

# OEWATCH

Issue 7  
2024

*FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT*



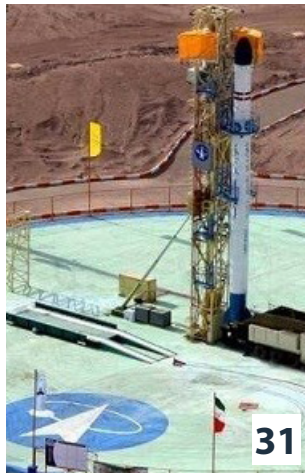
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Issue 7

2024

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## Taiwan President's Inaugural Speech Prompts Chinese Military Drills

By Cindy Hurst  
OE Watch Commentary

During his inaugural speech on 20 May, Taiwan's eighth president, Lai Ching-te, reaffirmed that Taiwan is a "sovereign, independent nation" and not subordinate to the People's Republic of China, infuriating Beijing. The first article excerpt, published by Chinese Communist Party flagship newspaper *Global Times*, blasted Lai's speech, calling it "a declaration of harm to Taiwan," and "extremely dangerous." It warned that China "will inevitably be unified... regardless of changes in the situation on the island or who holds power."

Three days after Lai's speech, China's Eastern Theater Command<sup>1</sup> launched "Joint Sword-2024A," a series of military exercises surrounding Taiwan and its outer island territories. The second article excerpt, from the Communist Youth League of China's official newspaper *Beijing Youth Daily*, describes the exercise as a "powerful punishment for separatist forces seeking 'independence,'" and a serious warning to external forces against "interfering and provoking" Taiwan. The article noted that "Joint Sword-2024A" focused on joint sea and air combat readiness patrols, joint seizure of comprehensive battlefield control, and joint precision attacks on key targets surrounding Taiwan as well as around the four outlying islands.

The goals of the exercise varied. Operations south of Taiwan were to strike a heavy blow to the Tainan region<sup>2</sup> politically and economically: they aimed to attack Taiwan's largest port and navy base, Kaohsiung Port, and designed to impact Taiwan's foreign trade. Operations east of Taiwan were intended to block the country's lifeline to energy imports, an escape route for "Taiwan independence" forces, and a support line for the United States and its allies attempting to provide assistance. At the same time, the Fujian Coast Guard conducted a comprehensive law enforcement exercise to test their joint patrol, rapid response, and emergency handling capabilities around Taiwan-controlled Wuqiu and Dongyin islands, each located within 10 nautical miles of mainland China. These islands are the main transportation routes

to the Taiwan Strait and the "most advanced outposts of Taiwan Strait defense operations." The goal of these exercises was to constrain Taiwan's military operational capacity. While not the first time Taiwan's actions have prompted China to launch aggressive military exercises,<sup>3</sup> according to *Beijing Youth Daily*, this is the first time the Eastern Theater Command (publicly) mentioned the mission of "Jointly seizing comprehensive control of the battlefield."

**"Lai-style Taiwan independence" will only exacerbate the confrontation and instability across the Straits, inevitably leading to self-overestimation and self-destruction.**



A schematic representation of Joint Sword-2024A exercises.

Source: Data derived from [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lianhelijian\\_2024A\\_zhmap.svg](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lianhelijian_2024A_zhmap.svg); Attribution: Cindy Hurst



**Source:** “‘Lai-Style Taiwan Independence’ Agenda is a Dead-End: Global Times Editorial,” *Global Times*, Daily newspaper under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily Newspaper, 21 May 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202405/1312690.shtml>

*On May 20, Lai Ching-te assumed the role of Taiwan region's new leader and delivered his inaugural speech. Lai shamelessly stated in his speech that “the Republic of China Taiwan is a sovereign, independent nation” and “the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other,” spewing various “Taiwan independence” fallacies and hostile provocations against the Chinese mainland, once again exposing his stubborn nature as “a worker for Taiwan independence.” This speech can*

*be described as a blatant “Taiwan independence manifesto” and “a declaration of harm to Taiwan.” It is extremely dangerous, and the Taiwan compatriots should be particularly vigilant and united in opposition.*

*“Lai-style Taiwan independence” will only exacerbate the confrontation and instability across the Straits, inevitably leading to self-overestimation and self-destruction.*

**Source:** “东部战区台岛周边演习，三个罕见表述透露重要信号！（The Eastern Theater Command Conducts Exercises Around Taiwan; Three Rare Statements Revealed Important Signals）,” *Beijing Youth Daily* (Official newspaper of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League of China), 23 May 2024. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1799839595761324756>

*On May 23, Li Xi, a Navy colonel and spokesperson for the Eastern Theater Command, disclosed:*

*From May 23 to 24, the Eastern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army of China organized the theater army, navy, air force, rocket force and other forces to carry out the “Joint Sword-2024A” exercise around Taiwan Island, focusing on joint sea and air combat readiness patrols, joint seizure of comprehensive battlefield control, and joint precision attacks on key targets. Ships and aircraft approached the periphery of Taiwan Island for combat patrols... This is also a powerful punishment for the separatist forces seeking “independence” and a serious warning to external forces for interference and provocation.*

*On May 23, the Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army continued to carry out training in subjects such as sea assault, land strike, air defense and anti-submarine in the sea and air areas north and south of Taiwan Island, to test the theater troops' actual combat capabilities in multi-*

*domain coordination and joint strike.*

*On the same day, Gan Yu, spokesperson for the China Coast Guard, disclosed:... the Fujian Coast Guard organized a fleet of ships to conduct a comprehensive law enforcement exercise in the waters near Wuqiu Island and Dongyin Island to test its joint patrol, rapid response and emergency handling capabilities.*

*This exercise reflects the integrated design of Taiwan's main island and outlying islands.*

*The outer islands cover Kinmen, Matsu Island, Wuqiu Island, and Dongyin Island...*

*In addition, Zhang Chi from the National Defense University also explained in an interview with CCTV that Wuqiu Island and Dongyin Island are outlying islands of Taiwan Province. Their geographical location is very important. They are the main transportation routes to the Taiwan Strait. The Taiwan military regards them as the most advanced outposts of the Taiwan Strait defense operations. ...*

*continue on 6*

*...In recent years, it has become normal practice for the Eastern Theater Command to organize military forces to conduct exercises around Taiwan Island. However, Zhengzhijun sorted out previous public reports and found that several new statements appeared in the Eastern Theater Command's announcement. Regarding the key exercise subjects,*

*the Eastern Theater Command's report mentioned for the first time "Jointly seize comprehensive control of the battlefield"... In addition, CCTV News reports on the specific subjects of the first day of the exercise, which was rare as they mentioned "intelligence" many times...*

Notes:

- 1 China has five theater commands. The Eastern Theater Command is responsible for Taiwan and the East China Sea. For more information on the Eastern Theater Command, see "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2021," *Annual Report to Congress: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021*, p. 98. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>
- 2 The article refers to Tainan as "The political base of Taiwan Independence."
- 3 Previously China launched two separate rounds of exercises around Taiwan. First after former U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan and again after former Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen visited former U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy in April 2023.



## China Concludes Its Largest Military Drills Near Taiwan

By MAJ Kevin Kusumoto  
OE Watch Commentary

On 23-24 May, China conducted its latest large-scale military exercise, Joint Sword-2024A, around Taiwan, including the surrounding Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin islands. These drills were the largest and closest-ever held to Taiwan and signal an increasingly aggressive Chinese stance.

According to the first excerpted article published by the Central Military Commission via its website [www.81.cn](http://www.81.cn), the purpose of Joint Sword-2024A was to punish separatist activities of

Taiwan's independence forces and to issue a serious warning against interference from external forces.<sup>1</sup> Joint Sword-2024A was conducted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command to enhance its combat capabilities through multi-domain coordination. The exercise involved ships and aircraft conducting joint training near Taiwan's periphery, including the Taiwan Strait and its northern, southern, and eastern regions.<sup>2</sup> Activities encompassed rapid deployment of destroyer and frigate formations, integration of intelligence data for sea

and air scenarios, target acquisition, and joint strikes. South of Taiwan networks of destroyer, frigate, and anti-submarine formations were established, deploying assets for comprehensive submarine detection. The Air Force deployed fighter jets for combat patrols around Taiwan, engaging in joint intelligence sharing and coordination with surface fleets for target strikes. Meanwhile, the Army and Rocket Force assumed predesignated launch positions, initiating preparation for joint strikes in coordination with naval and air assets.<sup>3</sup>

# 越海殺器



China's Eastern Theater Command released posters for 'Joint Sword-2024A', showcasing weapons aimed to 'kill' Taiwan independence.

Source: [http://www.81.cn/zq\\_208553/16310798.html](http://www.81.cn/zq_208553/16310798.html); Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

In the second excerpt, published by the People's Republic of China newspaper *Da Wan News*, Major General Meng Xiangqi, a PLA professor from the National Defense University, outlines several significances of the Joint Sword-2024A exercise.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, conducting battle group exercises from multiple directions very close to Taiwan's periphery is intended to tightly confine Taiwan's military defense space. Major General Meng stated the exercise demonstrates that the closer Taiwan independence forces move towards external support, the tighter the squeeze around Taiwan will become. He strongly indicates that PLA forces will inch closer to Taiwan's periphery with each successive exercise.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Major General Meng emphasized the significance of the exercise's focus on the southern and eastern

parts of Taiwan. In particular, he highlighted the strategic importance of eastern Taiwan, which has traditionally been considered a refuge and a place to preserve combat power by Taiwan's military. He dismisses this notion, emphasizing that Joint Sword-2024A demonstrates the PLA's ability to create a powerful firepower network through the close cooperation of its four major services—land, sea, air, and rocket forces—capable of delivering strikes anywhere, any-time on targets, including eastern Taiwan. Major General Meng also pointed out that if external forces were to intervene, they would likely approach from the east. However, the PLA's ability to control and block access from the east means that

***“The distance is getting closer and closer, only one step away from the main island of Taiwan, or even a finger away.”***

Taiwan independence forces would be unable to escape or receive foreign aid. Thirdly, Major General Meng emphasized the significance of implementing a comprehensive blockade around the island. Such a blockade would halt Taiwan's energy imports, disrupt domestic exports, and sever aid from the U.S. and its allies, effectively crippling the island.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Joint Sword-2024A demonstrates that military drills are becoming routine to signal displeasure and punish Taiwan. Additionally, it underscores China's increasing capability to convert these exercises around Taiwan into actual military operations at any time.<sup>7</sup>

**Source:** Guo Yanfei, “东部战区位台岛周边开展“联合利剑-2024A”演习 (Eastern Theater Command conducts the ‘Joint Sword-2024A’ exercise around Taiwan island), *www.81.cn* (China's Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest national defense organization in the PRC), 24 May 2024. [http://www.81.cn/yw\\_208727/16310888.html](http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16310888.html)

*From May 23 to 24, the Eastern Theater Command of the PLA organized the army, navy, air force, rocket force, and other units to conduct the ‘Joint Sword-2024A’ exercise around Taiwan. The exercise focused on joint sea and air combat readiness patrols, the joint seizure of battlefield comprehensive control, joint precision attacks on key targets, and other objectives. Li Xi, spokesperson for the Eastern Theater Command, stated that this exercise was a powerful*

*punishment for Taiwan separatist forces seeking independence and a serious warning to external forces.*

*Starting at 0734, the exercise and training began in the Taiwan Strait, as well as in the northern, southern, and eastern parts of Taiwan, including areas around Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin island. After the mobilization order was given, multiple formations of destroyers and frigates moved at high speed to*

*continue on 9*



surround Taiwan. Upon reaching their designated areas, the ships deployed their main and secondary guns, missiles, and other weapon systems, ready to strike. The fleet integrated intelligence information from both the air and sea, captured and locked onto targets, and executed multi-type, multi-dimensional saturation simulated strikes. Additionally, ships and aircraft coordinated anti-submarine operations by using towed sonar and buoys and carried out simulated attacks against underwater targets.

The Eastern Theater Air Force also dispatched dozens of fighters to systematically conduct combat patrols around Taiwan and its outer islands. These fighter jets, relying on joint intelligence support and various tactical maneuvers, approached the periphery of Taiwan for combat patrols. The air force formed

multi-type formations with live ammunition and flew to designated airspace to establish strike positions. They coordinated with destroyers, frigates, and missile boats to simulate strikes against high-value targets. Simultaneously, the army and rocket force moved into their designated areas, quickly occupying their launch positions to coordinate with sea and air assault forces for joint strikes.

With the support of the Eastern Theater Command's joint combat system, the theater command's troops conducted training in sea assault, land strike, air defense, and anti-submarine operations around Taiwan. This exercise further tested their actual combat capabilities in multi-domain coordination and joint strike operations.

**Source:** “联合利剑—2024A”演习距台岛很近有何深意？专家解析：这次解放军以压倒性实力反切香肠 (What is the significance of ‘Joint Sword-2024A’ being so close to Taiwan? Experts analyze: this time the PLA is countering incremental steps of Taiwan independence with overwhelming strength),” *Xinan Evening News* (PRC newspaper created by the Propaganda Department of the Anhui Provincial Committee of the CCP), 25 May 2024. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1799986237998926830&wfr=spider&for=pc>

On May 23, the Eastern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army conducted the 'Joint Sword-2024A' exercise around Taiwan, involving sea-air coordination, sea assault, land strikes, and other training activities. The exercise aimed to test multi-domain coordination and organize joint strikes, demonstrating the combat capabilities of the Eastern Theater Command troops. With strong determination, firm will, and robust capabilities, they are poised to resolutely crush the arrogance of Taiwan independence forces. There are three significant aspects of this exercise to note: 1) The proximity of the exercise close to Taiwan. 2) The joint efforts to seize battlefield control and execute precision attacks. 3) The deployment of troops to the eastern part of Taiwan and its strategic implications.

Regarding the proximity of the exercise to Taiwan, Major General Meng Xiangqing, a professor and special commentator at the National Defense University, highlights two key points. First, he notes that the approaching ships and aircraft are increasingly nearing Taiwan, being just a step away from the main island, or even as close as a finger's reach. Second, he emphasizes that the exercise clearly showcases the PLA's multi-domain control capabilities, with the depth of this 'squeeze' being greater and more unprecedented than before. It can be inferred that the closer Taiwan independence forces move towards external support, the tighter the chain around Taiwan will become.

Regarding joint efforts to seize battlefield control and execute precision attacks, Major General Meng

*continue on 10*

*Xiangqing highlighted the 3D animations released by the Eastern Theater Command which demonstrated the focus on striking critical Taiwan independence targets. This involves leveraging strategic advantages by targeting coastal areas and dominating sea, air, and information domains from multiple directions. Additionally, the deployment of naval and air assets across vast areas creates a robust firepower network capable of striking any location harboring Taiwan independence.*

*Regarding the strategic implication of troop deployments to the eastern part of Taiwan, Major General Meng Xiangqing emphasizes it as a significant shift in perspective. Historically, the*

*Taiwan military underestimated the PLA's capability to effectively project combat power to the eastern part of the island, considering it a haven to preserve their own combat strength. However, recent demonstrations by the PLA, including simulated multi-directional strikes, have highlighted their ability to swiftly deploy troops to the region and assert control over key routes. Should external forces attempt intervention, they would likely approach from the east. However, the Eastern Theater Command's capacity to deploy joint formations of naval, air, and land forces indicates that Taiwan independence elements would find it difficult to escape, foreign aid would be effectively blocked, and there would be no vulnerable points in their defense.*

Notes:

- 1 To watch the PRC's Ministry of Defense (MOD) official response for conducting Joint Sword-2024A, see the MOD's video post, *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*, 24 May 2024. <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/xwfy/fyrthhdjzw/16310980.html>
- 2 For a comprehensive breakdown of PLA activities during Joint Sword-2024A, including composition of PLA forces on each day, see Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense daily report of PLA activities, *Ministry of National Defense*, R.O.C. <https://www.mnd.gov.tw/PublishTable.aspx?Types=即時軍事動態&title=國防消息&Page=2>
- 3 Considering information released by the PLA and public sources, Joint Sword-2024A is recognized by observers as China's largest and closest military exercise ever conducted near Taiwan. See: Josephine Ma, "Mainland China's military wraps up Joint Sword-2024A drills near Taiwan," *South China Morning Post*, 25 May 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3264093/mainland-chinas-military-wraps-joint-sword-2024a-drills-near-taiwan>
- 4 To view a broadcast featuring Major General Meng Xiangqing from the National Defense University and Senior Colonel Tong Zhen from the Academy of Military Sciences discussing the 'Joint Sword-2024A' exercise, see the exclusive Xinhuanet video post, *Xinhuanet* (the official state news agency of the PRC known for propaganda and disinformation), 24 May 2024. [https://live.baidu.com/m/media/pclive/pchome/live.html?room\\_id=9254336688&source=h5pre](https://live.baidu.com/m/media/pclive/pchome/live.html?room_id=9254336688&source=h5pre)
- 5 A visual released by CNA that compares the 2022 PLA military drills around Taiwan to 'Joint Sword-2024A', *Central News Agency* (Taiwan state-owned news agency), 25 May 2024. [https://imgcdn.cna.com.tw/www/WebPhotos/1024/20240524/2000x2000\\_wmkn\\_02594021293743\\_0.jpg](https://imgcdn.cna.com.tw/www/WebPhotos/1024/20240524/2000x2000_wmkn_02594021293743_0.jpg)
- 6 To watch a clip of Senior Colonel Zhang Chi, Deputy Director at the National Defense University, briefly describing the effects of sieging Taiwan, see *China Net Culture* video post, China Net Culture (a state-run web portal of the State Council Information Office, part of the CCP Central Propaganda Department), 24 May 2024. <https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&id=6554376293806421436>
- 7 Nectar Gan, Eric Cheung, Brad Lendon, "China says military drills encircling Taiwan designed to test its ability to 'seize power,'" *CNN*, 24 May 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/23/asia/china-military-drills-taiwan-second-day-intl-hnk/index.html>



## China Assures and Warns Japan Regarding Taiwan

By Dodge Billingsley  
OE Watch Commentary

In June, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense (MoD) issued a statement that sought to temper Japanese concerns that any action by Beijing might take to reclaim Taiwan would affect Japanese territory. The statement issued on 27 June and reported across multiple media channels including the official newspaper of the People's Republic of China's Central Military Commission, *Jiefangjun Bao*, came in the aftermath of a report that Japan had issued a draft plan to evacuate residents of Okinawa prefecture and Sakishima islands to

Kyushu and Yamaguchi prefectures should China invade Taiwan. The Chinese MoD spokesperson pointed out that "Taiwan is China's Taiwan" and the Taiwan question had nothing to do with Japan, and thus, "China opposes the Japanese side's playing up regional tensions under the excuse of the so-called 'Taiwan contingency.'" The spokesman noted that Japan, which had inflicted countless atrocities against China in the past, "should have reflected on its history of aggression and be prudent about its words and deeds." The statement also reiterated China's view of the operational environment in the

region, emphasizing that Taiwan is the core of Beijing's core interests<sup>1</sup> and noting that 1.4 billion Chinese would take action should any person or entity seek to restrict Beijing from its efforts to bring Taiwan under Beijing rule. Collectively, these statements underscore the fact that while China does not seek conflict with Japan, it also insists that Japan not impede any would-be efforts to seize Taiwan. As one of the United States' most important allies in the Asia-Pacific, the delicate brinkmanship between China and Japan serves as a useful barometer of regional sentiment.



***“The Taiwan question is at the core of China’s core interests. It bears on the political foundation of China-Japan bilateral relations and is the red line that must not be crossed [by Japan].”***

Map illustrates the close proximity between Taiwan and the Japanese Sakishima Islands and Okinawa Islands.

Source: T.Kabayashi, [https://wikitravel.org/shared/File:Japan\\_Okinawa\\_map.png](https://wikitravel.org/shared/File:Japan_Okinawa_map.png);  
Attribution: CC BY SA 3.0

**Source:** “Taiwan Question has nothing to do with Japan: Defense Spokesman,” Chinese Ministry of National Defense as reported by *Jiefangjun Bao* (official newspaper of the People’s Republic of China’s Central Military Commission), 27 June 2024. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/VOICES/MinistryofNationalDefense\\_209794/16319219.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/VOICES/MinistryofNationalDefense_209794/16319219.html)

*“The Taiwan question is at the core of China’s core interests. It bears on the political foundation of China-Japan bilateral relations and is the red line that must not be crossed, “ said Senior Colonel Wu Qian, spokesperson for China’s Ministry of National Defense, at a regular press conference on Thursday.*

*According to reports, the Japanese government has released a draft plan to evacuate residents of Okinawa prefecture and Sakishima islands to Kyushu and Yamaguchi prefectures. Some analysts believe that Japan’s evacuation plan aims to cope with the so-called “Taiwan contingency”. Not long ago, Chinese Ambassador to Japan said that if Japan ties itself onto the chariot of splitting China, its people will be led into a fire pit.*

*When being asked to make a comment, the spokesperson first pointed out that Taiwan is China’s Taiwan and the Taiwan question has nothing to do with Japan.*

*“China opposes the Japanese side’s playing up regional tensions under the excuse of the so-called*

*‘Taiwan contingency’,” stressed the spokesperson, adding that the biggest threat to cross-Strait peace is the separatist activities for “Taiwan independence” and the connivance and support for such moves from external forces.*

*“Japan, as a country that had colonized Taiwan for a long time and committed countless atrocities against Chinese people, in particular should have reflected on its history of aggression and be prudent about its words and deeds,” said the spokesperson.*

*The spokesperson urged the Japanese side to earnestly abide by the spirit of the four political documents between China and Japan and the commitments it has made and stop using the Taiwan question to provoke confrontation.*

*“More than 1.4 billion Chinese people will take resolute and strong actions against any individual or force that attempts to interfere in China’s internal affairs or hinder China’s reunification,” stressed the spokesperson.*

Notes:

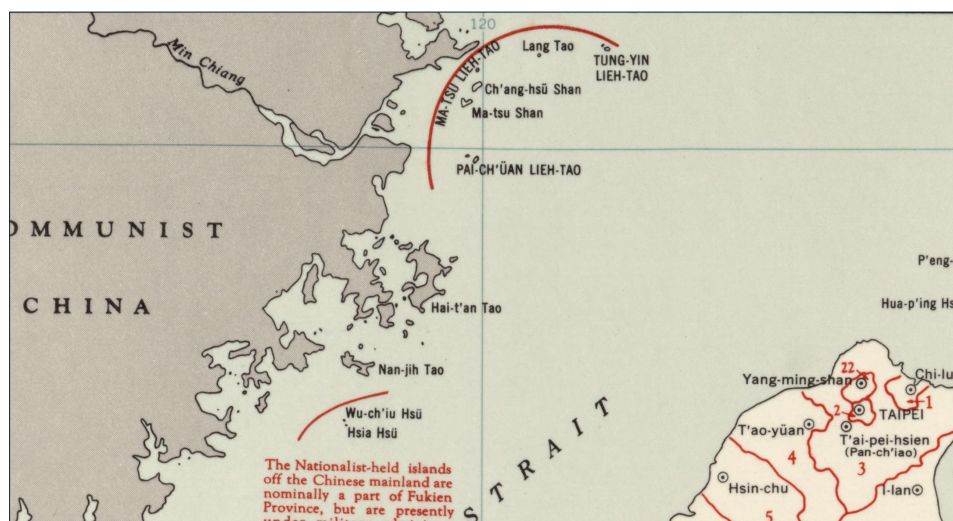
- 1 In June 2023 Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, reiterated the same phrase in person to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken while Blinken was on an official visit to the region, see: Dodge Billingsley, “Chinese Officials Justify Reaction To Western Presence In Taiwan Strait,” *OE Watch*, 07-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/chinese-officials-justify-reaction-to-western-presence-in-taiwan-strait-2/>



## China Creating Undersea Cable Network in Response to United States Isolation Efforts

By Dodge Billingsley  
OE Watch Commentary

A battle has recently been playing out between China and the United States in a bid to secure information, particularly in regard to the role of undersea cable networks. According to the excerpted article from the Japan-based *Nikkei Asia* news agency, Beijing is working around U.S. efforts to isolate China from the global undersea cable network, which carries 95% of the world's data.<sup>1</sup> According to the article, China is striking deals and building its own network of cables with regional neighbors, recognizing the U.S. is using its political power to pressure the mostly U.S.-based data companies that develop the undersea cable network, to exclude China from access to future undersea cables. A Chinese executive interviewed by *Nikkei Asia* asserted that “we don’t care about the U.S. blacklisting” and claimed that the United States’ undersea network is its “tool to keep its [U.S.] hegemony.” He concluded that the undersea cable race is really a diplomatic one, noting that China only needs other governments’ consent to link with China. As per the article, there are at least three major China-led projects under construction in the Asia-Pacific region, linking China and Hong Kong to multiple Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.



Close up section of historical map showing Islands under Taiwan’s control including the Matsu Islands (upper left), the location of a severed undersea cable in early 2023. Taiwan suspected China of cutting the cable as part of its hybrid war against Taiwan.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matsu\\_Islands\\_-\\_/media/File:Nationalist\\_China\\_-\\_administrative\\_divisions\\_-\\_LOC\\_2007633622.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matsu_Islands_-_/media/File:Nationalist_China_-_administrative_divisions_-_LOC_2007633622.jpg); Attribution: Public Domain

Part of China’s ability to develop its own undersea cable network in the region is that they do not require any new or emerging technology. China currently has all the necessary fiber optic technology necessary to lay its own cables and maintain its own network. That ability is one reason the U.S. sees the global undersea cable network as vulnerable to both sabotage<sup>2</sup> and eavesdropping by China. Last February, Taiwan suspected Chinese vessels of cutting two under-

sea cables linking Taiwan to its Matsu Islands.<sup>3</sup> In response, in October, Taiwan announced it was working to back up its communications network to protect itself in the event of a cross-strait conflict.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that as tensions continue in the region two independent networks of undersea cables will emerge and require the necessary security attention by each side to ensure against compromise.

**“The U.S.’s undersea network is its tool to keep its hegemony,” said Wu, the FiberHome executive.”**

**Source:** Cheng Ting-Fang, Lauly Li, Tsubasa Suruga and Shunsuke Tabeta, “China’s undersea cable drive defies U.S. sanctions,” *Nikkei Asia* (Japanese global and regional business news source), 26 June 2024. [https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/China-s-undersea-cable-drive-defies-U.S.-sanctions?utm\\_campaign=IC\\_editor\\_in\\_chief\\_picks\\_free&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=NA\\_newsletter&utm\\_content=article\\_link&del\\_type=2&pub\\_date=20240628153000&seq\\_num=9&si=91811959-21c4-44f4-9028-13136a8d0104](https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/China-s-undersea-cable-drive-defies-U.S.-sanctions?utm_campaign=IC_editor_in_chief_picks_free&utm_medium=email&utm_source=NA_newsletter&utm_content=article_link&del_type=2&pub_date=20240628153000&seq_num=9&si=91811959-21c4-44f4-9028-13136a8d0104)

*Stretching 1.4 million kilometers – long enough to wrap around the Earth more than thirty times – the world’s undersea cable network is the backbone of global communications. These cables lie hundreds or even thousands of meters below the waves, carry over 95% of the world’s data and cost billions of dollars each to install. Using companies like FiberHome, China is determined to break America’s grip on the industry.*

*The U.S. and a handful of its allies have dominated the undersea cable market for decades, and Washington is pushing hard for “clean” communications networks free of Chinese involvement, citing national security risks. But the quiet rise of companies like FiberHome underscores how hard it is for the U.S. to contain China’s progress in an industry that it has become proficient in.*

*Unlike cutting-edge semiconductors, where U.S. export controls on production tools have set China’s chip industry back by years, experts agree with Wu’s assessment: China has no need for foreign technology*

*in fiber-optic cables. Instead, success in this industry has come to rely more on state-level diplomatic ties, with politics largely determining who has access to crucial markets and who does not.*

*“The U.S.’s undersea network is its tool to keep its hegemony,” said Wu, the FiberHome executive. “The subsea cable industry is like a membership club, we all need other governments’ consent to link with their countries. ... This is a diplomatic race.”*

*Arguably the most important market is in China’s own backyard. The Asia-Pacific region is the global leader in subsea cable investment, recording more projected spending from 2024 to 2026 than anywhere else in the world, according to data from Washington-based research company TeleGeography. At least three major China-led projects are under construction in the Asia-Pacific region, linking China and Hong Kong with multiple Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.*

Notes:

- 1 For more information, see: Dodge Billingsley, “Limiting China to Undersea Data Cable Network Threatens To Be a Flashpoint,” *OE Watch*, 06-2024. (URL when available)
- 2 U.S. officials have warned about potential national-security risks from SBSS, a Chinese undersea cable maintenance company that helps repair broken internet lines, see: “U.S. Fears Undersea Cables Are Vulnerable to Espionage From Chinese Repair Ships,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 May 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/china-internet-cables-repair-ships-93fd6320>
- 3 The Matsu Islands, officially Lienchiang County, are an archipelago of 36 islands and islets in the East China Sea governed by the Republic of China (Taiwan), situated alongside the southeastern coast of mainland China. In early 2023, an undersea cable linking Taiwan to its Matsu Islands was cut effectively disrupting internet connectivity to the Matsu Islands’ 14,000 residents. A Chinese freighter and fishing vessel were suspected of cutting the cable but Taiwan made no formal protest. See: Joe Brock, “U.S. and China wage war beneath the waves – over internet cables,” *Reuters*, 24 March 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/us-china-tech-cables/>
- 4 See, Lawrence Chung, “Taiwan ramps up backup satellite network plans in island defence strategy.” *South China Morning Post*, 7 October 2023. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3237034/taiwan-ramps-backup-satellite-network-plans-island-defence-strategy>



## Russia Gains Combat Power From Volunteer Service



Former army colonel and current commander of GROM Kaskad, Dmitrii Sablin.

Source: [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Саблин,\\_Дмитрий\\_Вадимович#/media/Файл:Дмитрий\\_Саблин\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Саблин,_Дмитрий_Вадимович#/media/Файл:Дмитрий_Саблин_(cropped).jpg); Attribution: Aleksey Klimov, CC BY-SA 4.0

By Chuck Bartles  
OE Watch Commentary

Russia's volunteer formations, such as the GROM Kaskad unmanned aircraft brigade, are increasingly providing Russia with additional avenues of generating combat power during its war in Ukraine. However, the ways that such formations are portrayed and understood in Russia and Ukraine vary significantly.

The first accompanying article excerpted from the website of *United Russia* (Putin's political party), extols the values of the GROM "Kaskad" unmanned aircraft brigade and features information about a memorial (monument) to its servicemen.<sup>1</sup> GROM "Kaskad" has its roots in October

2022, when Dmitrii Sablin (a retired Colonel, prominent businessman, 'United Russia' party member, and Duma deputy) signed a contract with the Russian Armed Forces and created the BARS "Kaskad" UAV unit, a volunteer formation.<sup>2</sup> In October 2023, the unit was upgraded to a brigade and subordinated to the Russian Aerospace Forces. By March 2024, GROM "Kaskad" reportedly consisted of two reconnaissance-strike UAV battalions, two reconnaissance-strike UAV squadrons, and supporting units—in total, 54 UAV crews, with 10 different types of UAVs. GROM "Kaskad" crews have reportedly destroyed over 7,000 targets and flown 18,000 combat missions.

The second accompanying article excerpted from the pro-Ukrainian *Center of Journalistic Investigations*, gives a more negative take on GROM "Kaskad," purporting that the brigade "is for parliamentarians and children of public officials who would like to participate in the war but far away from the front line." Although GROM "Kaskad" almost certainly has a lower casualty rate than Russia's assault detachments, both Ukrainian and Russian UAV operators are often targeted, and are very much "on the front line." Service in GROM "Kaskad" is likely far safer than other forms of Russia service in Ukraine, but the likely real benefit is that GROM "Kaskad," and other volunteer forma-

tions offer fixed contracts for terms of service that cannot be involuntarily extended or "stop loss-ed," unlike contract servicemen, including the involuntarily mobilized, with the Russian Ministry of Defense.

GROM "Kaskad" and other such volunteer formations are showing the innovative ways that Russia is creating and projecting combat power. Aggressive contract service recruitment and partial mobilization have filled Russian ranks showing that centrally managed, top-down control is still needed. But volunteer formations also appear to be important, as they offer more flexibility and provide a more palatable form of service for elites and those with vital technical skills that might otherwise shirk from military service.

***"The unit [GROM "Kaskad"] is for parliamentarians and children of public officials who would like to participate in the war but far away from the front line. It is easier to send other children to the war."***

**Source:** Alexey Mikhailov, Roman Kretsul, and Vladimir Matveev, “В Москве открыт мемориал бойцам бригады беспилотной авиации ГРОМ «Каскад» (A memorial to the fighters of the GROM “Kaskad” unmanned aircraft brigade has been opened in Moscow),” *Yedinaya Rossiya* (website of the ‘United Russia’ political party), 31 May 2024. <https://er.ru/activity/news/v-moskve-otkryt-memorial-bojcam-brigady-bespilotnoj-aviacii-grom-kaskad>

*In Moscow, on the territory of the central headquarters of the “Combat Brotherhood”, a military memorial was opened to the “Stuntmen” - fallen and alive.” It is dedicated to the fighters of the separate GROM “Kaskad” [ГРОМ «Каскад»] unmanned aircraft brigade. The idea of opening the monument was proposed by a colonel, State Duma deputy from United Russia, first brigade commander Dmitry Sablin.*

*“This monument is not just a perpetuation of the memory of heroes, it is a memorial of true love for one’s Motherland, dedication, and courage. The BARS “Kaskad” detachment, today the GROM “Kaskad” brigade, is first and foremost a symbol of volunteerism. Not only for people with military experience, but also people of civilian professionals. And, most importantly, those who did not have the obligation to do this by order,” said the First Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyyenko, who took part in the opening ceremony of the memorial.*

*He noted that Kaskad had seven thousand destroyed targets, behind which stood thousands of saved lives of Russian military personnel and civilians. “Thank*

*you very much, guys, you are an example of colossal courage and real heroism for us,” said Sergei Kiriyyenko...*

*In turn, Dmitry Sablin noted that the “stuntmen” conducted more than 18 thousand combat missions. “I want to say words of gratitude to all military personnel, volunteers, who are currently serving in the brigade, and who served in it. Thank you for your courage and fearlessness. We will always remember the fallen and continue our work. Our motto: a “stuntman” is someone who can do what others won’t do. And may this always accompany you in life. Victory will be ours!” - he said...*

*On October 1, 2023, the GROM “Kaskad” unmanned aviation brigade was created as part of the Russian Aerospace Forces, the commander of which was Colonel, State Duma deputy Dmitry Sablin. The GROM “Kaskad” brigade has at its disposal all currently available UAVs in service with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. The unit’s crews are concentrated along the entire front line and destroy enemy equipment, including Western equipment. Many GROM “Kaskad” fighters were awarded state awards, some of them posthumously.*

**Source:** Valentyna Samar and Vladyslav Marchenko “«GROM Kaskad». Who Fights against Ukraine in the First Russian Drone Brigade,” *Center of Journalistic Investigations* (Pro-Ukrainian website), 18 May 2024. <https://investigator.org.ua/en/investigations/266753/>

*In December 2022, Vladimir Putin awarded Dmitrii Sablin as commander of BARS «Kaskad» with the Order of Courage. The first official report about «Kaskad» by the Russian Ministry of Defence appeared on March 22, 2024, i.e. half a*

*year after its creation. Minister Sergei Shoigu sent greeting telegrams to five Russian military units for their achievements in so-called «special military operation».<sup>3</sup>*

*continue on 17*



*Russian telegram channel «ВЧК-ОГТИ» treats BARS «Kaskad» as the unit for Russian parliamentarians who would like to receive «the status of participant of special military operation». The unit is «for parliamentarians and children of public officials who would like to participate in the war but far away from the front line. It is easier to send other children to the war».*

*«Kaskad» is full of politicians and high rank officials. Besides Sablin, five members of the Russian State Dume voluntary joined «Kaskad»: Yevgenii Pervyshov, Oleg Golikov, Sergei Sokol, Dmitrii Khubezov and Oleg Kolesnikov. There are also members of legislative assemblies of Russian*

*regions, two «parliamentarians of «Donetsk People's Republic» and a lot of public officials.*

*Some of them have served minimum term of three months. Other people served several terms. Many politicians made short visits to «Kaskad». It is interesting that Russian media «The Insider» found that commander of «Kaskad» Dmitrii Sablin relaxed in Turkish resort areas.*

*Major Oleg Alekseevich Kolesnikov is the commander of the 2nd reconnaissance attack battalion of brigade «GROM «Kaskad». He is the member of the Russian State Duma (for the fourth time in a row) and millionaire from Chelyabinsk region of Russia...*

Notes:

- 1 (ГРОМ «Каскад»): The term “Kaskad” is likely in reference to the KGB’s “Kaskad” special operations task force in Afghanistan. “Grom” is the Russian word for thunder, but the term is likely used in reference to the well-regarded General Boris Gromov, the commander of the Soviet 40th Army. General Gromov was the last Soviet soldier to leave Afghanistan.
- 2 The Special Army Combat Reserve (BARS) [Боевой Армейский Резерв Специальный (БАРС)], in some sources the National Army Combat Reserve (BARS) [Боевой Армейский Резерв Страны (БАРС)] began as an operational reserve program of record for the Russian Armed Forces around 2021. Since the start of the special military operation, many of Russia’s newly formed units are designated as “BARS” formations.
- 3 Moscow uses the term spetsial’naya voyennaya operatsiya (“special military operation”) or spetsoperatsiya (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.

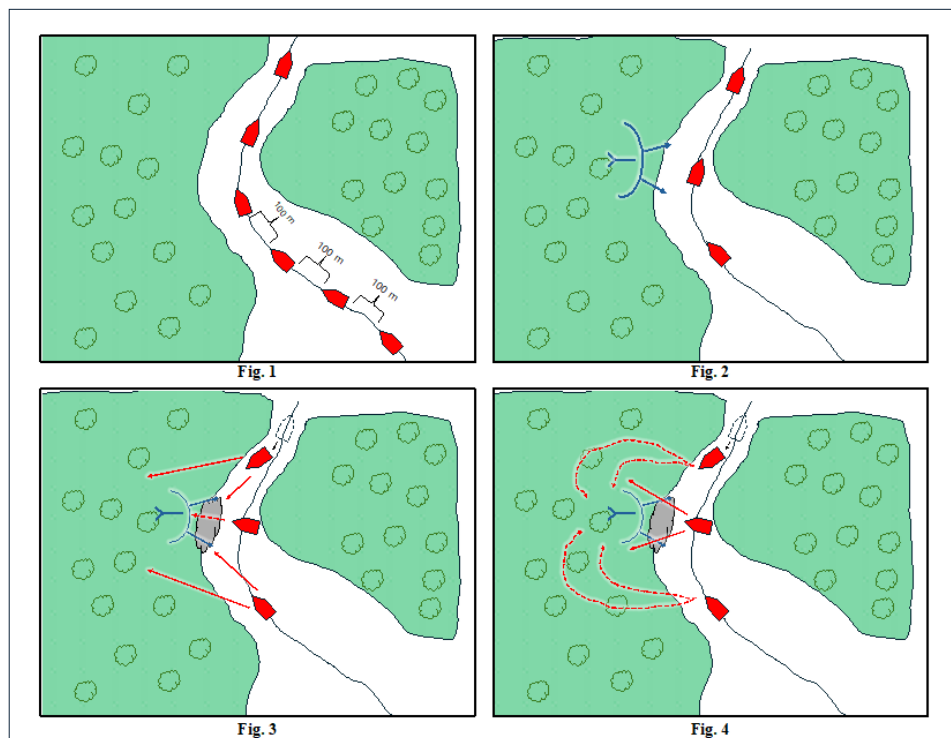
## Russia Sees Need for Emphasized “React to Ambush” Training

By MAJ Andrew Fisher  
OE Watch Commentary

While few units from any nation’s military can survive an ambush unscathed, an article in the Russian military journal *Armeiskii sbornik* highlights the need for additional emphasis on “react to ambush drills” in Russian military training programs. These recommendations reflect continuing training deficiencies in basic soldier tasks despite lessons learned in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Ukraine.

The article’s authors recommend adding a sixth task to Chapter 5 of the Russian combat manual “Actions in Armed Conflict, Part 3: Platoon, Squad, Tank.”<sup>1</sup> Titling the task “Educating Personnel on Counter-ambush Activities,” the authors first highlight the need to practice counter-ambush tactics more frequently in individual and collective training. The article further outlines in detail the steps in reacting to an ambush. To begin, commanders must identify likely ambush points and plan accordingly. These points will likely be main avenues of approach containing terrain restricting movement, funneling targets, alongside cover and concealment.

The training recommendations mirror U.S. Army battle drills. Near ambushes are defined by an enemy being within hand grenade range



Reacting to Ambushes Inside and Outside of 35m, Illustrated. Fig. 1 – 2x BTR Platoons travel along a road; 100m spacing is maintained. Fig. 2 – An enemy initiates an ambush on the rear of the formation. Fig. 3 – Within 35m, those in the fire zone immediately return fire and deploy smoke and fragmentation grenades; front and rear elements provide covering fire, allowing those in the fire zone to assault the ambushers position. Fig. 4 – Outside of 35m, those in the fire zone return fire and deploy smoke; the front or rear element assaults a flank or the rear of the ambusher’s position while the other provides covering fire.

Source: Andrew Fisher; Attribution: Author grants permission to use

up to 35m. Those caught within the ambush must immediately return fire with all possible weapons, directing fire against enemy positions. Smoke and fragmentation grenades are used to further suppress adversaries and conceal Russian forces in the “fire zone,” enabling assaults on the ambusher’s positions. Russian forces outside the fire zone provide supporting fire. Far ambushes are those outside of 35m. Actions of troops within the fire zone are similar to those in

**“Counter-ambush actions in combat training practice, in our opinion, is not given due importance.”**

the near-side ambush, except the elements outside the fire zone maneuver to attack the ambusher’s flanks or rear. Those in the fire zone adjust fire as necessary to avoid fratricide.



The authors acknowledge the need to train these skills is due to obvious failures and losses in both the initial steps of the Ukrainian invasion in 2022 and the First Chechen War,<sup>2</sup> both of which were consequences of lack of

training. Similar issues also appear in accounts from the Soviet-Afghanistan War,<sup>3</sup> where Russian forces failed to recognize likely ambush points and hesitated in reacting to ambushes, costing them in men and equipment.

Reacting to ambush is the antithesis to the calculated, fires-heavy tactics frequently used by Russian forces and could be a challenge to the Russian largely conscripted ground force.

**Source:** A. Levchenko, “Засада – не приговор (The Ambush is not a Sentence),” *Army Review* (monthly Russian military periodical), Vol. 6, June 2024. <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/publication/470>

**Pg. 30-31:** “The practice of military operations in recent military conflicts showed that any movement of a unit, be it large or small, not to mention single machines, is always associated with maximum risk of being attacked by the enemy from ambush. This was especially true for the first stage of the SVO in Ukraine. So, we need to talk about it, especially since counter-ambush training developments in combat training practice, in our opinion, is not given due importance.

...The word “ambush” has become something like an objective obstacle, “an irresistible force”. Meanwhile, in the overwhelming majority of the analyzed facts of being ambushed and the destruction of columns, commanders’ errors are visible in organizing and conducting a march. Although, according to all governing documents, the responsibility of the unit commander is to train officers and soldiers to act when ambushed.

In our opinion, there is a need to add to Chapter 5 of the Manual for Training for Combined Armed Combat ‘Actions During Armed Conflict’ (Part 3 ‘Platoon, squad, tank’) one more point number 6, entitled ‘Personnel Training in counter-ambush action events.’”

**Pg. 31:** “The effectiveness of the actions of a unit marching through its territory and ambushed by enemy

reconnaissance and sabotage groups, directly depends on the degree of training of personnel to fight in data conditions. The response is usually heavy fire on ambush positions,

from all types of weapons, protection of the unit caught in the affected area, and setting up smokescreens and attacking enemy positions... To immediately attack ambush positions from the front, flank or rear, all personnel must be previously trained... Attacking the ambush’s flanks is preferable, as it is easier to organize contact... Responsibilities of the unit commander is to train officers and soldiers to act upon contact with an ambush even without his participation.”

**Pg. 80:** “Every officer, sergeant and soldiers are trained to act in two situations (regardless of type of travel). First, the enemy opened fire from a grenade throwing distance (up to 35 m). In this case part of the unit is under strong, concentrated fire from the attackers. Without additional command, this part of the unit responds with maximum fire in the direction of the ambush, throws smoke and fragmentation grenades and attacks enemy positions. Those who are outside affected areas, open fire in the direction of the ambush positions, covering the attack.

Second, the enemy opened fire from a distance exceeding the above distance (more than 35 m). Part of

continue on 20

*the unit that fell into the affected area lies down, puts up a smoke screen and returns fire in the direction of the ambush. The second part of the unit, which does*

*not fall into the affected area, can and must attack the ambush positions from the flank or from rear by fire and maneuver.”*

Notes:

- 1 The other five tasks within Chapter 5 are “Common Actions (ex. conduct counterterrorism operations, maintain border integrity), Blocking (more similar in definition to the US Army ‘isolating’ tactical task), Searching and Reconnaissance, Serving in a Checkpoint, and Convoys.”
- 2 For case studies on Chechen ambush tactics during the first and second Chechen wars, see; Dodge Billingsley, “Fangs of the Lone Wolf: Chechen Tactics in the Russian Chechen Wars 1994-2009,” Foreign Military Studies Office and United States Marine Corp’s Studies and Analysis Division. 2012.
- 3 These include “The Other Side of the Mountain” by LTC(R) Lester Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali which provide insights on mujahadin activities against Soviet and Afghan government forces during the Soviet-Afghan War. Vignettes 1-16, particularly Vignettes 6 and 16, detail *mujahadin* ambush tactics and Soviet responses. Chapter 5 of “The Bear Went over the Mountain” by LTC(R) Grau discusses from the Soviet perspective reactions to ambushes.

## Russian Drift Station Vital to Arctic Research Effort

OE Watch Commentary  
By Les Grau

The Arctic has always been important to Russia<sup>1</sup> and according to the excerpted article from Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, Russia is conducting Arctic research using a large drift station, the *Severny Polyus*, or North Pole.<sup>2</sup> The *Severny Polyus* is a self-propelled platform vessel that houses 34 scientists, 15 laboratories, and crew on board and is designed to autonomously drift through Arctic sea ice for up to two years. According to Russian Minister of Natural Resources, Aleksandr Kozlov, the data collected from the *Severny Polyus* will form the basis for “understanding of climate change and climate prognosis, development of climate adaptation measures, they are important for providing security to shipping on the Northern Sea Route.” The article notes that Russia’s new Marine Doctrine includes the use of civilian ships and infrastructure for military purposes,



Admiralty Shipyards in St Petersburg, Russia built the *Severny Polyus* drift station.  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiralty\\_Shipyards\\_-\\_/media/File:Admiralty\\_Shipyard.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiralty_Shipyards_-_/media/File:Admiralty_Shipyard.jpg); Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0

including not only trawlers and ice-breakers, but also platforms like the *Severny Polyus*. The deployment of the *Severny Polyus* to conduct Arctic research is yet another indication of Russia’s vision of the operational environment in the Arctic region, giving Russia a continued presence in the vital region.

**“Since it set out from St.Petersburg in early September 2022, the *Severny Polyus* (“North Pole”) has drifted more than 3,000 nautical miles through the sea-ice from the East Siberian Sea to the Greenland Sea.”**

**Source:** Atle Staalesen, “Russia says its North Pole platform is key to understanding climate change,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 23 May 2024. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2024/05/russia-says-its-north-pole-platform-key-understanding-climate-change>

*Since it set out from St.Petersburg in early September 2022, the *Severny Polyus* (“North Pole”) has drifted more than 3,000 nautical miles through the sea-ice from the East Siberian Sea to the Greenland Sea. On board has been a crew of 16 and a research team of 34. The ship in late April made it out of the ice north*

*of Svalbard and in early May sailed southwards. On the 10th of May it was located to the west of the Ice Fjord at Svalbard and shortly later made it to the waters north of the Bear Island. For unclear reasons, the vessel for several days stayed in the waters of the Bear Island before it proceeded towards Murmansk.*

*continue on 22*



*According to Russian Minister of Natural Resources Aleksandr Kozlov, the Severny Polyus offers Russia unique insights into the Arctic. “With the start of the operations of the self-propelled and ice-protected platform Russia has gotten the possibility to undertake long-term scientific experiments on high latitudes,” Kozlov said in a comment delivered in connection with the arrival of the Severny Polyus in Murmansk.*

*“The researchers have access to 50 types of research work: from meteorology to geophysics, glaciology, seismology and aerology. The data will form the basis for understanding of climate change and climate prognosis, development of climate adaptation measures, they are important for providing security to shipping on the Northern Sea Route.” Kozlov has been Minister of Natural Resources since 2000 and was reappointed in May 2024. He has also been closely engaged in natural resource cooperation with several foreign countries, among them China and North Korea.*

*...In the course of the 20-month expedition, the geologists took a number of samples from the Arctic seabed. The samples will be used as part of Russia’s efforts to expand its borders on the Arctic shelf, representatives of the expedition say.*

*The Severny Polyus is designed to be able to*

Notes:

- 1 Russia began exploring the Arctic in the 11th century. Trans-Arctic navigation continued into the 16th century during voyages to Spitzbergen-Gruman and Novaya Zemlya. In 1764-1776, Captain Chichagov attempted an expedition across the North Pole to the Pacific Ocean. Chichagov’s attempt failed, but much scientific knowledge on the Arctic waters were gained.
- 2 In 1902, Fritjof Nansen, a famous Norwegian Arctic explorer, proposed the idea of a scientific drifting ice station to chart the Arctic waters. In the 1930s, Soviet scientists conducted studies of the Arctic on drifting ships. In 1937, the Soviets built a drifting ice station, “North Pole 1,” on an Arctic ice floe supported by Soviet aviation, followed by “North Pole 2” and so on until “North Pole 40” was built. North Pole 40 had to be evacuated in 2013 as the ice floe was breaking up.

*autonomously drift through Arctic sea-ice for up to two years. On board are 15 labs where researchers can work year-round. The ship is operated by Russia’s meteorological service Roshydromet...*

*The research platform has replaced Russia’s Arctic expeditions based on ice floes organized since the 1930s. The quickly vanishing Arctic sea-ice made it increasingly hard to organize the expeditions and the last real ice station, the “North Pole-40”, was held in the winter of 2012.*

*Albeit built for research purposes, the Severny Polyus could ultimately also be applied by the Russian military. The country’s new Marine Doctrine includes a high stress on use of civilian ships and infrastructure for military purposes. That could include not only trawler and icebreakers, but also the Severniy Polus.*

*“The researchers have access to 50 types of research work: from meteorology to geophysics, glaciology, seismology and aerology. The data will form the basis for understanding of climate change and climate prognosis, development of climate adaptation measures, they are important for providing security to shipping on the Northern Sea Route” Kozlov explained....*

## Russia Demonstrating Power Projection Capabilities With Havana Port Call

By Ryan Berg  
OE Watch Commentary

Latin America holds an important place in Russia's foreign and defense policy.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, Latin America is a key battleground for pushing back against the United States' operations in the European theater—specifically Ukraine.

According to the excerpted article in the Spanish daily *El País*, the recent port call of four Russian naval vessels in Havana, Cuba should be seen within this context. Prior to arriving in Cuba, the three surface warships and a nuclear-powered submarine participated in missile exercises in the Atlantic Ocean. While Russia's

Navy had been visiting the Caribbean more frequently in the past, COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have curtailed the number of these visits. *El País* also reports that once the Russian warships leave Cuba they will conduct exercises in the Caribbean before continuing onwards to Venezuela. The Cuban government was quick to point out that none of the vessels are nuclear armed. However, as reported in the second excerpted article by the Argentine outlet *Infobae*, Russia assured the media that the submarine carried hypersonic missiles. Furthermore, *Infobae* concluded that the timing of the visits was not mere coincidence: the visit came

approximately one week after Russian President Vladimir Putin mused about placing weapons in countries close to the United States in response to Washington's support of Ukraine.

This development is significant because it reaffirms Russia's close ties with Cuba and Venezuela and indicates that Russia continues to view Latin America as a central region in near-peer competition. It is also notable that regional responses to the visit have been muted. Few Latin American governments have said anything publicly—possibly a harbinger of broader Russian influence in keeping Latin American countries non-aligned on geopolitical issues.<sup>2</sup>

**“Cuba is Russia’s most important partner in the Western Hemisphere from a purely geopolitical and geostrategic point of view.”**



An **Admiral Gorshkov** class frigate at sea was part of the five Russian warships that paid a port of call to Cuba in June 2024.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_frigate\\_Admiral\\_Gorshkov\\_-\\_/media/File:Admiral\\_Gorshkov\\_frigate\\_03.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_frigate_Admiral_Gorshkov_-_/media/File:Admiral_Gorshkov_frigate_03.jpg);  
Attribution: CC BY 4.0

**Source:** “Llega al puerto de La Habana una flotilla de buques de guerra rusos con un submarino nuclear (A flotilla of Russian warships arrives at the port of Havana with a nuclear submarine),” *El País* (a Spanish daily with excellent regional coverage), 12 June 2024. <https://elpais.com/america/2024-06-12/llega-al-puerto-de-la-habana-una-flotilla-de-buques-de-guerra-rusos-con-un-submarino-nuclear.html>

*Until June 17, the ships will remain in Cuban waters...Before arriving in Havana, the Russian ships carried out exercises and maneuvers in the Atlantic. These are not the first naval maneuvers involving Cuba and Russia. In July the Russian Navy training ship Perekop spent several days in Havana. The frigate Almirante Gorshkov was there*

*in 2019...Cuba is Russia's most important partner in the Western Hemisphere from a purely geopolitical and geostrategic point of view and the meaning of this naval presence is not essentially different from the past: Russia wants to demonstrate that its navy is capable of crossing the oceans and reaching the coasts of Florida.*

**Source:** “Cuba profundiza su relación con Rusia: tres buques de guerra y un submarino llegarán a La Habana para ejercicios militares (Cuba deepens its relationship with Russia: three warships and a submarine will arrive in Havana for military exercises),” *Infobae* (an Argentine outlet with excellent regional coverage), 6 June 2024. <https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2024/06/06/cuba-profundiza-su-relacion-con-rusia-tres-buques-de-guerra-y-un-submarino-llegaran-a-la-habana-para-ejercicios-militares/>

*Although the military maneuvers have been planned in advance, they follow the words of the President of Russia about possible retaliation due to Ukrainian attacks against Russian territory with Western*

*weapons. The president mentioned the possibility of Moscow delivering military material to other countries to carry out ‘attacks against sensitive targets’ of Kyiv’s partners.*

Notes:

- 1 For more information on how Russia views Latin America, especially in the context of its war against Ukraine, see: Ryan C. Berg et al., “Two Years Later: LAC and Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 February 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/two-years-later-lac-and-russias-war-ukraine>
- 2 To read more about Russia’s strategy and how Latin America has remained relatively silent on Russia’s recent activities, and especially its war in Ukraine, see: Ryan C. Berg et al., “A Hesitant Hemisphere: How Latin America has been Shaped by the War in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 February 27 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/hesitant-hemisphere-how-latin-america-has-been-shaped-war-ukraine>



## Kazakhstan Imposes New Language Requirements for Citizens

By Lionel Beehner  
OE Watch Commentary

Kazakhstan has made it stricter for noncitizens to become naturalized citizens by requiring applicants to pass a series of history and language tests. According to the excerpted article from state-run news outlet *Kazinform*, “ignorance of the state language... as well as the basics of the history and Constitution... can become grounds for refusal to admit citizenship.” The move is part of a broader push by the government to promote and preserve the Kazakh language and possibly distance itself from Russian influence. The move comes amid remarks made by Russian commentators and academics who have called into question the legitimacy and sovereignty of Kazakhstan as a country. It may be interpreted as a move to reduce the role of the Russian language in schools, business, and other aspects of Ka-

zakhstani life. In January, a Russian historian, Mikhail Smolin, claimed on Russia’s state-owned television that Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan did not exist as nations.<sup>1</sup> The charge drew widespread condemnation in the region.

The new language rules, under the leadership of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, are just one manifestation of Kazakhstan’s pivot away from Russia toward other regional powers like China. Part of the Soviet legacy, particularly along its northern border with Russia, large portions of Kazakhstan’s population do not speak Kazakh. There are proposals underway to regulate the country’s media to require that a majority (55 percent) of all content on radio and television be broadcast in Kazakh by 2025. The widely heard phrase “Qazaqsha soyle” (*Speak Kazakh*) is

now commonly heard on the street and has even emerged as an internet meme.

Tokayev has defined his “multi-vector” foreign policy as one of pragmatism defined by “national interests and strategic tasks.”<sup>2</sup> Russian soft power and influence is arguably on the wane in Kazakhstan, whose youthful population—half of its population is under the age of 30—did not grow up under the Soviet Union and have absorbed the “de-colonization” discourse ascendant among other countries in the Global South.<sup>3</sup>

**“Knowledge of the language is necessary,” Interior Ministry spokesman Shyngys Alekeshev told reporters, adding that the new amendments were similar to those in countries like Germany, Canada and Turkey.”**



Statue of man and camels from Türkistan, Kazakhstan.

Source: Ekrem Osmanoglu, Unsplash, <https://unsplash.com/photos/statue-of-man-and-camels-during-daytime-2qbAZ7RGNM>; Attribution: Free to use under the Unsplash License

**Source:** “Ignorance of the state language at the elementary level can prevent admission to citizenship of the Republic of Kazakhstan - Ministry of Internal Affairs,” (Незнание госязыка на элементарном уровне может помешать в приеме в гражданство РК- МВД),” *Kazinform* (Kazakhstani state news agency) 20 May, 2024. <https://www.inform.kz/ru/neznanie-gosyazika-na-elementarnom-urovne-mozhet-pomeshat-v-prieme-v-grazhdanstvo-rk-mvd-0aabd6>

*“Ignorance of the state language at the elementary level, as well as the basics of the history and Constitution of our country can become grounds for refusal to admit citizenship. The elementary level will be determined by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The purpose of the amendments is rapid adaptation and integration into society. Knowledge of the language is first of all necessary for the citizens themselves who want to obtain our citizenship in order to quickly join society and participate in the life of the state,” said Shyngys Alekeshev at a briefing in the*

*Ministry of Internal Affairs.*

*“To prevent dual citizenship, a new basis for registering the loss of citizenship of the Republic of Kazakhstan is being introduced. Citizenship of our country will be lost if the passports of another state are used after acquiring citizenship of Kazakhstan. Previously, it was planned to lose citizenship of the Republic of Kazakhstan only for the acquisition of citizenship of a foreign state,” added Shyngys Alekeshev.*

Notes:

- 1 “Russian historian Mikhail Smolin: ‘Uzbekistan did not exist at all before the revolution,’” *Anhor.uz* (online Uzbek newspaper), 23 January 2024. <https://anhor.uz/news/there-were-no-uzbeks/>
- 2 “President Tokayev: Kazakhstan Continues Constructive, Balanced Foreign Policy Considering National Interests,” *The Astana Times* (English-language weekly), 3 January 2024. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/president-tokayev-kazakhstan-continues-constructive-balanced-foreign-policy-considering-national-interests/>
- 3 In May 2022, months after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, not a single leader of Central Asia commemorated Victory Day in Moscow—a symbolic blow to the Kremlin and a demonstration of the region’s growing autonomy. See: Temur Umarov, “Kazakhstan is Breaking out of Russia’s Grip,” *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/16/kazakhstan-russia-ukraine-war/>

## Iran Asserts the Strength of Its Air Defense Capabilities

By Holly Dagues  
OE Watch Commentary

Following Israel's recent attacks, Iranian authorities are seeking to reassert the capabilities of their air defense systems by making visits to various air defense zones in the country. On 19 April, Israel carried out a retaliatory strike in western Esfahan (Iran), which took out one of four Russian-made **S-300** air defense radars.<sup>1</sup> The Israeli attack was in response to Tehran and its proxies launching more than 300 drones, as well as ballistic and cruise missiles, in response to the Israeli strike on the Iranian embassy compound in Syria in mid-April.<sup>2</sup>

As per the first excerpted article from the state-run *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)*, during a visit to Iran's northwest, Iranian

Army Air Defense Force Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahifard underscored the capabilities of Iran's air defenses claiming it "has the capability to react promptly and momentarily against any potential threats." Sabahifard emphasized that "The Army's air defense force has achieved significant and valuable accomplishments, especially in the areas of producing various types of drones and radars." According to the second excerpted article by *IRIB*, Sabahifard said, "Radars, missiles, electronic warfare, and drone systems

will be unveiled in the near future and integrated into the country's air defense cycle."

These comments about the strength of the air defense systems are in line with other Iranian officials' efforts to downplay the Israeli retaliation in Esfahan. They have claimed that the attacks were merely carried out by quadcopters or, as they described, "toy" drones. But as evident by Sabahifard's comments, Tehran is trying to sell the notion that its air defense systems can withstand any threat. In the wake of the tit-for-tat with Israel, the Iranian military is reassessing its air defense capabilities and better preparing itself for the possibility of another attack.

***"[Iran's air defenses] have the capability to react promptly and momentarily against any potential threats."***



"Brigadier General [Alireza] Sabahifard visiting the radar and missile positions in Tabriz," *IRIB* (state media broadcaster), 11 June 2024.

Source: <https://www.tribnews.ir/00HrNy>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.



**Source:**

(Iran's air defense system has developed exponentially)," *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 9 June 2024. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00HqxS>

پیشرفت‌های پدافند هوایی ایران شتابنده و جهشی است"

*According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Brigadier General [Alireza] Sabahifard stated on Sunday during a visit to the air defense northwest region of the country: "The army's air defense force has achieved significant and valuable accomplishments, especially in the areas of producing various types of drones and radars. These achievements are very important and precious stones that are a source of pride for friends and a cause of concern for enemies"*

*The commander of the army's air defense force emphasized that air defense is at the forefront of the*

*country's defense, stating: "This divine force with its various defense systems has the capability to react promptly and momentarily against any potential threats..."*

*The commander of the army's air defense force pointed out that though air defense is successful and anonymous has been established within the armed forces, he added: "Air defense is a manifestation of the power of Islamic Iran, which under the shadow of self-belief and self-confidence for Iran was able to reach important developments for Iran and Iranians to be proud of today..."*

**Source:**

(Unveiling of various radar, missile, forestry and drone systems in the near future)," *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 11 June 2024. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00HrNy>

رونمایی از انواع سامانه‌های راداری، موشکی، جنگالی و پهپادی در آینده نزدیک"

*According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Brigadier General [Alireza] Sabahifard during his continued visit of the region's air defense in the northwest of the country, evaluated the combat capability and operational readiness of the radar and missile positions of the "Shahid Nikandish" Tabriz group.*

*The commander of the Army's Air Defense Force, referring to the effective role of air defense in improving the combat power of the armed forces, added: "Radars, missiles, electronic warfare, and drone systems will be unveiled in the near future and integrated into the country's air defense cycle."*

Notes:

- 1 Jon Gambrell, "Satellite photos suggest Iran air defense radar struck in Isfahan during apparent Israeli attack," *Associated Press*, 22 April 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/iran-israel-s300-radar-hit-isfahan-attack-ce6719d3df8ebf5af08b035427ee215c>
- 2 "Iran says Israel bombs its embassy in Syria, kills commanders," *Reuters*, 1 April 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-bombs-iran-embassy-syria-iranian-commanders-among-dead-2024-04-01/>; Matthew Mpoke Bigg, "What We Know About Iran's Attack on Israel and What Happens Next," *New York Times*, 14 April 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/14/world/middleeast/iran-israel-drones-attack.html>

## Bahrain May Renew Ties With Iran Following Saudi Arabia’s Lead

By Holly Dagues  
OE Watch Commentary

According to a state media interview with Mohammad Jamshidi, the Iranian president’s deputy chief of staff of political affairs, Bahrain “wants to resume relations with Iran.” The interview, reported by the *Iranian Students’ News Agency* on 7 June noted in May, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who said Manama welcomed the recommencement of ties between the Persian Gulf neighbors.<sup>1</sup> A similar message was reportedly delivered during Al Khalifa’s visit to China during the same month.<sup>2</sup>

If true, the resumption of Iran-Bahrain ties would end nearly a decade of separation. In 2016, Bahrain followed Saudi Arabia in ending ties with Iran after a mob stormed the Saudi missions in Tehran and Mashhad in response to the execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. An example of the warming ties occurred when President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and their cohort died in a helicopter crash on 19 May, and Bahrain’s King Hamad gave his condolences to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.<sup>3</sup> The Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani also attended the state funeral.<sup>4</sup>

For their parts, in March 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia recommenced ties through a China-brokered deal which allowed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait to follow suit (both had downgraded ties due to the storming incident). Bahrain appears to be the next in line, which is noteworthy not only because it is home to the United States Fifth Fleet, but also because it normalized relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords in 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Bahrain tends to follow Saudi Arabia’s thinking. With the ongoing Gaza war bringing strong criticism from the Arab streets of the region’s monarchies—Jordan, Bahrain, and



“President’s deputy chief of staff of political affairs Mohammad Jamshidi,” ISNA, 7 June 2024.

Source: <http://www.isna.ir/xdRgjG>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

the UAE—the revival of ties has the potential to keep the Persian Gulf calm (in the event of a regional escalation between Israel and Iran), and arguably balance out some of the angry sentiment towards Arab monarchies for their relations with Israel.

**“Bahrain directly sent this message that it wants to resume relations with Iran.”**

**Source:**

(Bahrain government’s desire to establish political relations with Iran),” *Iranian Students’ News Agency* (ISNA—semi-official news agency), 7 June 2024. <http://www.isna.ir/xdRgjG>

تمایل بحرین برای برقراری روابط سیاسی با ایران

*The president’s deputy chief of staff gave news of Bahrain’s desire to establish political relations with Iran. According to ISNA, Mohammad Jamshidi stated in part of a television interview: “Bahrain directly*

*sent this message that it wants to resume relations with Iran, however, this request was made during a meeting with Russian officials.”*

*continue on 30*

Notes:

- 1 “King of Bahrain Says No Reason to Delay Normalizing Ties with Iran,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 24 May 2024. <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/5023861-king-bahrain-says-no-reason-delay-normalizing-ties-iran>
- 2 “Bahrain sent message through Russia to normalize ties with Iran: Official,” *Al Jazeera*, 7 June 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/7/bahrain-sent-message-through-russia-to-normalise-ties-with-iran-official>
- 3 “President Sheikh Mohamed and other world leaders send condolences on death of Iran’s Raisi,” *The National*, 22 May 2024. <https://thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/05/20/iran-president-raisi-condolences>
- 4 “Assigned by HM King, Foreign Minister condoles with Iranian officials,” Bahrain Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 May 2024. <https://www.mofa.gov.bh/en/assigned-by-hm-king-foreign-minister-condoles-with-iranian-officials>
- 5 “The Abraham Accords,” US Department of State. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>



## Iran Spaceport To Open in 2025

By Michael Rubin  
OE Watch Commentary

The Iranian space industry is both a source of pride and a strategic asset. It is used to launch vehicles to carry satellites into space and has dual-use technology benefits that could also further Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile ambitions.<sup>1</sup> As per the excerpted article below, from *BultanNews.com*, a conservative Iranian website, Isa Zarepour, Iran's Minister of Communications, recently announced that its new spaceport is more than half complete and will be ready to launch satellites by February 2025. This announcement reflects both an expansion of Iran's space program, and potentially its missile program, and the growing strategic importance to the southern strategic port city of Chabahar.<sup>2</sup>

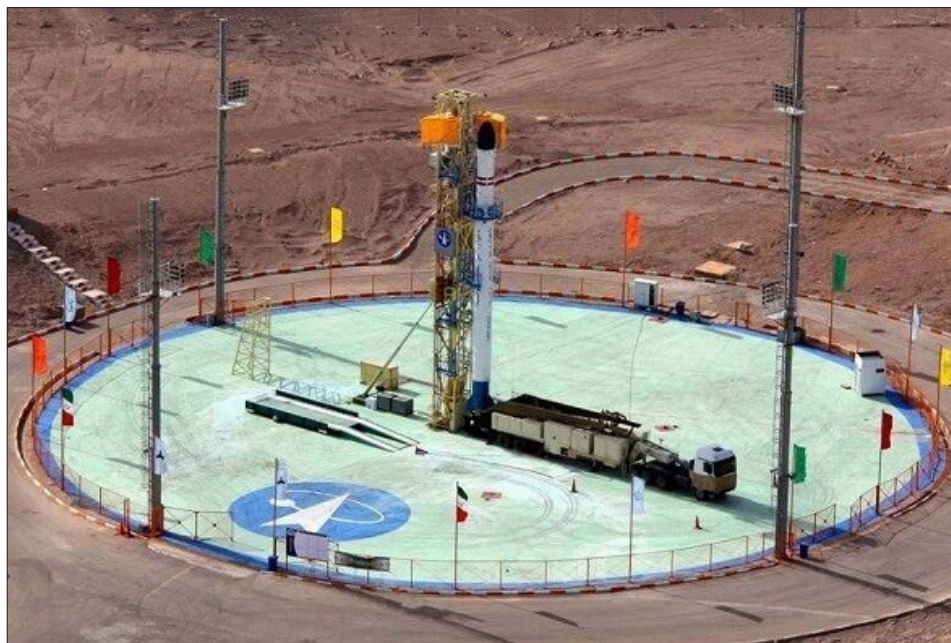
Iranian authorities take great pride in satellite launches, even though they fail almost as frequently as they succeed.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, Iran inaugurated its first spaceport, the Imam Khomeini Spaceport, in the northern city of Semnan, upgrading it significantly in 2017.<sup>4</sup> Iran also launches satellites from the Shahroud Test Center in Dasht-e Kavir. The Ebrahim Raisi government-initiated work on the new spaceport alongside other efforts to develop the Indian Ocean port of Chabahar. The Chabahar spaceport augments Iran's satellite launching capabilities but does not replace

the spaceport in Semnan. Reports about Chabahar excerpted here and reported in conservative websites do not mention Semnan, but Iran's original spaceport appears to remain operational.

through Western countries, Russia, or China. Second, Iran's growing military investment in Chabahar facility might suggest the launch facility will contribute to the region's growing military footprint.

***“The largest spaceport in West Asia is being built in Chabahar.”***

The number of satellites that Iran launches annually – six so far in 2024 – do not appear to justify the expense of a third facility, suggesting two other possibilities. First, Iran might seek to utilize its satellite launch industry to support other countries seeking to put satellites into space but suspicious or resistant to work



The Iranian spaceport in Chabahar.

Source: <https://newsmedia.tasnimnews.com/Tasnim/Uploaded/Image/1402/07/10/14020710092925717284705610.jpg>; Attribution: Tasnimnews.com

**Source:**

(Zarepour: Chabahar Space Base is 56 percent Complete),” *BultanNews.com* (an Iranian conservative website), 7 June 2024. <https://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/847281>

“زارعپور: پایگاه فضایی چابهار ۵۶ درصد پیشرفت داشته است”

*Yesterday [6 June 2024], during a video conference with Acting President Mohammad Mokhber and several ministers inaugurated three major projects in the fields of oil and gas industry, hydroelectricity, and communications in Sistan and Baluchestan province.*

*The communications project connected the 1,261st village with a population greater than 20 households, a 20 trillion rial [US\$475 million] communication network. In the ceremony, Isa Zarepour, the minister of Communications and Information Technology, said,*

*“The largest spaceport in West Asia is being built in Chabahar, and with the round-the-clock efforts of my colleagues, its first phase will be completed by the ‘decade of dawn’ [the anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran on 1-11 February 1979].”*

*Stating that 56 percent of the first phase of the project has been completed, Zarepour said, “The first launch from the Chabahar space port will take place this year.”*

Notes:

- 1 For discussion of the dual use nature of Iran’s satellite launch capability, see: Michael Rubin, “Zuljaneh: Iran’s New Solid-Fuel Rocket,” *OE Watch*, March 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/368233/download>
- 2 For previous discussions of Chabahar, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Announces Maritime Development Plan,” *OE Watch*, 01 2024, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/irans-supreme-leader-announces-maritime-development-strategy/> and Michael Rubin, “Iran: Construction Begins on the Chabahar-Zahedan Railway,” *OE Watch*, December 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/379863>
- 3 For discussion of Iranian satellite launches, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran to Launch New Satellite by Year’s End,” *OE Watch*, August 2018, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/241432/download> and Michael Rubin, “Iran: Preparing for Zafar III Satellite Launch,” *OE Watch*, July 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/284140/download>
- 4 For discussion of the Semnan space port, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran: Launch Officially Opens Space Port,” *OE Watch*, September 2017. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/205061/download>

## Criminal Organizations Mar Mexican Elections



Claudia Sheinbaum, former Mexico City mayor, won a resounding victory in the elections and will be the next president of Mexico.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eneas/53678721694/>; Attribution: CC BY2.

***“Without a doubt, this is a weakening of democracy because citizens are afraid to go out to vote, or they do not see the point in going out to vote, if it seems that crime is dominating, who defines who can be a candidate, who does campaign.”***

By Ryan Berg  
OE Watch Commentary

Mexico’s 2 June elections were highly anticipated, and the results closely watched. It was the largest election in Mexico’s history, with more than 20,000 seats contested at local, state, and federal levels.<sup>1</sup> While coverage of the election tended to focus on breaking the glass ceiling—both major candidates were women, a first in a country known for “machismo”—the elections were also marred by intense violence, assassinations, and kidnappings.<sup>2</sup>

The business-focused Mexican daily *El Economista*, reported that as the campaign closed, more than 30 candidates for public office, and approximately 50 people close to candidates or working for candidates, had been assassinated during the campaign season—the most violent campaign season on record. There were also countless attacks, threats, and intimidation against family members and friends of candidates, and hundreds more were murdered at campaign events, the outlet states. Further, the newspaper relays that most of the victims were candidates for local office, where organized crime groups seek to control public officials. 272 separate attacks were recorded during the campaign season, many of them in central and southern Mexican states afflicted by violence and contestation between criminal groups.

Spanish international news agency *EFE*, says that election violence dampens democratic enthusiasm and participation. The outlet cites a datapoint of note: each assassination can reduce participation rates by up to 3 percent in a locality. *EFE* also reports that at least 168 polling stations around the country did not operate due to violence and security concerns.

Election-related violence also indicates the changing model of territorial control most criminal organizations seek to implement. Criminal organizations have taken to assassinating political opponents and candidates they deem as too independent.<sup>3</sup> And, rather than corrupting sitting politicians, criminal groups seek to install their candidates in the most important local offices. Mexico’s election-related violence demonstrates the country’s slide into greater insecurity has grave consequences for the operational environment.



**Source:** “Los mexicanos salen a votar en las elecciones más grandes de la historia y también las más violentas (Mexicans go out to vote in the largest elections in history and also the most violent),” *El Economista* (a Mexican daily mostly focused on business and finance), 2 June 2024. <https://www.economista.com.mx/politica/Los-mexicanos-salen-a-votar-en-las-Elecciones-mas-grandes-de-la-historia-y-tambien-las-mas-violentas-20240602-0003.html>

*Since the political campaigns began, 30 candidates for public office and nearly 50 leaders or sympathizers related to the electoral process have been murdered... The elections, in which just over 20,000 public positions will be elected...are being held under the*

*shadow of violence that has left a record of murdered candidates, fueling concerns about democracy in the country...The fatalities are mostly aspirants, pre-candidates, or candidates for municipal positions.*

**Source:** “Las elecciones más grandes de México también pasarán a la historia como las más violentas (Mexico’s biggest elections will also go down in history as the most violent),” *EFE* (a Spanish international news agency with regional coverage), 2 June 2024. <https://efe.com/mundo/2024-06-02/las-elecciones-mas-grandes-de-mexico-tambien-pasaran-a-la-historia-como-las-mas-violentas/>

*The largest election in Mexico will also go down in history this Sunday as the most violent...Integralia, a political consultancy, reported 150.5% more attacks in this electoral process, which officially began in September, compared to the last midterm elections in 2021, which includes murders, armed attacks, threats, kidnappings and disappearances...When analyzing previous elections, Data Cívica found*

*that for each attack on a candidate, participation in the locality in question drops 1.3%, and if the victim is a serving politician, such as the mayor, the drop is 3%...“Without a doubt, this is a weakening of democracy because citizens are afraid to go out to vote, or they do not see the point in going out to vote, if it seems that crime is dominating, who defines who can be a candidate, who does campaign.”*

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the election at a granular level, see: “Mexico Elects: Ongoing Coverage of the 2024 Race,” Americas Society/Council of the Americas. <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/mexico-elects-ongoing-coverage-2024-vote>
- 2 For more information on the election results and the dominant performance of the ruling Morena Party, see: Ryan C. Berg and Rubi Bledsoe, “Claudia Sheinbaum: the Most Powerful Woman in the World?,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 7 June 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/claudia-sheinbaum-most-powerful-woman-world>
- 3 To listen to more analysis on the cartels’ changing operational methods and its relationship to election violence, see: Ryan C. Berg, “The Long Shadow of Violence in Mexico’s Elections,” *35West Podcast*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 13 June 2024. <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/35-west/long-shadow-violence-mexicos-elections>

## Pakistan Under Pressure To Protect China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Projects

By Matthew Stein  
OE Watch Commentary

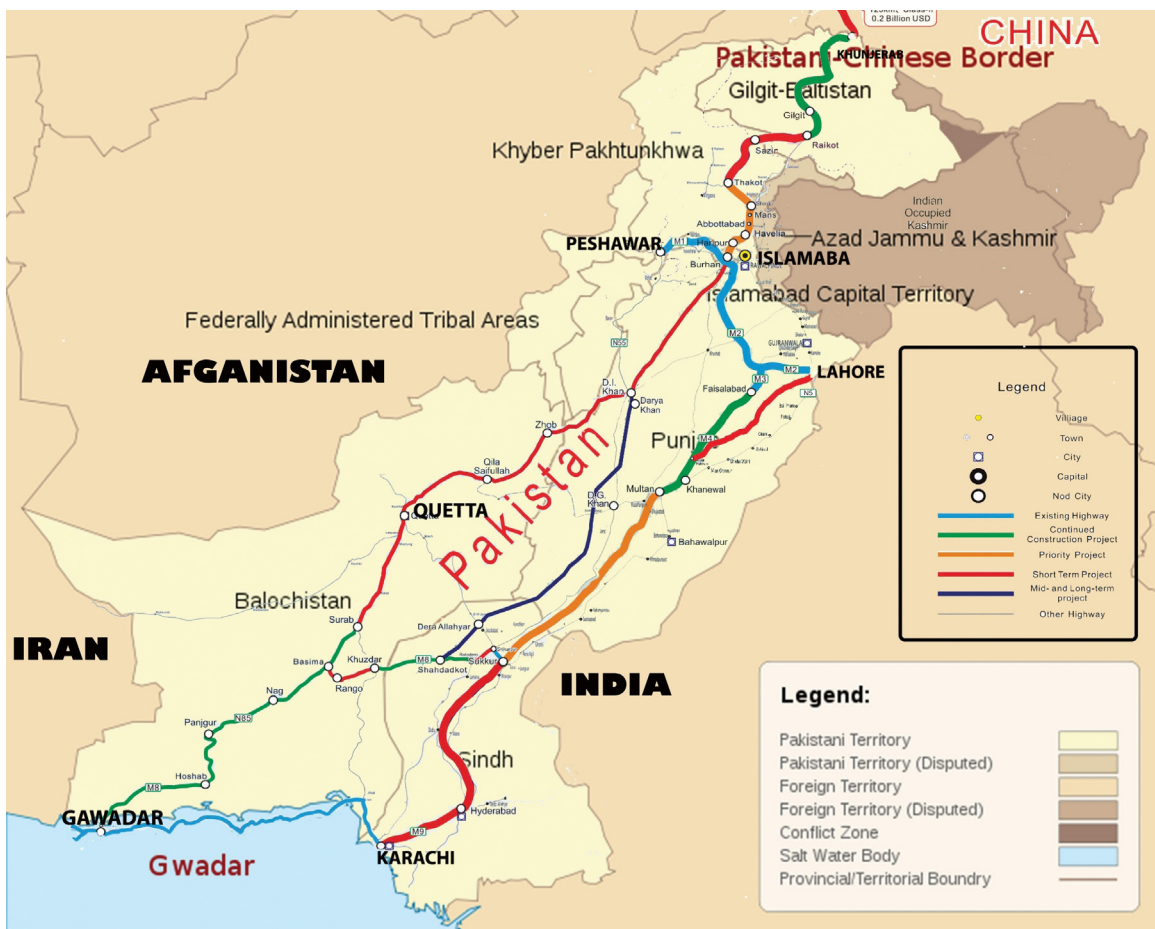
Pakistan has been under pressure for years from its partners to do more to counter violent extremist groups operating within its territory. On 26 March 2024, a suicide bomber struck a bus in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, killing five Chinese nationals and the vehicle's driver. It marked the third attack on Chinese interests in Pakistan that month, though no group claimed responsibility for the bombing.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese nationals were engineers working on the Dasu Dam, a hydroelectric dam under

construction by a joint Pakistan-China venture set to begin operation in 2025. The accompanying excerpted articles report on the fallout of the attack and how China could push Pakistan to do more to deal with violent extremist groups in its territory.

The first excerpted article from Pakistan's English-language newspaper *Dawn* reports that Pakistani officials recently completed an investigation into the 26 March attack. However, it may not be enough to satisfy China that Pakistan can deal with the threat from extremist groups. The

author points out that an operation against those responsible for the 26 March attack that killed the Chinese engineers is not feasible, as Pakistan believes the group responsible for the attack is based in Afghanistan and any operation would be costly and likely lead to broader conflict in the region.<sup>2</sup>

The second excerpted article from *Dawn* reports on an official visit by Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to China in early June. Sharif, accompanied by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, met with President Xi Jinping, who stated



China Pakistan Economic Corridor.  
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China\\_Pakistan\\_Economic\\_Corridor.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Pakistan_Economic_Corridor.jpg)  
Attribution: CCA4.0

China supports Pakistan but noted security issues. While the article does not mention China specifically requesting Pakistan carry out a counterterrorism operation in light of the recent attacks, it does mention that President Xi Jinping asked Sharif to step up efforts to ensure the security of Chinese projects in Pakistan. This is in addition to Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Sharif holding a meeting,

and both pledging to protect the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor “from its detractors and adversaries.” For the time being, China is not openly pressuring Pakistan to launch an operation against extremist groups. However, the attacks earlier this year and the June meeting show that Pakistan remains under considerable pressure to deal with extremist groups

for the sake of its relations with China and its economy.

**“Pakistan’s economy is in the throes of a deep crisis, and a massive military operation would entail its own costs.”**

**Source:** Muhammad Amir Rana, “Chinese advice,” *Dawn* (independent English-language newspaper in Pakistan), 2 June 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1837210>

*Pakistan’s law-enforcement agencies have completed the investigation of the Dasu terrorist attack carried out against Chinese nationals in March, in record time. This is, indeed, a remarkable achievement, but it does not seem to have impressed the Chinese authorities very much, as there have been reports that Beijing wants a large-scale anti-terrorism operation, like Zarb-i-Azb, against the militants.*

*On March 26, a convoy of Chinese nationals travelling from Islamabad to the Dasu Hydropower Project site in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s Kohistan district was attacked by Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists...A joint investigation team comprising police and intelligence agencies’ personnel was immediately formed to address Chinese concerns regarding the capability of Pakistani law enforcers to probe a high-profile terrorist attack.*

*The reports of China’s demand for a massive counterterrorism operation are reflective of Beijing’s*

*concerns over the escalating threats to Chinese nationals working on CPEC-related and other projects in this country. Pakistan has a history of launching such counterterrorism operations at the request of China. The Lal Masjid operation in Islamabad in 2007 was launched after Chinese President Hu Jintao called Gen Musharraf...*

*International pressure, including from the Chinese, also worked in 2014 when the Pakistan military launched Operation Zarb-i-Azb in North Waziristan... China’s latest demand regarding a large-scale operation does not seem feasible, as the TTP and its affiliates are hiding in Afghanistan, and cross-border operations would trigger a major conflict in the region...*

*Pakistan’s economy is in the throes of a deep crisis, and a massive military operation would entail its own costs...*

*continue on 37*



**Source:** Syed Irfan Raza, “Beijing vows to uphold Pakistani sovereignty,” *Dawn* (independent English-language newspaper in Pakistan), 8 June 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1838561>

*Acknowledging the all-weather strategic partnership between Pakistan and China, President Xi Jinping on Friday renewed his resolve to safeguard Pakistan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity besides extending financial support through investment in different sectors.*

*“China will, as always, firmly support Pakistan and safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity,” President Xi told Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif...*

*Besides federal ministers and senior officials, Chief*

*of Army Staff General Asim Munir is also a part of the delegation. This was the first meeting of PM Shehbaz with President Xi since assuming office... At the meeting, President Xi told the premier that the two neighbours should focus on “promoting the joint construction of CPEC”, and asked PM Shehbaz to step up efforts to ensure the security of Chinese projects in Pakistan.*

*...Earlier, PM Shehbaz met Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Beijing, where they resolved to protect CPEC “from its detractors and adversaries”, the Foreign Office said.*

Notes:

- 1 Earlier in March, insurgents in the Balochistan, Province, Pakistan attacked a Pakistani naval facility that helps provide security for the Gwadar Port, an important component of Chinese economic activity in Pakistan, in addition to an attack on the Gwadar Port Authority Complex, see: Avinash Mohanany, “Attacks on Chinese infrastructure in Pakistan disrupt CPEC, raise security concerns,” *Economic Times*, 28 March 2024. <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/attacks-on-chinese-infrastructure-in-pakistan-disrupt-cpec-raise-security-concerns/articleshow/108829369.cms>
- 2 One estimate from an analyst with Pakistan’s National Defense University put the cost of Operation Zarb-i-Azb alone at nearly \$2 billion, with the government of Pakistan also spending an unknown amount on the creation of additional security forces in the wake of the operation to help protect projects in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), see: Bhaswar Kumar, “Pakistan Army can’t afford China’s expensive security demand. What is it?,” *Business Standard*, 3 June 2024. [https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/china-s-latest-demand-is-a-bitter-pill-to-swallow-for-pakistan-here-s-why-124060200665\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/china-s-latest-demand-is-a-bitter-pill-to-swallow-for-pakistan-here-s-why-124060200665_1.html)

## Burkina Faso Reels From Continued Terrorist Attacks



Burkinabe soldiers respond to an ambush during training at Exercise Flintlock near Po, Burkina Faso.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burkinabe\\_soldiers\\_respond\\_to\\_an\\_ambush\\_during\\_training\\_at\\_Exercise\\_Flintlock\\_2019\\_near\\_Po,\\_Burkina\\_Faso,\\_Feb.\\_26,\\_2019.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burkinabe_soldiers_respond_to_an_ambush_during_training_at_Exercise_Flintlock_2019_near_Po,_Burkina_Faso,_Feb._26,_2019.jpg); Attribution: Public Domain

By Christopher Betts  
OE Watch Commentary

Even with exceptional monetary investment in military equipment by Burkina Faso, the al-Qaeda affiliated jihadist group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) continues to conduct deadly and coordinated attacks against government targets. According to the first excerpted article from French language news agency specializing in African economics, *Agence Ecofin*, a speech by the Minister of the Economy, Aboubakar Nacanabo, revealed Burkina Faso had spent more than \$1 billion to acquire military equipment in the fight against terrorism.<sup>1</sup> While this amount might not be notable for many nations, these purchases totaled 30% of the entire state budget in 2023 and contributed to

the government's 6.7% budget deficit. To help with funding, Burkina Faso implemented a voluntary Patriotic Support Fund and, later, compulsory taxes on telecommunications systems and land to assist with funding defense purchases. Minister Nacanabo indicated that the government planned a similar financial allocation for defense equipment purchases in 2024, totaling 29.49% of the state budget.

Despite its considerable spending, Burkina Faso continues to struggle with organized and frequent terrorist attacks by armed jihadist groups such as JNIM. JNIM, originally based in Mali, has spread through many parts of Africa, including Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire.<sup>2</sup> According to the second excerpted article from French-language public

service news channel *TV5 Monde*, JNIM conducted a deadly attack on 11 June 2024, at the military installation in Mansila, near the border with Niger. The attack targeted homes and businesses in the town as well as the local military detachment. The government is yet to release an official report on the number of killed or wounded. The 11 June attack is just one in a long history of terrorist attacks affecting the country, with the article noting that over 20,000 have been killed by jihadist groups and over 2,000,000 have been displaced in Burkina Faso alone.

Nearly one third of the Burkinabe state budget is being spent on defense equipment purchases, and the ongoing armed conflict throughout the country raises questions about

**“Burkina Faso - like its neighbors Mali and Niger - have been hit for almost ten years by attacks by jihadist groups which have left more than 20,000 dead and two million displaced.”**

the efficacy of these purchases. Much of the military equipment purchased by the new regime is likely originating from Russia, as Burkina Faso and other Sahelian countries have moved away from Western aid.<sup>3</sup> Though the country’s deteriorating securi-

ty situation is currently a regional issue, Burkina Faso’s counterterrorism strategy and effective combat operations against groups like JNIM have broader U.S. policy implications. Transnational terrorist organizations have had a resurgence in conducting

international attacks, which brings to the forefront the importance of stopping the spread of JNIM and the Islamic State from expanding to other neighboring African nations.

**Source:** “Burkina Faso: 1 milliard \$ investis dans du matériel militaire en 2023 (Burkina Faso: \$1 billion invested in military equipment in 2023),” *Agence Ecofin* (French language Geneva-based news agency), 7 June 2024. <https://www.agenceecofin.com/economie/0706-119330-lien-burkina-faso-1-milliard-investis-dans-des-materiels-militaires-en-2023>

*Burkina Faso has been facing a security and humanitarian crisis for many years due to terrorist attacks, putting strong pressure on public finances. In 2023, the country’s budget deficit reached 6.7% due to security-related spending. Burkina Faso spent around \$1 billion (more than 600 billion CFA francs), or 30% of the state budget, for the acquisition of military equipment in 2023. This information was revealed by Aboubakar Nacanabo (photo), minister of the Economy, during the program “Tribune of Accountability” broadcast on Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina.*

*According to the minister, this investment aims to strengthen the operational capabilities of the national armed forces in the fight against terrorism. Burkina Faso has, in fact, been facing a security and humanitarian crisis due to terrorist attacks for many years, putting strong pressure on public finances. In 2023, the country’s budget deficit reached 6.7% due to security-related spending, according to the government. However, Minister Nacanabo reassured*

*the public by affirming that after these acquisitions, the government will gradually increase spending in other sectors. A move that could underline the administration’s commitment to ensuring balanced national development, despite pressing security challenges.*

*Note that Captain Ibrahim Traoré, president of the transition, has placed the fight against terrorism and the reconquest of the territory at the heart of his priorities; what is considered “essential” before the organization of national elections. As a result, several reforms have been put in place to respond more effectively to the crisis, notably the creation of the Patriotic Support Fund (FSP) in January 2023. Initially funded by voluntary contributions, the government introduced compulsory contributions on certain products and services to support the Fund. For the 2024 budget year, the Burkinabe government plans to allocate 29.49% of its budget to security-related expenses.*



**Source:** “Burkina Faso: quel bilan dans l’attaque djihadiste meurtrière à Mansila (Burkina Faso: what results in the deadly jihadist attack in Mansila),” *TV5 Monde* (Multi-nationally funded French language news outlet), 15 June 2024. <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/burkina-faso-quel-bilan-dans-lattaque-djihadiste-meurtriere-mansila-2726176>

*The town of Mansila located in the northeast of Burkina Faso near Niger, was the target of a deadly jihadist attack on June 11, according to local and security sources. The authorities have not communicated on the attack claimed by the GSIM, affiliated with Al Qaeda.*

*A deadly jihadist attack, the exact toll of which is unknown, targeted the town of Mansila on Tuesday, in the north-east of Burkina Faso, near Niger, we learned on Sunday from local and security sources. On June 11, “ill-intentioned individuals stormed the detachment (military, editor’s note), our homes, our businesses and all other representations of the country”, indicates the association of pupils and students of Mansila, in a published press release on Facebook.*

*“At present, while we have not finished mourning our dead, many of our fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters are missing,” continues this association, which calls on the authorities to “restore peace.” A security source confirmed the attack to AFP. “It is difficult to give a precise assessment, but there were losses in Mansila. Many elements are missing,” said this source.*

*The military detachments deployed in the various localities of Burkina generally comprise around 150 elements. No official report has been released, and the authorities have not communicated about this attack, which was claimed by the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM), affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Friday, the head of the military regime in power in Burkina Faso appeared on national television news, donating blood in the capital Ouagadougou, after two days of uncertainty following the fall of a shell in the courtyard of public television located near the presidency.*

*On Sunday, the presidency of Faso posted a message wishing a happy Eid to the country’s Muslims, accompanied by a photo of Captain Traoré praying. Burkina Faso - like its neighbors Mali and Niger - has been hit for almost ten years by attacks by jihadist groups which have left more than 20,000 dead and two million displaced. The authorities regularly claim to obtain victories over the jihadists, but the attacks continue, and part of the territory remains beyond the control of the army*

Notes:

- 1 Aboubakar Nacanabo’s speech took place in June 2024 during the “Tribune de la redevabilité (Tribune of Accountability)” broadcast on Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina.
- 2 The Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a foreign terrorist profile on JNIM, located here: “Jama’at Nursrat Al-Islam Wal-Muslimin (JNIM),” Office of the Director of National Intelligence Counter Terrorism Guide, Updated October 2022. [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/jnim\\_fto.html](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/jnim_fto.html)
- 3 The M-DIME Research Project details Russia’s total Military DIME influence in Burkina Faso, including arms transfers. Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Amelia Cheatham, “Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Burkina Faso,” *Foreign Military Studies Office*, January 2024. <https://fmsotr.doc.army.mil/burkina-faso-russia-m-dime-report/>

## Sudanese Armed Forces Employ Iranian Drones in Civil Conflict

By Jacob Zenn  
OE Watch Commentary

On 25 May, the *Sudan News Agency* published the excerpted Arabic-language article on the meeting in Tehran between Sudan's foreign minister, Hussein Awad Ali, and Iran's foreign minister, Ali Bagheri. The article discussed the deepening relations between the two countries amid a backdrop of Iranian attempts to expand its influence in the Red Sea<sup>1</sup> and to sell drones to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The SAF is combatting the rival Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary faction for control of Sudan in a civil war.<sup>2</sup> According to the article, the two foreign ministers pledged they would cooperate at the highest levels since resuming diplomatic relations in October 2023.<sup>3</sup>

Drones will be the most important aspects of the two countries' cooperation. In particular, the Iranian **Ababil-3**

flies low to evade radar detection and is ideal for urban combat missions.<sup>4</sup> The RSF is trained in and accustomed to non-conventional warfare, including urban combat, where it initially gained an advantage over the SAF. However, the SAF's superior weaponry, such as Iranian drones, is now neutralizing the initial RSF advantage. Although the RSF's advances exceeded those of the SAF in the first half-year after the conflict broke out in April 2023, the Battle of Omdurman in February 2024 became a turning point when the SAF captured the city and continued advancing afterwards.<sup>5</sup> If Iranian drones support the SAF to retake control of more Sudanese territory, especially around the capital Khartoum, the SAF will become closer, or at least more ingratiated, to Iran. This will facilitate Iranian efforts to gain access to the Sudanese Red Sea coast. This will, in turn, strengthen Iran's geopolitical

**“Cooperation between the two countries [Sudan and Iran] increased in various fields since their recent resumption of diplomatic relations.”**

position in the region, with its Houthi proxies in Yemen on the eastern side of the Red Sea and the SAF in Sudan on the western side.



◀ Iranian drones have assisted Sudan SAF to gain a military advantage over the rival RSF paramilitary faction

Source: Tasnim News Agency, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iranian\\_drone\\_exercise\\_in\\_2022\\_-\\_Day\\_2\\_\(52\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iranian_drone_exercise_in_2022_-_Day_2_(52).jpg); Attribution: CC x 4.0

**Source:**

(Interim Foreign Minister Meets with Acting Iranian Foreign Minister),” *suna-sd.net* (Arabic-language public Sudanese news agency, which commits to independent and balanced reporting), 8 May 2024. Image:<https://suna-sd.net/posts>

وزير الخارجية المكلف يلتقي القائم بأعمال وزير الخارجية الإيراني

*Acting Foreign Minister Ambassador Hussein Awad Ali met today in Tehran with Acting Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri, where he gave him condolences from the Chairman of the Sovereignty Council, the Sudanese government, and the Sudanese people on the death of Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi and Minister Foreign Ministry Hussein Amir Abdullahian and their colleagues in a helicopter crash.*

*Cooperation between the two countries increased in various domains since their recent resumption of diplomatic relations and their reopening the two embassies again. They agreed to expedite the opening of the two countries’ embassies under the leadership of their respective ambassadors and to contribute to advancing relations between the two countries at a rapid pace to the highest level.*

**Notes:**

- 1 See, for example: Mohammed Yassin, “Reports about Iran’s Bid for Naval Base in Sudan Sparks Controversy,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 4 March 2024. <https://english.aawsat.com/world/4891051-reports-about-iran%E2%80%99s-bid-naval-base-sudan-sparks-controversy>
- 2 The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) are led by General Abd al-Fatah al-Burhan and are engaged in military conflict with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary faction, which is led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (“Hemedti”). In April 2023, al-Burhan called the RSF a “rebel” movement and formally dissolved it, which led to civil war. In early 2024, the RSF still had the upper hand in the fighting, but now the SAF appears to have the military advantage. See: Andrew McGregor, “Gold, Arms, and Islam: Understanding the Conflict in Sudan,” *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 21 Issue: 9, April 2023. <https://jamestown.org/program/gold-arms-and-islam-understanding-the-conflict-in-sudan/>
- 3 Sudan severed relations with Iran in 2016 in opposition to Iranian sectarianism and under the geopolitical influence of Saudi Arabia. However, in an effort to balance against the West, Sudan sought closer relations with Iran. Sudan and Iran’s restoration of relations only two weeks after Hamas’ massacre in Israel on October 7, 2023, and despite a previous thaw in Sudanese-Israeli relations, has only put the SAF’s relations with the West further under strain. See: Mohamed Yassin, “What is Sudan’s Purpose of Diplomatic Approach with Iran?,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 22 January 2024. <https://english.aawsat.com/features/4805441-what-sudans-purposediplomatic-approach-iran>
- 4 See: “Sudan’s small but deadly drone fleet could turn the tide of war,” *Military Africa*, 22 April 2023. <https://www.military.africa/2023/04/sudans-small-but-deadly-drone-fleet-could-turn-the-tide-of-war/>
- 5 See: Ashraf Abdelaziz, “Sudan war: ‘Iranian drones played decisive role in Omdurman battle.’” *Dabanga Sudan*, 17 March 2024. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-war-iranian-drones-played-decisive-role-in-omdurman-battle>.



## Turkey Deploying Syrian Private Security Contractors to Niger

By Jacob Zenn  
OE Watch Commentary

Russia's Wagner Group, and its successor Africa Corps, have received significant international attention and notoriety because of their operations propping up of post-coup military regimes in West Africa. While their objectives ostensibly include combating Islamist militants and protecting mining and other extractive industries whose exports benefit Russia, they have also partaken in the excessive killing of civilians during counter-insurgency operations.<sup>1</sup> The excerpted French-language article in *L'Orient Le Jour* highlights Turkey's recent programs to deploy militants to West Africa, whose activities can be juxtaposed against those of Wagner and Africa Corps.

According to the article, the program involves hundreds of pro-Turkish Syrians—and not Turks themselves—from the Sultan Murad brigade.<sup>2</sup> This differs from Russia's Wagner and Africa Corps, whose members are primarily Russians, despite recent evidence of an African member in Wagner ranks in Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The Syrians have been contracted by a Turkish private military company, which has paid the Syrian fighters up to \$1,500 per month. This is almost ten times more than they had received when fighting in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria. Like with Wagner and Africa Corps members, remuneration is,



Turkey and Niger have increased their military cooperation since 2020, including through using Libya as a gateway.

Source: Saotura, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niger\\_Turkey\\_Locator.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niger_Turkey_Locator.png); Attribution: CC x2.0

therefore, a primary incentive for the Syrians to travel to Niger.

The exact activities of these Turkish mercenaries remain unclear. On one hand, the article asserts that their main role is to protect Turkish interests and projects in Niger, including mining operations. In this sense, they would be functioning much like private security contractors, rather than mercenaries. On the other hand, one of the Syrian contractors interviewed for the article noted that the outfit was deployed to combat Boko Haram. If true, this would likely mean that they were based in southeastern Niger near Lake Chad, where iron ore and other minerals are mined, where Boko Haram factions have pillaged villages and even taken over military outposts in the last few years. If this were the outfit's primary role, it would appear

to function more closely to Wagner, though without the regime protection efforts.

Although the interviewee states that his cohorts arrived in Niger only around one year ago, the article claims Turkey had been preparing for their deployment by sending Syrian fighters to train in Libya for several years. This provided the fighters with combat experience in Africa and a gateway for further travel to Niger. In addition, in 2020, Turkey signed a military cooperation agreement with Niger, which involved the sale of armed drones from Turkey to Niger. However, this may have since evolved into the additional deployment of these pro-Turkish Syrians to Niger as well.

The article does not indicate the Syrians in Niger will play as significant of a counter-insurgency role as Wagner or Africa Corps in West Africa, which also means their presence in the country is less likely to generate international concerns on humanitarian grounds. However, the Syrians' primary motivation of remuneration and the challenging security environment in Niger, including with Boko Haram and other al-Qaeda and Is-

lamic State-affiliated fighters in their midst, raises questions about their ability to successfully defend Turkish interests, let alone enhance security in the region. Another question lingers about whether friction will develop

between Turkey and Russia in West Africa through their deployment of fighters to protect their respective interests in similar areas.

***“The defense component of the relationship between Niger and Turkey has become more prominent with the signing of a military cooperation agreement in 2020 and the sale of armed drones.”***

**Source:** “Le Niger, nouvel Eldorado des mercenaires proturcs de Syrie (Niger, the new Eldorado of pro-Turkish mercenaries from Syria),” *www.lorientlejour.com* (Lebanon-based French-language publication covering Francophone international affairs, including coverage of Islamist militancy) 3 May 2024. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1413977/le-niger-nouvel-eldorado-des-mercenaires-proturcs-de-syrie-enquete.html>

*A thousand Syrian fighters from areas under Turkish control have left for Niger for a year to protect Turkish interests and projects. In the areas of northern Syria controlled by Turkey, where recruitment into pro-Ankara factions is the main driver, according to Omar, his monthly salary never exceeded \$46. “Here in Niger, we are paid \$1,500,” added the young man, who supports his mother and brothers and sisters.*

*At the group’s headquarters, they signed six-month contracts with a private Turkish military consulting company that protects Turkish interests, including mines, in Niger.*

*The military regime of Niger, as a result of a coup d’état perpetrated on July 26, 2023, has reoriented its foreign policy and denounced military cooperation agreements with France and the United States, while Russia is advancing its interests in this country. For its part, Turkey has increased its influence in Niger over the past decade through humanitarian aid, development and trade. The defense component of the relationship between Niger and Turkey has become more prominent with the signing of a military cooperation agreement in 2020 and the sale of armed drones.*

Notes:

- 1 For an analysis of Russia’s Africa Corps, see: Jacob Zenn, “Revisiting Russia’s Africa Corps Organizational Structure,” *OE Watch*, 06-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/revisiting-russian-africa-corps-organizational-structure/>
- 2 The Sultan Murad brigade in Syria was comprised primarily of ethnic Turkmen from Syria and specialized in fighting Islamic State (IS) forces, as opposed to forces loyal to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The brigade was part of the Jaysh al-Fateh (“Army of Victory”) coalition, which was backed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey and reached its peak in 2015 before suffering from internal factional disputes. See: Fabrice Balanche, “The Battle of Aleppo Is the Center of the Syrian Chessboard,” *WINEP*, 5 February 2016. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/battle-aleppo-center-syrian-chessboard>
- 3 See, for example, Jacob Zenn, “Russia’s Africa Corps Appears to Be Recruiting African Militants,” *Terrorism Monitor*, July 9, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/brief-russias-africa-corps-appears-to-be-recruiting-african-militants/>

## Rumors of Russian Military Cargo Activity Underscore Tunisia’s Eastward Turn Away From the United States

By Lucas Winter  
OE Watch Commentary

On 19 May, the Italian daily *La Repubblica* published a report claiming that Russia may be using a Tunisian airport to transport military equipment, raising questions about Moscow’s designs in the country. Russia exerts substantial military influence in both Libya and Algeria, Tunisia’s neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup> Tunisia, however, is a historical Western security partner in which Russia has traditionally had little to no military influence. The rumors of Russian activities in Tunisia may not amount to much, but they should nonetheless be taken seriously in light of evident Russian attempts to deepen its influence in Libya and the Sahel,<sup>2</sup> along with Tunisian President Kais Saied’s seeming “eastward turn.”

The report suggests that entities linked to Russia’s Wagner Group had flown equipment and personnel into the international airport of Djerba, a southern Tunisian island popular with local travelers and European package tourists.<sup>3</sup> There is no open-source evidence supporting claims of Russian military-related movements in Djerba, but speculation among Tunisians is nonetheless rife, as noted in the first accompanying excerpt, from the Qatari-aligned English-language daily *The New Arab*. Theories on Russian activities in Djerba include

that former Wagner personnel are vacationing in Djerba; that Russia is “transporting migrants to overwhelm Tunisia’s border crossing points”; or that the planes are transporting “personnel and crates of vodka for Russian soldiers on leave in Tunisia.” The Russian embassy was quick to ridicule claims of any military connection to these flights, as shown in the second accompanying excerpt, from the Russian Embassy in Libya’s Facebook page.

**“Kais Saied is a ripe fruit waiting to fall into the hands of the Russians”**

The week after the publication on Russian flights to Djerba, President Saied flew to Tehran to attend Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi’s state funeral. The last time a Tunisian head of state visited Iran was 1965. The following week, Saied flew to Beijing to attend the China-Arab Cooperation Forum. While Saied’s recent engagement with Iran and China has been more overt than any gestures toward Russia, most analysts see these developments as part of a broader eastward turn in Saied’s foreign policy. Saied’s eastward turn, particularly toward China, as largely motivated by economics explains a Tunisian political activist cited in the



Tunisian President Kais Saied on Inauguration Day, 23 October 2019.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kais\\_Saied\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kais_Saied_2.jpg); Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl

third accompanying excerpt, from Qatar’s *al-Jazeera*. However, there are also ideological affinities between members of Saied’s inner circle and Iranian political leadership.<sup>4</sup> This confluence of circumstances, according to a Tunisian researcher cited in the fourth accompanying excerpt, from the Kuwaiti daily *al-Jarida*, makes Saied’s Tunisia a “ripe fruit waiting to fall into the hands of the Russians.”



**Source:** “Tunisia: alleged Russian military activity in Djerba raises concerns,” *The New Arab* (Qatari-aligned daily), 24 May 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisia-alleged-russian-military-activity-raises-concerns>

*Theories on the suspicious events at Djerba airport have become a “culture de trottoir” in Tunisia for months. Some speculate it involves Wagner personnel, while others suggest it’s about vodka shipments. According to some Tunisian analysts, these aircraft are believed to be “cargo planes” and civilian “charters,” not the military aircraft mentioned by La Repubblica. Some sources claim that the aircraft transported Russians affiliated with the former security company Wagner (now “Africa Corps”), who came to rest on the island of Djerba. Others suggest they transported personnel and crates of vodka for*

*Russian soldiers on leave in Tunisia. A far more speculative hypothesis suggests that some aircraft might be transporting migrants to overwhelm Tunisia’s border crossing points, thereby creating a crisis. Wagner’s presence in neighbouring Libya mainly fueled all these rumours... While rumours continue circulating, one thing may seem to be agreed on: Russian aircraft have been seen on Djerba Island. President Kais Saied, known for publicly addressing rumours targeting his country, has refrained from commenting on the situation at Djerba airport.*

**Source:** Russian Embassy in Libya, Facebook Page, 20 May 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/RussEmbLib/posts/122143879226177351>

*Now the Italian “La Repubblica,” having clearly decided to keep up with the task of creating and replicating horror stories about “Wagner,” scares the inexperienced reader with the idea of Russian combat aircraft at the airport of the tourist island of Djerba in*

*Tunisia, neighboring Libya. One can only envy their imagination. But as a reaction, we have to say: this is a lie and a fake. A complete lack of respect for the reader, whether in Italy or abroad.*

**Source:**

“Tunisia’s eastward orientation... a plan to ditch the West or a maneuver?” *al-Jazeera* (Qatari news channel), 4 June 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/6/4>

توجه تونس شرقا.. خطة للانسلاخ من الغرب أم مناورة؟

*Political activist Ahmed Al-Kahlawi views the Tunisian-Chinese rapprochement as an important step taken by President Saied to revive historical relations with China, stressing that the Tunisian orientation towards the East was dictated by the economic difficulties that the country is experiencing as a result of dysfunctional cooperation to benefit the interests of Western powers. Al-Kahlawi told Al-*

*Jazeera Net that President Saied chose to lead Tunisia to establish new partnerships with the East because he was certain that Tunisia would reap many economic and investment advantages, especially with China, the rising economic power, considering that Tunisia would achieve great growth that would free it from the hegemony of Western countries.*

**Source:**

“ تونس بين التوجه شرقاً أو الحفاظ على حلفها مع الغرب ”

Tunisia between an eastward turn and maintaining its alliance with the West,” *al-Jarida* (Kuwaiti daily), 30 May 2024, <https://www.aljarida.com/article/64205>

*For his part, Tunisian researcher at the Institute for Defense and Security Studies, Jalal Harchaoui, explained that in a context characterized by Russian*

*penetration of the Sahel region and Libya, “Kais Saied is a ripe fruit waiting to fall into the hands of the Russians.”*

Notes:

- 1 See: Lucas Winter, “Russia Uses Diplomacy To Increase Military Influence In Libya,” *OE Watch*, 10-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/russia-uses-diplomacy-to-increase-military-influence-in-libya/>; Lucas Winter, “Algeria Seeks Non-Alignment By Preserving Russia Ties While Welcoming NATO Overtures,” *OE Watch*, 03-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/algeria-seeks-non-alignment-by-preserving-russia-ties-while-welcoming-nato-overtures/>; Lucas Winter, “Algerian Military Deepening Ties To Russia,” *OE Watch*, 09-2022. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2022/algerian-military-deepening-ties-to-russia/>
- 2 See: Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Amelia Cheatham. “Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Burkina Faso,” *Foreign Military Studies Office M-DIME Report*, January 2024, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/burkina-faso-russia-m-dime-report/>; Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Amelia Cheatham. “Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Burkina Faso,” *Foreign Military Studies Office M-DIME Report*, January 2024, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/burkina-faso-china-m-dime-report/>; Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Christopher Betts. “Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Mali,” *Foreign Military Studies Office M-DIME Report*, June 2024, Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Christopher Betts. “Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Mali,” *Foreign Military Studies Office M-DIME Report*, June 2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/mali-china-m-dime-report-2/>
- 3 The *La Repubblica* article is unavailable without a subscription. It can be found at: [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2024/05/19/news/aerei\\_militari\\_russi\\_tunisia\\_allarme\\_usa\\_migranti\\_saied\\_timori\\_governo\\_meloni-423030975](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2024/05/19/news/aerei_militari_russi_tunisia_allarme_usa_migranti_saied_timori_governo_meloni-423030975)
- 4 *Per Le Monde*, “certain circles surrounding Saied have long-standing links with the Islamic Republic,” in particular his brother Naoufel Saied. “Tunisia: Kais Saied’s inclination to turn to Iran,” *Le Monde*, 25 May 2024. [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/05/25/tunisia-kais-saied-s-inclination-to-turn-to-iran\\_6672647\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/05/25/tunisia-kais-saied-s-inclination-to-turn-to-iran_6672647_124.html)