islands,” *Hindustan Times* (Delhi-based weekly covering issues in India and around the world from nationalist angles), 14 January 2024. [hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-build-naval-bases-in-agatti-and-minicoy-islands-101707884042309.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-build-naval-bases-in-agatti-and-minicoy-islands-101707884042309.html)

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Lakshadweep, India has decided to firmly extend its naval footprint by establishing naval bases in Agatti and Minicoy Islands along with air bases in order to secure the vital sea lanes of communication.

This decision dovetails into Modi government’s strategy to use its islands territories to project power in the Indo-Pacific in support of maritime security of the region.

The geographical location of Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands and the Andamans and Nicobar Islands is such that India can safeguard the maritime trade routes while countering the challenge of rapidly expanding Chinese Navy and their supplicants in the Indian Ocean.... Such level of force projection has never been seen in the past and will make the adversary [China] and its supplicants think twice before playing mischief in the Indian Ocean region.

Notes:

- 1 An overlooked reason why China has gained increasing influence in Sri Lanka is that India’s domestic Tamil population has exerted pressure on India’s government to pressure the Sri Lankan government on treating Tamil civilians better during the civil war and in Sri Lanka. Although India did not directly intervene, it “warned” Sri Lanka about its human rights conduct, while the U.S suspended aid to Sri Lanka for its human rights violations. China, in contrast, took advantage of the situation to offer crucial aid, armaments, and diplomatic support to the Sri Lankan government without any criticism of its human rights record. See A. Jathindra, “Revisiting Sri Lanka’s Foreign Policy Balance under the Shadow of the Space Dragon,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, July-August 2023. https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/28/2003270082/-1/-1/1/JATHINDRA_COMMENTARY.PDF
- 2 See, for example, Firstpost.com, “‘String of Pearls’: How China-made Kyaukphyu Port in Myanmar threatens India’s nuclear attack submarine base,” 8 January 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/string-of-pearls-how-china-made-kyaukphyu-port-in-myanmar-threatens-indias-nuclear-attack-submarine-base-13588512.html>.
- 3 The Washington D.C.-based think tank, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), from 2020 to 2024, 64 Chinese “oceanographic missions” using “research vessels” were observed from satellite imagery, and 80% of them “demonstrated suspect behavior or possessed organizational links suggesting their involvement in advancing Beijing’s geopolitical agenda.” Indis would, therefore, rightly be suspicious of their activities in the Indian Ocean. See “China’s Research Vessels Carry Out Covert Missions for PLA,” *The Maritime Executive*, 14 January 2024. <https://maritime-executive.com/article/study-china-s-research-vessels-carry-out-covert-missions-for-pla>
- 4 See, for example, “印度海军潜艇到访斯里兰卡，印媒炒作“击败中国 (Indian navy submarine visits Sri Lanka, and Indian media exaggerates defeating China),” *guanacha.cn* (privately owned Chinese-language website with nationalist tendencies), 5 February 2024. https://www.guanacha.cn/internation/2024_02_05_724626.shtml