

OEWATCH

Issue 1
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FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



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OEWATCH

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Damage to Undersea Cables in Baltic Hint at China – Russia Collusion



The Baltic Fulmar was sold to a Chinese shipowner in 2023 and renamed the NewNew Polar Bear. The NewNew Polar Bear is suspected of severing undersea cables in the Baltics.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newnew_Polar_Bear-/media/File:Baltic_Fulmar_\(ship,_2005\)_IMO_9313204,_Maasmond,_Port_of_Rotterdam_pic4.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newnew_Polar_Bear-/media/File:Baltic_Fulmar_(ship,_2005)_IMO_9313204,_Maasmond,_Port_of_Rotterdam_pic4.JPG)

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

On 19 November, the Danish Navy detained the Chinese-flagged bulk carrier *Yi Pang 3* under the suspicion that it had damaged undersea cables connecting Finland and Germany and cables connection Sweden and Lithuania. As per the first excerpted article in the Polish defense publication *Defense24*, the *Yi Pang 3* had sailed from the Russian port of Ust-Lugu before passing through the Baltic Sea. German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius called the incident deliberate sabotage but did not delineate a responsible party. According to the second excerpted article from the Indian publication *The Week*, Russia may be the culprit, given that the *Yi Pang 3* was captained by a Russian. Additional western sources point to Russia as well.¹ However,

the incident is the second involving a Chinese-flagged ship damaging undersea cables in the Baltic.² It also comes on the heels of Western efforts to isolate China from the undersea cable network in the Indo-Pacific and suspicion of Chinese hacking into existing undersea cables in the region.³ Two months prior, in September 2024, Chinese officials excoriated the U.S. and its allies' efforts to control the global undersea cable network.⁴

It is highly probable that both Russia and China are complicit in the acts of sabotage against critical Western infrastructure. Both China and Russia have a shared interest in degrading Western capabilities: China's confrontations with the West regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea and Russia's confrontations with the West over control of Ukraine.

“Investigators suspect that a Chinese vessel is the perpetrator of the incident. The incident was sharply reacted to by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, who said that it ‘is not an accidental accident, but a deliberate sabotage.’”

Both China and Russia have recently engaged in hybrid or non-lethal forms of warfare, leading multiple Western leaders to suspect and accuse them of sabotage.

Source: “Danish Navy Stopped Chinese Ship Suspected of Damaging Undersea Cables,” *Defense24* (Polish based security focused news outlet), 20 November 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9yxuz7>

The detention took place in the area of Danish territorial waters, in the Danish Straits at the exit of the Great Belt. The detention of the vessel was carried out by the Danish Navy patrol vessel P525. After a few hours, another vessel HDMS Soeloeven, which is specialised for underwater work, reached both vessels. The detention of the vessel occurred on the evening of 19 November.

There is no information on whether there was an inspection of the vessel by the Danish MW's boarding group. The Chinese vessel was sailing from the Russian port of Ust-Luga.

There is no official announcement from the Danish authorities as yet either, but the Chinese bulk carrier is suspected of damaging telecommunications cables lying on the bottom of the Baltic Sea. The vessel was said to have sailed over the damaged cables between

Finland and Germany, the so-called C-Lion1, and between cables connecting Sweden and Lithuania.

Investigators suspect that a Chinese vessel is the perpetrator of the incident. The incident was sharply reacted to by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, who said that it “is not an accidental accident, but a deliberate sabotage.”

This is not the first time that a Chinese naval vessel has been responsible for damaging strategic infrastructure in the Baltic. In October 2023, the Balticconnector gas pipeline connecting Estonia and Finland was unsealed. The gas pipeline was damaged by an anchor dropped from the deck of the Chinese container ship NewNew Polar Bear. The vessel was suspected of being the perpetrator of that incident from the outset, but it was not decided to detain it and it escaped from the Baltic Sea without consequences.

Source: “Not Russia? Chinese cargo vessel “Yi Peng 3” likely behind the sabotage of undersea cables in Baltic,” *The Week* (India based news service), 21 November 2024. <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2024/11/21/not-russia-chinese-cargo-yi-peng-3-likely-behind-the-sabotage-of-undersea-cables-in-baltic.html>

A Chinese cargo vessel ‘Yi Peng 3’ is said to be “of interest” in connection with the alleged sabotage of two undersea communication cables in the Baltic Sea. The ship is said to have passed two cables on Sunday and Monday around the same time they were found to be severed, said reports.

Though there is no official confirmation in this regard, the Danish Navy is said to have detained the Chinese-registered cargo ship, allegedly helmed by a Russian captain. The detention allegedly took place inside the Danish territorial waters by the Danish Navy patrol vessel P525. Soon another vessel HDMS Soeloeven, which specialises in underwater work,

joined the P525.

However, it is not clear whether the Danish Navy officials boarded the Chinese vessel which was said to be sailing from the Russian port of Ust-Luga.

Besides Denmark, Sweden too is taking an active interest in the ship. Sweden's National Operative Department said it is “part of the sphere of interest, but there may be more.”

As per the data by Vesselfinder tracking data, Yi Peng 3's last port visit was on November 15 in Ust-Luga in western Russia, close to the border with Estonia.

It stopped overnight on Tuesday to Wednesday in the
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Kattegat strait between Denmark and Sweden. The ship was then said to be moving along a strange route and stopped overnight on Tuesday to Wednesday in the Kattegat strait between Denmark and Sweden.

The ship was travelling 78 km at an average speed of 10.4 km/h and the transponder, which relays the data of the ship, at the time was inactive. Though the vessel's AIS data shows that it circled just off Bornholm for about an hour, this is attributed to strong winds at that time and in that region.

However, Russian maritime pilot Alexander Stechentsev, who boarded the ship to guide it out

of port, told The Guardian that there “was nothing unusual about the vessel.” He added that he took the ship to a receiving buoy located 11 miles offshore before disembarking.

This isn't the first that a Chinese vessel is destroying an underwater asset in the Baltic Sea. In 2022, the Chinese container vessel, the 'NewNew Polar Bear' had damaged a gas pipeline after its anchor dragged it across the seabed. China acknowledged the incident but claimed that the vessel accidentally damaged the pipeline due to stormy conditions that were prevailing at the time.

Notes:

- 1 The view that Russia is behind the sabotage is also supported by at least one article in the U.S press. See: “Chinese-Registered Ship Is Held in Baltic Sea Sabotage Investigation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/chinese-registered-ship-is-held-in-baltic-sea-sabotage-investigation-27929472>
- 2 In October 2023 the Chinese flagged *NewNew Polar Bear* cut an undersea pipeline and communications cable in the Baltic. That ship was also piloted by a Russian crew and escaped the area without being detained. China eventually said the *NewNew Polar Bear* had indeed damaged the critical undersea infrastructure but noted it was an accident. For an Australian perspective see: Cynthia Mehboob, “Commentary: Beijing’s Baltic confession exposes undersea vulnerability,” *Channel News Asia* (Singapore-based news service), 15 August 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/china-ship-pipeline-accident-sabotage-damage-undersea-cable-europe-asia-4545766>
- 3 For background information on the recent undersea cable dispute with China, see: Dodge Billingsley, “China Creating Undersea Cable Network In Response To United States Isolation Efforts,” *OE Watch*, 07-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/china-creating-undersea-cable-network-in-response-to-united-states-isolation-efforts/>; and Dodge Billingsley, “Potential Flashpoint Stemming From Undersea Cable Network Access Restrictions,” *OE Watch*, 06-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/potential-flashpoint-stemming-from-undersea-data-cable-network-access-restrictions/>
- 4 “US politicization of undersea cables opposed,” *Global Times* (English language newspaper under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party’s flagship newspaper, the People’s Daily), 24 September 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202409/1320312.shtml>

China Unveils New High-Power Microwave Weapon Systems

By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

China unveiled at least three mobile, ground-based, high-power microwave-directed energy weapon systems during the Zhuhai Air Show in November. According to the excerpted article published on Chinese blog and news outlet *Sina*, these weapons are capable of paralyzing hundreds of drones with one strike and could give China an advantage in future wars. The article argues that the new weapon system will be an especially important counter-drone technology. The article outlines several key advantages of the high-power microwave weapons:

1. They can quickly deploy, lock onto, and attack a target the moment it comes into range
2. They produce electromagnetic pulses over a wide area and can attack multiple drones simultaneously
3. They are economical to employ, do not consume ammunition, such as missiles and artillery,

“High-power microwave weapons represent not only a leap forward in military technology, but also a major shift in the future war model. Whoever can seize the strategic commanding heights may gain the upper hand in future wars.”

and can be launched multiple times in succession

4. They are ideal in more complex environments, including urban settings, compared to traditional kinetic weapons, preventing civilian casualties and preserving necessary infrastructure

Specifically, China North Industries Group Corporation unveiled the Hurricane 2000 and Hurricane 3000 high-power microwave weapons systems. The article describes the first system as a large, flat array mounted on top of an 8x8 light armored vehicle chassis¹ or similar variant. The system features a small rotating radar for target detection and tracking. The second system, larger than the first, is mounted on a Shaanxi Auto SX2400/2500 series 8x8 truck. It also includes “planar arrays

and radars.” Some sources claim the Hurricane 2000 and Hurricane 3000 have an effective range of 2000 to 3000 meters, an order of a magnitude higher than the U.S. manufactured Leonidas high-power microwave weapon system.² The article also describes a third high-power microwave weapon system, which comes from China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation. Like the Hurricane 3000, it rides atop the Shaanxi Auto SX2400/2500 series 8x8 trucks.

According to the article, China has achieved major breakthroughs in the field of high-energy microwave weapons, which could indeed give it an edge in future warfare. Finally, China’s microwave weapon systems underscore its commitment to developing advanced weapons technologies, particularly to counter emerging aerial threats, such as UAVs.

Source: “无人机的新克星：国产高功率微波武器现身 (A New Drone Opponent: Unveiling the Domestic High-Powered Microwave Weapon),” *Sina* (Chinese blog and news outlet), 18 November 2024. <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2024-11-18/doc-incwmmas0246638.shtml>

At this year’s China Air Show, at least three domestically-produced large-scale mobile ground-

based high-power microwave directed energy weapons were unveiled. This type of weapon can be

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regarded as a killer weapon to deal with drone swarm attacks. It has not only become a hot spot of the air show, but also once again highlighted the strength of China's military industry.

In recent years, the use of drones for reconnaissance and attack on the battlefield by militaries around the world has increased... This has made armies of various countries strongly aware of the urgency to expand their defense systems against drone threats. However, traditional air defense systems are not always effective against these types of small and flexible aerial targets. In this context, high-energy microwave weapons have emerged as a new way to counter drones and have significant advantages in actual combat.

The primary advantages of high-energy microwave weapons in anti-UAV operations are: First...rapid response... Second, they cover a wide area. The third is they are more efficient... The fourth is non-lethal...

China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) has launched two high-power microwave weapons systems, the "Hurricane 2000" and the "Hurricane 3000."

The first system consists of a large flat array mounted on the top of an 8×8 light armored vehicle chassis. The system is equipped with a small rotating radar, which is likely used for target detection and tracking. Its chassis resembles the one used in the 625E self-propelled short-range air defense system. The latter system is larger than the former, mounted on the Shaanxi Auto SX2400/2500 series 8×8 trucks. It also

includes planar arrays and radars. Video broadcast at the scene showed a small drone being shot down by one of the systems, and infrared camera footage was also seen. Electro-optical and infrared cameras are usually used with directional It can be combined with anti-UAV systems to help accurately identify and track targets. It is estimated that the "Hurricane 2000" should be mainly used for field mobile accompanying air defense, while the "Hurricane 3000" may be used for fixed-point air defense missions in key areas.

In addition, photos of a third high-power microwave weapon system also appeared at the air show. This system comes from China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation and is also installed on Shaanxi Automobile SX2400/2500 series trucks. The microwave array is mounted on an articulated bracket of a different style at the rear of the vehicle. There should also be sensors such as radar in the dome on the retractable mast at the end of the cab...

China has made major breakthroughs in the field of high-energy microwave weapons and has begun to enter the international arms market. As the frequency of use of weapons such as drones and cruise missiles in modern warfare increases, countries are also increasingly demanding means to counter these threats. High-energy microwave weapons, as a type of weapon with strong anti-drone capabilities and relatively The lower-cost option is likely to attract global attention. In the future, China is expected to become a leading country in the export of such equipment.

Notes:

- 1 The referenced Hurricane 2000 sits on top of a vehicle resembling one used in China's Type 625E self-propelled short-range air defense system, which the country unveiled during the November 2022 Zhuhai Air Show. To read more about the Type 625E air defense system and view an image, see Emma Helfrich, "This is China's Beastly New Air Defense Vehicle," *The Warzone* (a U.S. online magazine that looks at national security and geopolitical coverage and analysis, with an emphasis on military technology, strategy, and foreign policy), 18 November 2022. <https://www.twz.com/this-is-chinas-beastly-new-chinese-air-defense-vehicle>
- 2 "反无人机利器，"飓风"微波武器，有效距离比美高出一个数量级 (The "Hurricane Anti-Drone Weapon has an Effective Range an Order of Magnitude Higher Than That of the United States)," *Net Ease* (one of China's largest internet companies, subject to government regulatory oversight and censorship), 18 November 2024. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/JHA8HFMA055300JA.html>

China Debuts Fifth-Generation Stealth Fighter



By Major Kevin Kusumoto
OE Watch Commentary

China hosted the 2024 International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition in Zhuhai from 12 to 17 November 2024. The event showcased a range of new and upcoming advanced weapons, including attack helicopters, UAVs, and robots. Notably, it marked the debut of China's newest fifth-generation stealth fighter, the **J-35A**.¹

The first excerpted article, published by the *Global Times*, a CCP tabloid newspaper, features an interview with Wang Yongqing, director of the Science and Technology Committee at Shenyang Aviation Industry Corporation of China.² Wang Yongqing highlights that the J-35A incorporates enhanced stealth capabilities through breakthrough technologies, with a focus on all-domain warfare. The J-35A could be tasked with a range of missions, including seizing and

maintaining air superiority, engaging ground and sea air defense systems, and intercepting enemy fighters, bombers, cruise missiles, and other airborne threats. Furthermore, Wang Yongqing elaborates that the J-35 is a “one machine with multiple types” platform, highlighting its versatility in supporting the development of multiple variants tailored to specific mission requirements while enabling efficient scaling for rapid production. This versatility includes a J-35 variant's anticipated deployment aboard China's **Type 003 Fujian** aircraft carrier.³

“The debut of the J-35A marks China becoming the second country in the world, after the United States, to simultaneously field two stealth fighter jets.”

◀ An image of the J-35A released by CCTV Military's official Weibo account.

Source: <https://weibo.com/6189120710/OEODkqT6a?layerid=5097277586408330>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

The second excerpted article, published by *Direct News*, a news outlet controlled by the propaganda department of the Shenzhen municipal committee, disputes claims that the J-35 is merely a copy of the U.S. F-35. The article states the two stealth jets share some design similarities but differ in stealth effectiveness, bomb bay design, engine performance, and aerodynamic shape, reflecting China's unique combat assumptions and tactical approaches, which diverge from those of Western countries. The debut of the J-35A demonstrates China's advancement in stealth technology and broader aviation engineering, yet challenges and uncertainties remain in achieving parity with the United States.

China's progress in fighter development is undeniable; however, noticeable differences exist in the

operational and combat experience of Chinese fifth-generation fighters compared to their U.S. counterparts.⁴ For example, U.S. F-22s and F-35s have flown numerous combat missions in the Middle East and Afghanistan, providing invaluable real-world in-

sights into their capabilities while also demonstrating the proficiency of their pilots. Additionally, while the unveiling of the J-35A underscores China's ambition to challenge U.S. military capabilities, the absence of detailed specifications and lack

of real-world operational insights make it difficult to assess whether the J-35A's technological sophistication and performance rival or exceed the U.S. fifth-generation fighters.⁵

Source: Fan Wei and Liu Xuanzun, “歼-35A研制单位首席专家：研制新装备，根本还是为了让人民过上好日子 (The chief expert of the J-35A development unit: the fundamental purpose of developing new equipment is to ensure a better life for the people),” *Global Times* (a tabloid newspaper under the CCP), 11 November 2024. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1815388616265828340&wfr=spider&for=pc>

The debut of the J-35A positions China as the second country in the world, after the United States with its F-22 and F-35, to operate two stealth fighters simultaneously. Wang Yongqing, director of the Science and Technology Committee at the Shenyang Institute of Aviation Industry Corporation of China, told the Global Times during the Zhuhai Airshow that the J-35A strengthens China's combat system network. He emphasized that the development of new equipment is fundamentally aimed at preventing aggression, promoting national development, and ensuring a better quality of life for the people.

In response to questions from Global Times about the new features of the J-35A, Wang highlighted the aircraft's advancements in stealth, information integration, networking, and intelligence. He explained that the J-35 adopted several new technologies to enhance its stealth capabilities and noted the significant progress and innovation made in these areas. Wang also emphasized the aircraft's focus on information warfare, coordinated warfare, and all-domain operations.

Regarding the J-35A's technical features and its potential to cooperate with other fighter jets, Wang provided insight into the aircraft's design. He stated

that the J-35A is capable of seizing and maintaining air control, attacking enemy third and fourth-generation fighters, and defending against ground and sea-based air defense systems. The fighter is also designed to intercept enemy aircraft, bombers, cruise missiles, and other aerial threats.

Wang further asserted that the J-35A can engage previous-generation aircraft while staying outside the enemy's effective detection range, achieving “one-way transparency” on the battlefield. This gives China an overwhelming advantage, allowing for the detection and neutralization of the enemy first. Against aircraft of the same generation, the J-35A's lethality and survivability, along with its advanced coordinated combat capabilities, allow it to disrupt the enemy's targeting abilities and gain a tactical advantage. He correlates the role of the J-35A as the “point guard on the basketball court.”

Wang also discussed the J-35's development as a “one aircraft, multiple types” platform. The aircraft's overall layout and technology research have matured key technologies, reducing research and production costs. This approach, he explained, will enable China's air defense forces to scale up quickly and enhance their combat capabilities.

Source: Qiu Yatong, “美媒承认：所谓“歼-35抄袭F-35”根本是无稽之谈 (US media acknowledges: the so-called “J-35 copying the F-35” is completely nonsense),” *Direct News* (news outlet controlled by the propaganda department of the Shenzhen municipal committee), 09 November 2024. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1815256338816862194&wfr=spider&for=pc>

On November 12, the 15th China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition will be held in Zhuhai, featuring the much-anticipated J-35A stealth fighter, which recently made a surprise appearance at Zhuhai Jinwan Airport. Reuters confirmed the J-35A's participation, describing it as a medium-stealth, multi-purpose fighter and highlighting it as the biggest draw of the air show. Reuters emphasized that advancing aerospace design and manufacturing capabilities, exemplified by the J-35, has become a critical strategic priority for China.

The debut of the J-35A positions China as the second country, after the United States, to operate two stealth fighters simultaneously, marking the beginning of its “double fifth-generation aircraft” era. While little is publicly known about the fighter's performance and combat specifications, it is widely believed that the J-35A will serve aboard the Chinese Navy's Type 003 aircraft carrier, Fujian.

For years, Western media have baselessly accused China of copying weapons designs, including claims that the J-35 is a direct imitation of the U.S. F-35. However, significant differences exist between the two aircraft, such as nose shape, engine tail nozzle, wing shape, and tail design, making these accusations unfounded and misleading.

Wu Wei, senior editor at Direct News, remarked that the Western tendency to compare the J-35 with the F-35 stems from subconscious bias. He noted that while the two aircraft share similar model numbers and overall appearance, the J-35 is distinct in reflecting China's unique assumptions about combat scenarios and tactical priorities. Differences include stealth effectiveness, bomb bay design, engine performance, and aerodynamic shape, all of which highlight China's independent approach to stealth fighter development and application.

Notes:

- 1 To watch an official news segment on the J-35A unveiling, see CCTV7 news coverage, *CCTV7 Military Report*, 14 November 2024. <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/11/14/VIDEf28pCkOpF9xOoD1NcEKJ241114.shtml>
- 2 To watch an interview with Wang Yongqing discussing the J-35A, see Global Times' official video interview, *Global Times*, 12 November 2024. <https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&vid=5212300448341909343>
- 3 Maya Carlin, “J-35A vs. F-35: Can China's New Fighter Jet Match Up?,” *National Interest*, 18 November 2024. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/j-35a-vs-f-35-can-chinas-new-fighter-jet-match-213760>
- 4 Lin Nai-Chuan, “China showcases new stealth fighter at Zhuhai air show,” *Voice of America*, 13 November 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-showcases-new-stealth-fighter-at-zhuhai-air-show/7863356.html>
- 5 Sebastien Roblin, “China Is Unleashing a New Stealth Fighter, And It's a Direct Challenge to America,” *Popular Mechanics*, 14 November 2024. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/aviation/a62906352/china-new-stealth-fighter-j-35a/>

China Sets Sight on Gabon for Second African Military Base

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Beijing is targeting Gabon to host the second Chinese military base on the African continent, marking its first military base on Africa's western coast. On 9 October, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation website published the excerpted Chinese-language article, which highlighted the Chinese naval visit to Gabon. The visit came amid a Chinese push to possibly establish its first military base on the western coast of Africa—and Gabon is a prospect to host this base.¹ The article indicates China's goal was to cultivate goodwill in Gabon through the visit of its *Peace Ark* naval hospital ship to Gabon's Owendo Port in the country's capital. Among the participants in the farewell ceremony with the Gabonese Navy, for example, were non-military personnel, such as overseas Chinese businesspeople in Gabon, Confucius Institute² representatives, and Chinese diplomatic personnel and medical teams.

The *Peace Ark* naval hospital ship held joint exercises with the Gabonese Navy on maritime rescue and evacuation between 26 September and 3 October. Yet, the most impactful mission of the hospital ship during the visit to Gabon was related to “soft power,” with it providing medical treatment to 6,934 Gabonese civilians, including 171 surgeries, and delivering four babies. Further,

“The visit of the [Chinese] Peace Ark highlights the friendly relations between Gabon and China, and brings glory and well-being to the Gabonese people.”

as part of the visit, Chinese medical teams were dispatched from the naval hospital ship to schools to promote health education and to hospitals to support Gabonese doctors, while also playing a friendly soccer match with the Gabonese military.

The Chinese campaign for influence in Gabon differs from Russia, which is unable to provide the same breadth of combined military and medical support to a country like Gabon. China is able to parlay its

military support with significant investment, including more than 4 million Euros to Gabon in the weeks prior to this naval hospital ship's visit to the country, which again Russia is unable to match.³ The Chinese campaign in Gabon is seeing results, with the Gabonese president publicly welcoming the Belt and Road Initiative's expansion into the country.⁴ China is, therefore, primed to increase its influence in Gabon, including potentially establishing a base in the country, while also outflanking other geopolitical powers, such as Russia, for influence in Africa in the long run.

Gabon's Port Gentil is the country's second largest city and its airport and seaport will likely increasingly host military and business visitors from China as China courts Gabon as a close partner in West Africa.

Source: Brian Ecton, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:POG-Airport.jpg>; Attribution: CC.x2.0



Source: “和平方舟”号医院船结束访问加蓬，离港时与加蓬海军举行联合演练 (The “Peace Ark” Hospital Ship Ends Visit to Gabon, Conducting a Joint Exercise with the Gabonese Navy When Leaving the Port),” *focac.org*, (official website of FOCAC, which is the official forum between all African states except Eswatini and China), 9 October 2024. https://www.focac.org/zfgx/hpaq/202410/t20241009_11504024.htm

The Chinese Navy’s Peace Ark hospital ship slowly sailed away from the Port of Owendo, Gabon, after successfully completing its visit to Gabon. More than 300 people, including Ambassador to Gabon Zhou Ping, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Gabonese Navy Diwaku, embassy staff, overseas Chinese in Gabon, representatives of the Confucius Institute and the medical aid team to Gabon attended the farewell

ceremony. This was the first joint maritime search and rescue exercise between the Chinese and Gabonese navies.

In addition to the main platform for treatment, the hospital ship also sent expert teams and patrol teams to local hospitals for diagnosis and treatment. The visit of the Peace Ark hospital ship was highly appreciated by the Gabonese government.

Notes:

- 1 See: Jacob Zenn, “China’s Initiates Push To Establish A Military Base In Gabon,” *OE Watch*, 06-2024. <https://fmsotrados.army.mil/2024/chinas-initiates-push-to-establish-a-military-base-in-gabon/>
- 2 China’s Confucius Institutes are often situated at university campuses abroad “to promote the Chinese language and cultural activities among students and researchers” but they “unswervingly” serve the Communist Party’s goals and are, therefore, part of Chinese soft power projection. As a result of Confucius Institutes’ ties with the Communist Party, an increasing number of them have been shut down in the West, but they are still expanding in Africa and the Middle East. Mordechai Chaziza, “China’s Soft Power Projection Strategy: Confucius Institutes in the MENA Region,” *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, 25 July 2023. <https://besacenter.org/chinas-soft-power-projection-strategy-confucius-institutes-in-the-mena-region/>
- 3 “Le Gabon attire 4,3 milliards \$ d’investissements chinois (Gabon attracts \$4.3 billion of Chinese investment),” *Agence Ecofin* [Cameroon— and Switzerland-based French-language website primarily covering African political economics]. 4 September 2024. <https://www.agenceecofin.com/economie/0409-121241-le-gabon-attire-4-3-milliards-dinvestissements-chinois>
- 4 See: “(FOCAC) Interview: China is a true friend that stands with Gabon through thick and thin, says Gabonese president,” *news.cn* [website of the official state news agency of the People’s Republic of China]. 5 September 2024. <https://english.news.cn/20240905/11512527b9eb47799078488bbb0c3e31/c.html>

China's Expands Its Influence in Africa Through Economic and Security Cooperation

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

China is supporting African countries in economic and infrastructure development alongside its growing military presence in the continent. Tanzania, where China has been showing increasing interest in both the security and economic realms, is indicative of this trend. In late July China held Peace-Unity 2024, a joint military drill with Tanzania, which involved counter-terrorism exercises. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) newspaper *Global Times* argued those exercises “reflected China’s power projection capabilities” in Africa.¹ After the exercises in Tanzania, China held similar counterterrorism and counter-piracy exercises in neighboring Mozambique, which has borne the brunt of Islamic State (IS) affiliated militant attacks in East Africa.

“The start of [China’s] joint naval exercise with Mozambique came after the conclusion of joint naval exercises with Tanzania...”

Consistent with China’s game plan in Africa to combine security with economic partnerships, on 8



Chinese trade cooperation with Tanzania dates back to 1965, but now not only includes large-scale infrastructure projects, such as bridges, but also joint military exercises.

Source: Xinhua, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China-Tanzania_trade_agreement_signed.jpg; Attribution: CC x2.0

October, the CCP website *cctv.com* published the excerpted Chinese-language article discussing the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation and China Railway 15th Bureau Group’s finalizing the construction of a bridge in Tanzania after four years of work. The article touts the two-mile long bridge, which connects Kigongo and Busisi on the banks of the Gulf on Mwanza in Tanzania’s north, as the longest low-tower cable-stayed bridge in Africa. Given that the China Railway 15th Bureau Group, like other railway companies,² has historically performed military-related construction missions, this bridge also has military significance for China’s power projection in Africa.

The combination of constructing major infrastructure projects in Tanzania followed by joint military training exercises with the same country and its strife-ridden neighbor reflects China’s *modus operandi* in Africa. Developing African infrastructure

not only opens economic opportunities for Chinese commerce on the continent but also enables China to expand its military influence in Africa. In addition, large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa can obscure the arguably more significant military influence China is acquiring there, which China does not wish to highlight internationally for fear it could be perceived as threatening.

China will continue to exert influence and enhance its military footprint in African countries by linking its ability to support economic development and infrastructure projects with joint military exercises and potentially other objectives in those countries, such as basing rights. This promotes China’s Belt and Road Initiative and broader global security objectives. If there is a new “great game” in Africa, Tanzania is among the numerous countries on the continent where China is playing aggressively.

Source: “China-Tanzania joint military drill kicks off, ‘reflects Chinese continental power projection capabilities,’” *Global Times* (Chinese Communist Party news service focusing on international affairs from a Chinese nationalist and populist perspective). 6 August 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202408/1317509.shtml>

On its way to Mozambique from Tanzania, the Qilianshan conducted joint search and rescue as well as counter-terrorism and counter-piracy training in preparation of the joint exercises, the PLA Navy confirmed. The start of the joint naval exercise with Mozambique came after the conclusion of joint naval exercises with Tanzania, also under the banner of the

“Peace-Unity 2024” joint exercises.

*With a focus on counter-terrorism and counter-piracy in the joint exercises, Zhang Junshe, a Chinese military expert, told the *Global Times* that the drills are of pragmatic significance in Africa where terrorist and pirate attacks occur frequently*

Source: “中企承建非洲最长矮塔斜拉桥顺利合龙 (The longest low-tower cable-stayed bridge in Africa built by a Chinese company was successfully closed),” *news.cctv.com* (website of national television broadcaster of China, which reports to the Chinese Communist Party), 8 October 2024. <https://news.cctv.com/2024/10/08/ARTIEo5gdghwYT812Y5y9IRG241008.shtml>

The Magufuli Bridge in Tanzania, jointly constructed by China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation and China Railway 15th Bureau Group, was successfully completed. After more than four years of non-stop construction, the longest low-tower cable-stayed bridge in Africa has been fully connected, and the countdown to the completion and opening of the entire line has begun. The Magufuli Bridge is located on the southern shoreline of Lake Victoria, which is the largest lake in Africa.

pedestal construction process, which minimized the impact of construction on the water quality of the lake and effectively protected the “Mother Lake” of the African people. During the construction process, the construction team strictly implemented quality control standards. After completion, it will become the first bridge project on Lake Victoria, which is of great significance for enhancing Tanzania’s national image and promoting local social and economic development.

There was no underwater casting during the entire

Notes:

- 1 See Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, “China-Tanzania joint military drill kicks off, ‘reflects Chinese continental power projection capabilities,’” *Global Times* (daily English language newspaper under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party’s People’s Daily newspaper), 30 July 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1317046.shtml>
- 2 The China Railway 15th Bureau Group was formerly the fifth and sixth divisions of the Chinese Railways Corps, which was considered a “special force” of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) since 1949. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00809A000700070455-8.pdf>

Russia and Belarus To Strengthen Security Guarantees



The Polish-Belarusian border, photo taken on 11 November 2021.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/premierrp/51674607554/>; Attribution: Irek Dorozanski

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

Russia and Belarus have nearly finalized a “Treaty on Security Guarantees of the Union State,” according to an interview with Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic Alexander Wolfovich in *Izvestia*, a pro-Kremlin Russian newspaper. The document, which will be sent for ratification by the Supreme State Council in December, will replace the 1999 union concept. Belarus will receive substantial security guarantees, including the use of nuclear and conventional weapons, “due to external threats.”

The intention of the original treaty was to achieve a federation not unlike the Soviet Union, whereby Belarus

and Russia would share a head of state, legislature, flag, currency, coat of arms, anthem, and other insignia of a unified state.¹ The full extent of the Union State never came to fruition, largely because both leaders of the federation, Presidents Boris Yeltsin (Russia) and Alexander Lukashenko (Belarus), quickly lost interest in the provisions of the treaty because both feared it would weaken their own power. Belarus suspended the customs union a few years later, and they never developed a common currency.

The revised treaty comes amid heightened tensions along Belarus’ borders with Ukraine and Poland, due to a migrant crisis (involving asylum-seekers from the wider Middle East),² nuclear drills conducted on

Belarusian territory summer 2024,³ and rumors that Belarusian soldiers may be sent to fight in Ukraine.⁴ The security guarantees of the new document suggest that an attack against Belarus, conventional or otherwise, would be considered an attack against Russia.

Interestingly, the original intention of signing the 1999 treaty was economic, not security related. Back then, commercial and economic interests trumped security concerns.⁵ Going back to the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has been Belarus’ largest economic and political partner. Vladimir Putin has sought greater integration of the two countries’ economies. As reported by *Izvestia*, trade

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between the two neighbors in the first half of 2024 (\$25 billion) was up 6.4 percent from the same time last year, with some 133 investment projects underway in the fields of agriculture, energy, tourism, IT, medicine, and pharmaceuticals, according to Deputy Minister of Economic Development of Russia Dmitry Volvach. The revised treaty should strengthen economic integration and trade between the two neighbors.

More importantly, the revised Union State treaty signals greater security cooperation and guarantees between Minsk and Moscow. Belarus has long acted as a strategic buffer zone between Russia and NATO. Although President Alexander Lukashenko sought greater autonomy after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, a disputed election in 2020 and a popular uprising forced the Belarusian leader to seek greater integration

with Russia. The revised Union State treaty will further isolate Belarus from Europe and make it more dependent on Russia for its security, both internal and external. While the long-term consequences of the revised Union State remain uncertain, given that Russia and Belarus have both sought to maintain their post-Soviet era borders and independence, greater military cooperation between Belarus and Russia is expected, including closer economic and potential territorial integration and even Belarus playing a larger role in the war in Ukraine, beyond just hosting Russian nuclear and military assets.

“This is also a very important strategic document. Work on these two documents has been completed, and we plan, together with the Secretariat of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, to submit [them] for approval by the heads of our states at the Supreme State Council.”

Source: Elizaveta Borisenko, “Взаимное действие: Москва и Минск подготовили договор о гарантиях безопасности (Union proposal: Moscow and Minsk strengthen cooperation against Western pressure),” *Izvestia* (a pro-Kremlin Russian newspaper), 11 November 2024. <https://iz.ru/1787861/elizaveta-borisenko/vzaimnoe-deistvie-moskva-i-minsk-podgotovili-dogovor-o-garantiah-bezopasnosti>

According to [Wolfovich], the provisions of the document will be published in the near future. The document will include the principle of the use of nuclear and conventional weapons, as well as other methods of protecting the Union State. “What our president recently said, what Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin recently said that, God forbid, there will be some aggressions towards the Republic of Belarus, is all true. If today it has the character of protecting the joint and protection of Belarus through the deployment of nuclear weapons on our territory, de facto in December, by the 25th anniversary of the

signing of the Treaty on the establishment of the Union State, this treaty will already be legally signed,” Belarusian Foreign Minister Maxim Ryzhenkov said earlier.

Russia previously decided to amend the nuclear doctrine, which was last updated in 2020. In particular, we are talking about the expansion of scenarios in which the Russian authorities reserve the right to use nuclear weapons. In the updated version of the document, aggression against Russia by any non-nuclear state, but with the participation

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or support of nuclear, is proposed to be considered as their joint attack on the Russian Federation. In addition, there are provisions that concern Belarus.

“We reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in case of aggression against Russia and Belarus as a member of the Union State. All these issues have been agreed with the Belarusian side and the President of Belarus. Including if the enemy, using conventional weapons, creates a critical threat to our sovereignty,” Vladimir Putin said on September 25.

As for the new concept of the security of the Union

State, which will replace the document adopted back in 1999, it will enshrine a provision on joint counteraction to the policies of the United States, unfriendly NATO states and the European Union to achieve strategic goals for mutually beneficial and equal international cooperation. Such strengthening of cooperation in the field of security is primarily related to the foreign policy situation, Dmitry Zhuravlev, scientific director of the Institute of Regional Problems, associate professor of the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, tells Izvestia.

Notes:

- 1 “The Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation signed the Union State Treaty on 8 December 1999,” Press Service of the President of the Republic of Belarus, <https://tinyurl.com/yfbh9rf7>
- 2 See: “Poland to temporarily suspend asylum rights amid Belarus border tensions,” *Al-Jazeera*, 12 October 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/12/poland-to-temporarily-suspend-asylum-rights-amid-belarus-border-tensions>
- 3 See: “Belarus launches nuclear drills a day after Russia announces them amid tensions with West,” *AP News*, 7 May 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-belarus-nuclear-drills-ukraine-war-144422347bb168878cebc0b78071dd99>
- 4 See: Mark Temnycky, “Will Belarus join North Korea in fighting Russia’s war?” *The Hill*, 17 November 2024. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4993006-ukraine-north-korean-fighting/>
- 5 For analysis, see Helene Alstad Dyndal, “The Union State of Russia and Belarus at the present stage,” *Strategem*, 11 April 2024 <https://www.stratagem.no/the-union-state-of-russia-and-belarus-at-the-present-stage/>

Russia Offers Financial Incentives To Meet Troop Recruiting Targets

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

In September, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for the “mobilization” of an additional 180,000 new service members. However, the meaning of “mobilization” appears to be a question of semantics: Russian media has reported that there is no talk in Moscow of a partial mobilization similar to the one conducted in the autumn of 2022, which led to tens of thousands of Russians fleeing the country. According to the first excerpted article from the pro-Kremlin Russian news source *Izvestia*, the press secretary for the Russian president, Dmitry Peskov, stated in November that “there is no talk of mobilization,” instead claiming that Russians are actively signing contracts for service in Ukraine.

Russia is mobilizing troops, not by traditional forced means, but financial inducements are now a key component of Russia’s recruitment tactics. According to the second excerpted article from the Russian news agency *Interfax*, a new debt law is the most recent incentive passed to encourage participation in the military. The new law allows up to 10 million rubles (\$96,000) of outstanding debt facing collection, previously incurred by a recruit and/or his or her spouse, to be written off if a recruit joins the force.¹ Further, according to the third excerpted article from the Russian



Russian soldiers fast-rope from helicopter during Centre 2019 strategic command-and-staff exercises.

Source: Russian Office of the President, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61584>; Attribution: Public Domain

“Russians are actively signing contracts with the Russian Defense Ministry for service in the special operation zone.”

continue to meet its recruiting goals, extending the war in Ukraine.²

news tabloid *Ragnum News Agency*, on 25 November, Russia extended a one-time 400,000 ruble (\$3,800) payment to those who sign a contract with the Russian Guard (Rosgvardiya) “for participation in the special military operation” in Ukraine.

The combination of financial incentives, which amounts to a windfall for many Russians, dead or alive, may well help the Russian armed forces

Source: “Песков сообщил об отсутствии планов по проведению мобилизации в России (Peskov reported no plans to conduct mobilization in Russia),” *Izvestia* (pro-Kremlin Russian news source), 23 November 2024. <https://iz.ru/1795673/2024-11-23/peskov-soobshchil-ob-otsutstvii-planov-po-provedeniuiu-mobilizatsii-v-rossii>

Russia is not planning to conduct mobilization. This was announced on November 23 by the press secretary of the Russian president, Dmitry Peskov.

The official representative of the Kremlin added that at present, Russians are actively signing contracts with the Russian Defense Ministry for service in the special operation zone.

“There are a lot of these people — hundreds of people sign contracts every day and go to a special military operation,” Peskov noted.

Assembly point: Putin announced the completion of

mobilization within two weeks

At the same time, the president emphasized that the conscription process needs to be improved.

Earlier, on October 27, when the agency asked whether there were enough volunteers and whether mobilization might be required, Peskov also answered that there was no talk of mobilization in Russia.

*Before that, in May, Peskov stated that there was no need for mobilization in Russia, commenting on an article in the *Financial Times* (FT) that the country was actively recruiting volunteer contract soldiers.*

Source: “Правительство доработало программу списания кредитов военнослужащих (The government has finalized the program for writing off military personnel’s loans),” *Interfax* (Russian news agency), 15 November 2024. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/992965>

The government proposes to write off overdue loans of up to 10 million rubles for which judicial collection has already begun for mobilized personnel, conscripts (except for cadets) and military contract soldiers during military service to perform the tasks of the Air Defense Forces, from December 1, 2024, follows from the amendments submitted to the State Duma.

We are talking about writing off obligations under loan agreements that were concluded before December 1, 2024 and for which a court order on debt collection has already entered into legal force or enforcement proceedings have been initiated. Up to 10 million rubles can be written off for a certain category of citizens - these are conscripts for military service upon mobilization; conscripted military personnel (except for cadets of military schools or universities); other citizens who are not undergoing military service, but who concluded a contract for military service for

a period of one year or more to perform the tasks of a special military operation no earlier than December 1, 2024. The write-off also applies to spouses of this category of citizens.

“The obligations of a citizen called up for military service upon mobilization into the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, a serviceman who has served in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation by conscription (except for a serviceman holding a military position as a cadet in a military professional educational organization, a military educational organization of higher education under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation), another citizen who is not serving in the military, who concluded no earlier than December 1, 2024, a contract for military service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for a period of one year or more to perform the tasks of a special military

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operation, and (or) his (her) spouse, arising from a loan agreement, if before December 1, 2024 a judicial act on the collection of debt on these obligations entered into legal force and (or) in order to fulfill such obligations, a writ of execution was issued to a bank or other credit organization and (or) enforcement

proceedings were initiated based on the applications of the said organizations (the writ of execution was presented for execution), shall be terminated in parts, not exceeding in total 10 million rubles, from the date of conclusion of the said contract,” the text of the amendment says.

Source: “Путин распространил на Росгвардию разовую выплату в 400 тыс. Рублей (Putin Extends One-Time Payment of 400,000 Rubles to the Russian Guard),” *Regnum News Agency* (Russian tabloid), 25 November 2024. https://regnum.ru/news/3931489?utm_source=iz&utm_campaign=vidjet&utm_medium=8&utm_content=3931489

The Russian Guard has been extended a one-time payment of 400,000 upon signing a contract with the Ministry of Defense.

Russian President Vladimir Putin extended the provision on a one-time payment of 400,000 rubles to the Russian Guard upon signing a contract for participation in a special military operation. The corresponding decree was published on November 25.

“This decree shall enter into force on the date of its signing and shall apply to legal relations that arose from August 1, 2024,” the document says.

Putin introduced a payment of 400 thousand rubles for participants in the special operation who signed a contract with the Ministry of Defense for a period of one year or more in August. Foreign citizens who decided to go to the combat zone also received the right to it.

The press secretary of the Russian president Dmitry Peskov explained that the payment is aimed at supporting the fighters of the special operation. He emphasized that this does not mean a change in the goals of the SVO.

Notes:

- 1 In April 2024, the Russian government clarified its position vis-a-vis Russian banks regarding debt and interest reduction for those serving in Ukraine. As per when the article was written, the price tag for the debt forgiveness would be in the neighborhood of 11 billion rubles, half of which will be paid by the banks. The other half would be paid for by the government, adding an additional 5-6 billion rubles to defense expenditures. See: “Принят закон о компенсации банкам 50% потерь от списания процентов по кредитам военных (A law has been adopted to compensate banks for 50% of losses from writing off interest on military loans),” *Interfax* (Russian news agency), 2 April 2024. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/953642>
- 2 For reporting on the positive economic impact of financial payment to family members of deceased service members, see: Georgi Kantchev and Matthew Luxmoore, “The ‘Deathonomics’ Powering Russia’s War Machine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 November 2024. https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-ukraine-war-military-death-pay-6cfe936e?mod=world_lead_pos3

Russia Expands Its Arctic Research Capabilities

By Les Grau
OE Watch Commentary

In October, Russia announced the construction of its latest Arctic-capable research vessel, the *Ivan Frolov*. According to the first excerpted article from the Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, the *Ivan Frolov*, set for completion in 2028, will be the largest Arctic research vessel of its kind in the world and “the new flagship of Russia polar science.”¹ Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Patrushev noted the *Ivan Frolov* will collect data “for the development of navigation on the Northern Sea Route and to clarify the boundaries of the continental shelf of Russia.”

According to the second excerpted article from *The Barents Observer*, Russia’s research platform, the ***Severn Polyus***, commissioned in 2022, recently began its second polar expedition.² The expedition, “North Pole-42,” is expected to continue until 2026. This article also notes that while the *Severn Polyus* is a scientific research vessel,³



Russian President Vladimir Putin at Admiralty Shipyards to inspect the Petropavlovsk Kamchatsky submarine, the Ivan Papanin icebreaker patrol ship, and the Viktor Chernomyrdin icebreaker in 2019. Admiralty Shipyards in St. Petersburg is the site of construction of the newly announced Ivan Frolov Arctic capable research vessel.

Source: Office of the Russian President, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62143>; Attribution: Public Domain

“Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Patrushev underlined that the new vessel is aimed at strengthening Russia’s positions in the polar regions.”

it could also serve Russian military purposes, as Russia’s new marine doctrine “includes a high stress on the

use of civilian ships and infrastructure for military purposes.” This doctrinal emphasis not only affects the *Severn Polyus* and the forthcoming *Ivan Frolov* but also all other nations with Arctic exposure.

Together, these developments underscore Russia’s continued focus on the Arctic region at a time when all nations with an Arctic foothold are also dedicating resources to the area.

Source: Elizaveta Vereykina, “Construction begins on a “new flagship of Russian polar research,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 30 October 2024. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/construction-begins-on-a-new-flagship-of-russian-polar-research/419705>

On 29 October, the Russian Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute reported on an official ceremony held at the Admiralty shipyards in St Petersburg to start the construction of a new scientific vessel

named the Ivan Frolov. The vessel – with a length of 165 meters and displacement about 25,000 tons – is planned to be able to accommodate up to 240 people. In addition to the announced 20 scientific laboratories

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on board, it will also have a helicopter platform.

“In 2028, the vessel will join the fleet of the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute and become the new flagship of Russian polar science,” the news report says. At the ceremony, the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Patrushev underlined, that the new vessel is aimed at strengthening Russia’s positions in the polar regions:

“The vessel will have powerful scientific equipment that will allow conducting research even in the harshest conditions, including research on the ocean floor, in the atmosphere and space,” – “The study of the Arctic and Antarctic is one of the key areas of activity of the Russian Environmental Monitoring Service. More than 20 expeditions are already carried

out annually. They allow tracking climate change, collecting data for the development of navigation of the Northern Sea Route and clarifying the boundaries of the continental shelf of Russia”.

The Governor of St Petersburg, Alexander Beglov, called the new ship “the largest scientific research vessel in the world”. The two well-known large scientific -the RV Kronprins Haakon (Norway) or RRS Sir David Attenborough (UK), are smaller than the new Russian vessel. The technology used in the construction has previously been tested at the floating Arctic research station “North Pole” [“Severny Polyus”], according to the head of the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute Alexander Makarov.

Source: Atle Staalesen, “With the North Pole platform, Russia has returned to the Arctic for good,” *The Baltic Observer*, (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 17 September 2024. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/arctic/with-the-north-pole-platform-russia-has-returned-to-the-arctic-for-good/142846>

Russia’s North Pole (Severny Polyus) research platform has started its second comprehensive Arctic expedition. The 83-meter-long vessel this week set out from Murmansk with course for the high Arctic. It will sail into the polar sea-ice north of the New Siberian Islands and drift with the currents for the next two years. Experts at the Russian Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute are now scanning satellite images for the most suitable icefloe for the drift. The search will continue as the vessel approaches the area.

“With the expeditions of the ice-protected self-propelled platform Severny Polyus Russia has returned to the Arctic for good,” says Aleksandr Kozlov, the Russian Minister of Natural Resources. According to the minister, who is also known for his key role in Russia’s cooperation with North Korea, the

researchers will gather materials of great importance for the protection of Arctic ecology, understanding of climate change, as well as safe sailing on the Northern Sea Route. The expedition is named “the North Pole-42” and is expected to continue until 2026.

The Severny Polyus has the shape of a bathtub and is often referred to as a platform. It has a ship crew of 16 and a research team of up to 34 people. Ship operator is Roshydromet, the Russian state meteorological service. The Severny Polyus is capable of geological, acoustic, geophysical and marine research under the harshest Arctic conditions. In temperatures down to minus 50°C it is reportedly able to provide comfortable living and working conditions for researchers and crew.

On board are 15 labs where researchers can work

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

Albeit built for research purposes, the vessel 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 trawlers and icebreakers, but also the Severniy Polus.

Notes:

- 1 The Soviet Union and its successor state, Russia, have conducted a sustained Arctic maritime research effort since the 1930s and a sustained Antarctic research effort since 1955. The Arctic and Antarctic Scientific Research Institute (Арктический и антарктический научно-исследовательский институт) was founded in 1920 and still heads the country's polar exploration with close to a thousand land and sea expeditions to its credit.
- 2 For additional reporting on the *Severny Polyus*, see: Les Grau, "Russian Drift Station Vital To Arctic Research Effort," *OE Watch*, 07-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/russian-drift-station-vital-to-arctic-research-effort/>
- 3 For additional reporting on Russian research efforts in the Arctic, see: Les Grau, "China and Russia Expand Agreement For Arctic Strategic Resource Development," *OE Watch*, 08-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/china-and-russia-expand-agreement-for-arctic-strategic-resource-development/>

Russian Volunteer Force Highlights the Evolution of UAV Missions in Ukraine

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from the Russian daily newspaper *Izvestia* discusses the activities of the Volunteer Corps of the Russian Ministry of Defense's Española Brigade. The Española Brigade—currently numbering no more than 100 individuals, according to the founder—began as a volunteer formation of soccer enthusiasts, which now provides trained UAV operators and UAVs to support Russia's conventional force in the special military operation in Ukraine.¹ According to the *Izvestia* article, the Española Brigade operates its own UAV training center and is developing its own UAVs for use in Ukraine. Although state UAV development programs are entrenched in both Russia and Ukraine, the development of UAV technologies by volunteer units and their personnel in the field also appears to be increasingly common on both sides of the front. It would now seem that the traditional model of governments procuring defense articles from private industry and then supplying these materials to the military is simply no longer effective given UAVs' rapidly evolving technology and newfound tactical uses. Indeed, both the Russian and Ukrainian militaries are now collaborating closely with industry to quickly deliver new capabilities to the battlefield as the requirements are recognized.



Ukrainian Soldiers handling a Baba Yaga UAV.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baba_Yaga_\(aircraft\)#/media/File:UA_Vampire_UCAV_01.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baba_Yaga_(aircraft)#/media/File:UA_Vampire_UCAV_01.jpg); Attribution: Арміяінформ CC BY-SA 4.0

“Now everything that concerns combat UAVs is developing rapidly, if you stop, you fall behind.”

The article also mentions the importance of the **Baba Yaga** class of large UAVs. The primary mission of the Baba Yaga-class of UAVs is not reconnaissance or bomb dropping, but logistics support. This development illustrates the expanding role of UAVs on the modern battlefield—UAVs are no longer being used just as a means of reconnaissance (intelligence) and/

or fires. UAVs are now becoming key capabilities to enable success for other war-fighting functions.

Overall, although volunteer formations like Russia's Española Brigade are relatively small, they help fill critical shortages of UAV expertise that the conventional force would be hard-pressed to stand up on its own.²

Source: Dmitry Korneev, “«Птичьа» школа: как в бригаде «Эспаньола» готовят операторов дронов БПЛА (“Bird” school: how the “Espanola” brigade trains drone operators),” *Izvestiya* (major Russian daily newspaper), 7 November 2024. <https://iz.ru/1786422/dmitrii-korneev/ptica-skola-kak-v-brigade-espanola-gotovat-operatorov-dronov>

The volunteer “Española Brigade”, the backbone of which is football fans, has a unique UAV combat training center...the commander and founder of the UAV Combat Training Center is respectfully called Petrovich...“With the start of the special operation, the idea came to organize a UAV combat training center. But it didn’t work out right away. It only opened in May 2023. He notes that a wide variety of people came to the center. “We invited those who had experience working with UAVs, even if it was minimal,” he recalls...They started training and preparing people on “commercial” UAVs. Gradually training switched to FPV [first-person-view] UAVs. The trainees first master the theory, and then go to the training grounds. The final stage of the program involves training on a relatively calm section of the front...There, people receive their first combat experience. The center itself is relatively small. Its resources are designed mainly for the Española Brigade, Petrovich emphasizes...“We have been operating for only a year and a half. However, during this time, we have trained more than 100 qualified UAV operators in various areas” says Petrovich...

“Española”, like many other volunteer units, received special weapons manufactured by the so-called people’s defense industry, that is, developed and released outside the framework of the defense order...Now everything that concerns combat UAVs is developing rapidly, if you stop, you fall behind..., - Petrovich points out, moving on to the scientific

Notes:

- 1 Moscow uses the term spetsial’naya voyennaya operatsiya (“special military operation”) or spetsoperatsiya (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.
- 2 Additional Russian volunteer units have filled critical positions in Russia’s war in Ukraine, especially in the field of UAVs. See Charles Bartles, “Russia Gains Combat Power From Volunteer Service,” *OE Watch*, 07-2024, <https://fmsotrados.army.mil/2024/russia-gains-combat-power-from-volunteer-service/>

and practical activities of the center’s employees. At Española, they work with the entire spectrum of UAVs...In cooperation with a young design bureau, we are currently developing and conducting experimental tests on two types of UAVs: a night reconnaissance UAV and a high-speed Baba Yaga UAV. Due to the abundance of FPV [first-person-view] UAVs, the enemy has problems supplying units on the front line. “Five, seven, ten kilometers is a dead zone”, he explains. The fact is that people who sit directly at the front, paradoxically, are sometimes safer than those who are trying to resupply them from the rear. And so the first request for such a Baba Yaga [class UAV] came from such rear detachments.

Petrovich says that the troops needed a fast “bird” that could carry a good load and do it quickly. The primary mission is supplying provisions, ammunition, and medicine. The secondary mission is to carry powerful munitions. A load capacity of, for example, 10 kg allows you to transport an anti-tank mine. Moreover, ammunition can be varied. Now there is a whole line [of UAV munitions]. We call this project “Kikimora”. The active testing phase is underway... The center is also working on countering enemy electronic warfare...The second UAV currently being developed at the center is a night reconnaissance UAV. “It can stay in the air for up to an hour and a half...in terms of range, it’s at least 12 km, we want to increase it to 15-17 km”

Iran's Supreme Leader Hints at His Own Succession



By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

On 7 November 2024, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is 85 years old,¹ appeared before the 88-member Assembly of Experts, a clerical body charged with selecting the new supreme leader, to discuss—obliquely but still more directly than ever before—his own succession. Published on his official website, *Khamenei.ir*, Khamenei's speech discussed the possibility of his own "absence" and the need for a rapid transition. While his comments were oblique, they nevertheless represented the bluntest discussion of an increasingly sensitive subject. To hint at his own mortality and the looming succession risks not only transforming Khamenei himself into a lame duck but can also be destabilizing as regime officials begin to maneuver for the post-Khamenei scramble.

Whenever it occurs, the leadership transition in Iran will have an

important impact on the operational environment, because, constitutionally, the supreme leader is also the commander-in-chief with authority to hire and fire military commanders in both the Revolutionary Guard and the regular Iranian Army. The speed of succession could also affect both domestic and regional stability. Quick acceptance of a new leader lessens the chance of domestic unrest. However, there is the risk a new leader may resort to military action, terrorism, or through proxies, to establish his revolutionary bona fides. One major question is whether Khamenei's successor will launch a cultural revolution to try to tamp down dissent in a way that could lead to a public backlash and exacerbate unrest.

Beyond nods to his succession, Khamenei's speech included other notable takeaways. While Khamenei has previously voiced concern about declining revolutionary fervor among

"There will be no pause or interruption in the system...."

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei speaks to the Assembly of Experts in Tehran, 7 November 2024.

Source: https://idc0-cdn0.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/58257/C/14030817_0758257.jpg; Attribution: Khamenei.ir

Iranian youth, the speech was also the first time that Khamenei raised the possibility that the gains that resulted from the 1979 Islamic Revolution could be reversible.² Khamenei also criticized former Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin for allowing the Soviet experiment to descend into dictatorship at the expense of "communist democracy," but does not appear self-aware that many within Iranian society see him as a dictator and that Iran as a regime has betrayed its promised values: chants of "death to the dictator" during last year's "Woman, Life, Freedom" are one example of this public sentiment.

Source:

“(Statements in the Meeting of the Assembly of Experts),” *Khamenei.ir* (official website of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei), 7 November 2024. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=58264>

Within the structure and general framework of the Islamic system, the primary role of the Leader is to ensure that the system's orientation is directed toward the goals of the Revolution. This is the main responsibility of the Leader. The Revolution took place for a purpose. Of course, all revolutions have goals. They have fundamental goals that lead them to reshape and transform the order of life... [Those opposed to revolution] were able to prevent [previous] revolutions from achieving their goals and reverse their course. For instance, in the great French Revolution, which was one of the most significant revolutions in our contemporary history, barely 15 years had passed since the start of that revolution when the previous authoritarian monarchy and dictatorship were reestablished. All the efforts of the people, the endeavors of renowned French intellectuals, the efforts and struggles of the masses, the casualties, the massacres, the conflicts — all of these were essentially nullified and destroyed in less than 15 years!

A similar but worse case was what happened to the Soviet Revolution, which was also another major revolution. There too within less than a decade, the claims, the rhetoric, the professed justice and so-called “communist democracy” all vanished. A

dictator, a ruthless tyrant like Stalin, seized power and that was the end of it. So this is a risk that all revolutions face.

The Quran repeatedly emphasizes and warns about this matter, not just once or twice, but perhaps tens of times. The holy verses of the Quran repeatedly speak about regression and returning to the previous state from which people had been liberated and saved. This warning is directed toward both the believers and the unbelievers.

An element is necessary to prevent this [regression]. In the Islamic system, this element is the position of the Leader. Such a deviation must be prevented by a leader. This is very important. It is very important...! The establishment and creation of the Assembly of Experts signifies the uninterrupted progress of the Islamic system. This means that there will be no pause or interruption in the system. The Assembly of Experts exists to be able to designate a successor. Therefore, this succession will continue with full strength, power, and ability. This readiness and presence of the Assembly of Experts has such a meaning. If the current Leader were to be absent, the Assembly of Experts would immediately take action to select a successor. It is like this.

Notes:

- 1 Ali Khamenei's health struggles are not entirely secret: a 1981 assassination attempt left him partially paralyzed, and the regime photographed him in the hospital five years ago as he received treatment for prostate cancer.
- 2 For discussion of Khamenei's concern about declining revolutionary fervor, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran's Supreme Leader Warns of Declining Fervor of New Generation,” *OE Watch*, 08 2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/irans-supreme-leader-warns-of-declining-fervor-of-new-generation/>. See also: Michael Rubin, “Iran's Supreme Leader Speaks on Martyrdom” *OE Watch*, December 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/399678/download> and Michael Rubin, “Khamenei Warns Veterans of Declining Revolutionary Fervor” *OE Watch*, February 2020. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/310925/download>

Iran and Saudi Arabia Deepen Defense and Bilateral Ties

By Holly Dages
OE Watch Commentary

Iran and Saudi Arabia's defense ties grow despite Donald Trump winning the 2024 U.S. presidential election—known for his maximum pressure strategy on Tehran. According to the semi-official media outlet *Iranian Students' News Agency* (ISNA), on 10 November, the general chief of staff of Saudi Arabia's armed forces, General Fayyadh al-Ruwaili, met with his Iranian counterpart, Major General Mohammad Baqeri, in Tehran, where they discussed “the development of defense diplomacy and the expansion of bilateral cooperation.”

According to the excerpted article from the semi-official news outlet *Mehr News Agency*, during the meeting, Major General Bagheri also invited the Saudi defense minister to visit Iran and said Tehran is “interested in having the Saudi Navy participate in a naval exercise with Iran in the coming year, either with its naval units or as an observer.” The countries recently participated in a joint naval exercise with Russia and Oman, as well as five other observer countries—among those Saudi Arabia—in the Sea of Oman.¹ General Bagheri is the second high-ranking Saudi official to visit Iran after Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan visited in June 2023.²

The storming of the Saudi missions in Tehran and Mashhad following

“We are interested in having the Saudi navy in the coming year participate in a naval exercise with Iran, either with its naval units or as an observer.”

the execution of prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016 prompted Saudi Arabia to sever ties with Iran.³ In the years since, particularly under the Trump administration, Riyadh had taken a harder stance against Tehran. After the 2019 Aramco attacks, Saudi Arabia felt vulnerable due to Iran-backed attacks, which the administration failed to address. This led to a reassessment of its approach to Tehran and a de-escalation of tensions. It was not until a China-brokered deal in March 2023 that the two neighbors recommenced relations

with the reopening of embassies in their respective countries.⁴ According to the *Mehr News Agency* article, Ruwaili called the Beijing deal “a good basis for increasing bilateral work together between the two countries,” noting that Riyadh considers “this agreement as a strategic opportunity.”

The rare Saudi visit to Iran demonstrates that rapprochement will continue despite a new U.S. administration that is expected to resume its maximum pressure strategy on Tehran. Iran's “neighborly policy” of improving ties with its Arab neighbors appears to be paying off for now.

General chief of staff of Saudi Arabia's armed forces, General Fayyadh al-Ruwaili, and his Iranian counterpart, Major General Mohammad Baqeri, in Tehran.

Source: mehrnews Mehr News Agency (semi-official news outlet), 13 November 2024, com/x36rn3; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.



Source:

رئیس ستاد کل نیروهای مسلح عربستان با سرلشکر باقری دیدار کرد
 “(Saudi Arabia’s chief of staff of the armed forces met with Major General Bagheri),” *Iranian Students’ News Agency* (ISNA; semi-official news agency), 13 November 2024. isna.ir/xdSfrg

General Fayyadh bin Hamed al-Ruwaili met with the chief of staff of the armed forces. According to ISNA, quoting the public relations office of the general staff of the armed forces, General Fayyadh bin Hamed al-Ruwaili, [Saudi] chief of staff of the armed forces, met and talked with Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the [Iranian] chief of staff of the armed forces.

The development of defense diplomacy and the expansion of bilateral cooperation are among the main topics of this meeting.

Today at noon, the Saudi chief of staff of the armed forces arrived in Tehran as the head of a high-ranking military delegation.

Source:

همکاری‌های دوجانبه دفاعی و نظامی ایران و عربستان بررسی شد
 “(The bilateral defense and military cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia was reviewed),” *Mehr News Agency* (semi-official news outlet), 13 November 2024. mehrnews.com/x36rn3

Major General Mohammad Bagheri, after greeting and welcoming, said: “We believe that cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries, given numerous commonalities and abundant potential, can increase.”

The chief of staff of the armed forces of Iran emphasized improving cooperation in the fields of defense and exchanging experiences in the education and sports sectors, adding: “We are interested in having the Saudi navy in the coming year participate in a naval exercise with Iran, either with its naval units or as an observer.”

Examining the improvement of bilateral defense and military cooperation and the Palestine issue was among the topics that were part of the parties’ discussion.

Army General Fayyadh bin Hamed al-Ruwaili, at the time of thanking for the hospitality of the chief of staff of the armed forces, highlighted and emphasized the improvement of the level of cooperation in various fields in the armed forces of the two countries and stated: “The Beijing agreement was a good basis for increasing bilateral work together between the two countries and we consider this agreement as a strategic opportunity.”

He also emphasized the importance of the two countries’ role-playing and influence in uniting the Islamic and regional countries and the continuation of political and defense relations between the two countries.

At the end, Major General Mohammad Bagheri invited the Saudi defense minister to visit Iran.

Notes:

- 1 “Iran and Saudi Arabia hold joint naval exercise in Sea of Oman,” *Times of Israel*, 24 October 2024. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-and-saudi-arabia-hold-joint-naval-exercise-in-sea-of-oman/>
- 2 Amir Vahdat, “Saudi foreign minister in Iran as part of restoration of diplomatic ties after a 7-year rift,” *Associated Press*, 17 June 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-iran-c04f4483f660c65229535ae80083dbd6>
- 3 “Saudi Arabia breaks off ties with Iran after al-Nimr execution,” *BBC News*, 4 January 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35217328>
- 4 “What You Need to Know About China’s Saudi-Iran Deal,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 16 March 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/what-you-need-know-about-chinas-saudi-iran-deal>

Iranian Navy Closely Monitors U.S. Naval Operations in the Persian Gulf



“Commander of the Navy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Shahram Irani,” published on 3 November 2024.

Source: Mehr News Agency, <http://mehrnews.com/x36nJL>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

As tensions stemming from the Gaza war continue, Iran claims that it is sending a message through its monitoring of U.S. naval vessels in regional waters, which it believes do not belong there. As per the excerpted article published by the semi-official Iranian news outlet *Mehr News Agency*, on 3 November, marking the anniversary of the 444-day hostage crisis, the commander of the Iranian Navy, Rear Admiral Shahram Irani, said, “The U.S. aircraft carrier, as well as sixteen destroyers and frigates present in the region, are monitored by our reconnaissance drones, and we are surveilling them from above.” Irani noted that Iranian reconnaissance drones could be seen with the naked eye, and their presence was intended to send a clear message to the United States that its presence is not welcomed in the Middle East and that its naval movements in the region are being monitored. He added, “This is a very important point that we have the ability to monitor the enemy at sea, and it’s become a concern for the Americans.”

Previously, the rear admiral made a reference to the Marshall Islands-flagged *Suez Rajan* oil tanker (renamed *St. Nikolas*), which the United States confiscated in 2023 for carrying Iranian oil as it headed to the Bahamas. The rear admiral stated Tehran was able to seize it back from the Gulf of Oman.¹ Irani also said that Iran is capable of escorting oil and commercial shipments from all continents and is

prepared to respond to any aggression, noting that such actions are “a point of strength.”

Although Irani made his comments prior to the U.S. presidential election, it is worth noting that the previous Trump administration’s oil embargo—as part of its maximum pressure strategy—escalated U.S.-Iran tensions to a historic high with the regular seizing and sabotaging of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. Tehran has always threatened to shut down the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world’s oil passes.² As these comments were made on the anniversary of the Iran hostage crisis, Irani appears to have wanted to emphasize Tehran has command of the waters in the region regardless of tensions and whatever the outcome of the U.S. presidential election.

“The U.S. aircraft carrier, as well as sixteen destroyers and frigates present in the region, are monitored by our reconnaissance drones, and we are surveilling them from above.”

Source:

ناو هواپیمابر، ۱۶ ناوشکن و ناوچه آمریکا را در منطقه رصد می کنیم

“(We monitor US aircraft carrier, 16 destroyers and frigates in the region)” *Mehr News Agency* (Iranian state media outlet), 3 November 2024. <http://mehrnews.com/x36nJL>

According to Mehr News Agency, Shahram Irani, the commander of the Navy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, met with Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Saeedi, custodian of the holy shrine of Fatima Masuma, stated in reference to the National Day of the Fight Against Global Arrogance: “The US aircraft carrier, as well as sixteen destroyers and frigates present in the region, are monitored by our reconnaissance drones, and we are surveilling them from above.”

He stated that our reconnaissance drones can be seen with the naked eye to tell the Americans that their place isn't in the region and that we are always monitoring their movements. He added: “This is a very important point that we have the ability to monitor the enemy at seas, and it's become a concern for the Americans.”

Notes:

- 1 Kathryn Armstrong, “Iran seizes oil tanker St Nikolas near Oman,” *BBC News*, 11 January 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67948119>
- 2 Mark Landler, Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, “US Puts Iran on Notice and Weighs Response to Attack on Oil Tankers,” *New York Times*, 14 June 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/14/us/politics/trump-iran-tanker-hormuz.html>

The commander of the Navy of the Islamic Republic of Iran stated that our navy was able to escort the ships of the countries... the navy escorts oil and commercial shipments from the shores of Venezuela to America, Europe, and Africa, and if any aggression is made against our ships, we will respond to it.

He added, “One of the recent actions we carried out was recapture an oil shipment that had been seized by the United States, along with the vessel that was transporting it, despite the US having renamed it.”

Irani added: “We are going after showing system authority in the depths of the oceans, and our actions will be a point of strength for the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Iran Struggles to Supply Its Electric Grid

By Michael Rubin
OE Watch Commentary

While Iran boasts the world's second-largest natural gas reserves after Russia, it is increasingly difficult for it to provide enough supply to its electrical generating stations to power its electric grid. The problem is especially severe in the winter as consumption increases. Iran's failure to provide electricity has ramifications for domestic stability and could affect the larger regional operational environment.¹

The excerpted notice, first posted on the Iranian Ministry of Electricity's website, noted that there will be forthcoming power disruptions, partially due to the decision not to use *mazut*. This heavy, low-quality fuel oil is a byproduct of refining but degrades electrical generating plants and causes heavy air pollution. President Masoud Pezeshkian's decision to shutter mazut-burning plants suggests regime fear of popular backlash to air pollution trumps the discord of suffering power cuts.² He is right to worry; Iran has experienced nationwide protests over poor stewardship of the environment.³

While Iranian analysts place responsibility for the energy shortfall on growing consumption, especially during the cold winter months, such an explanation may be too straightforward and exculpatory toward the



The Tehran headquarters of Tavanir, a subsidiary electricity company of Iran's Ministry of Electricity.

Source: https://static.neshanmap.ir/places/images/dca/1043877_3901745-ریناوت-تک‌رش- .jpeg; Attribution: Nshan.ir

“There will be electricity cuts in the domestic and commercial sectors.”

regime: Iran's population growth rate is only 0.8 percent. More likely is that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which dominates the power industry, is diverting resources for its own aims and agendas. It is unclear if the pending energy cuts will spare the IRGC's manufacturing base, but, if so, it will likely spark popular antagonism against the elite military force and its domination of Iran's industrial sector.

Because Iran's refinery network is decrepit, Iran cannot adequately refine gasoline domestically. This forces the regime to export gas for refining and then reimport it for use in power generation and to inject into oil fields to enable further oil extraction.

This creates a lose-lose situation for the Iranian leadership: either it reverts to burning highly polluting substances and risks public protest, or it suffers more frequent power shortfalls and risks public unrest and industrial shortfalls. The danger of either scenario for those outside Iran is similar: When Iran faces domestic unrest, it often lashes out militarily to distract its own public around the nationalist flag.

Source:

“(Announcement No. 1 of Tavanir Company about the power cut program),” *Donya-e-Eqtasad.com* (nominally independent center-right financial newspaper), 9 November 2024. <https://donya-e-eqtasad.com/ن-اوخ-ت-ی-اس-ش-خ-ب/قرب-ع-طق-هم-ان-رب-ه-راب-رد-ری-ن-اوت-ت-ک-ر-ش-ه-رام-ش-هی-ع-ال-طا-ی-روف-62/4121436>

“We would like to inform our dear compatriots that due to the onset of the cold season and the increase in gas consumption in the domestic sector and the restriction of the supply of gas fuel to power plants, and in accordance with the decisions taken not to consume mazut in some power plants, there will

be electricity cuts in the domestic and commercial sectors. Respected subscribers can be informed about the time schedule for imposing electricity restrictions from the relevant electricity distribution companies on the My Electricity System website.”

Notes:

- 1 For previous discussion of Iranian blackouts, see: Michael Rubin, “Blackouts in Bushehr Province Risk Unrest,” *OE Watch*, August 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-past-issues/387127/download/>
- 2 For previous discussion of Iranian air pollution, see: Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Pollution Problems Peak,” *OE Watch*, September 2021. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-21393-00-00-00-39-51-99/2021_2D00_09_2D00_01-Iran_1920_s-Pollution-Problems-Peak-_2800_Rubin_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true&_465e6ac6175646f29c3498916f3fcd2f
- 3 For discussion of Iran’s arrests of environmental activists, see: Michael Rubin, “Iranian Environmentalists Arrested as Spies,” *OE Watch*, April 2018. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/__key/telligent-evolution-components-attachments/13-17883-00-00-00-28-50-74/2018_2D00_04_2D00_01-Iranian-Environmentalists-Arrested-as-Spies-_2800_Rubin_2900_.pdf?forcedownload=true&_401ef985fd9b4fb89199f41137332cb3

North Korean State Media Quickly Censors Its Own Photos



A before and after image from the same PRK state media article reporting on the contents of a balloon launched from South Korea. The first image was downloaded before the PRK decided to censor and pixelate the image, while the second one obscures the contents (Oct 15, 2024).

Source: <https://usg01.safelinks.protection.office365.us?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nknews.org%2F2024%2F11%2Fnorth-korea-slams-rok-balloon-launches-scattering-propaganda-over-seoul%2F&data=05%7C02%7Csusan.1.littleton2.ctr%40army.mil%67C36eb83aa1429465e404108dd46cd27cb%7Cfae6d70f954b481192b60530d6f84c43%7C0%7C0%7C638744569159699186%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJFbXB0eU1hcGkiOnRydWUsIlYiOiJlLjAuMDAwMCIsIlAiOiJXaW4zMlIsIkFOIjoiTWVpbiIsIldUijoyfiQ%3D%3D%7C0%7C%7C%7C&sdata=W6HDHwUBL2pMokfogyqC7%2BCWz%2Fj9ea416PhxkoXCXeU%3D&reserved=0>

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

For more than a decade, South Korean NGOs have routinely launched balloons into North Korea containing anti-regime leaflets, USB drives, and CD/DVDs containing foreign media and news reporting, food, medicine, and other items. North Korea considers these launches to be a serious threat to regime stability because the items provide information outside the control of its oppressive and all-consuming censorship apparatus. The balloon launches occur along or near the demilitarized zone when winds are favorable to carry them into the North. North Korea has threatened to attack balloon launch sites or military targets, as Pyongyang claims Seoul is responsible for not stopping the NGOs.

North Korean state-controlled general circulation major daily newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* recently released several photos of items contained in a probable South Korean NGO-launched balloon into North Korea. However, within 24 hours of releasing the photos, North Korea redacted them by pixelating the balloon's contents. This appears to be an act of narrative damage control by Pyongyang. North Korean state media at all levels has been criticizing these balloon launches for months, with increasingly frustrated commentaries and threats by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong, who is vice chair of the central committee of ruling Korean Workers Party.¹

In an unusual move, *Rodong Sinmun* attached the images to another warn-

ing commentary by Kim Yo Jong. North Korea characterizes the contents of the balloons as a provocation and sanitizes the areas where they land like a hazardous materials spill site. North Korean state media had not discussed the contents of the balloons before, rather referring to them as “dirty rubbish” that “even a mutt dislikes to touch.” By not providing too much information, it allowed the readers, both domestic and international, to infer the contents. By explicitly showing the contents of the balloon, North Korea removed the mystery. The balloon in this image contains choco-pies (a South Korean favorite) and other snacks, possibly some sanitary napkins or baby wipes, and medicine, among other things. It is probable, but again unclear

because of the image quality, that it also contained media or anti-regime materials.

North Korea would likely be reacting similarly even if the balloons contained only food, hygiene, and personal items. The quality of these items, information about the outside world, the hint of a better life in South

“The security forces organs in the areas where the report of discovery was made have blocked the relevant districts and are conducting the work for searching, gathering and disposal.”

Korea, and the opportunity it holds anger the North Korean regime more than the items themselves. North Korea has consistently demonstrated

in its actions that it considers external information to be a critical threat to the Kim Jong Un regime.

Source: “김여정 조선로동당 중앙위원회 부부장 담화 (Press Statement of Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of the C.C., WPK),” *Rodong Sinmun* (main party newspaper for general audiences), 18 November 2024. <http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?MTVAMjAyNC0xMS0xOC1OMDA1QA>

Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, issued the following statement on November 17:

On November 16, various kinds of political agitation leaflets and dirty things sent by the ROK scum were dropped in many areas near the southern border and even in the depth area of the DPRK.

A continuous report of this was made from various parts all day long yesterday.

The security forces organs in the areas where the report of discovery was made have blocked the relevant districts and are conducting the work for searching, gathering and disposal.

We strongly denounce the shameful and dirty acts

of the ROK scum who committed the provocation of scattering anti-DPRK political and conspiratorial agitation things once again in disregard of our repeated warnings.

There will be no house owner who hardly gets enraged at such dirty rubbish scattered in the clean yard, which even a mutt dislikes to touch.

The inviolable territory of the DPRK is being polluted, and much labor had to be used in disposing of these wastes.

There is a limit to patience. The DPRK people’s anger at the most disgusting curs has reached the extremes. The scum will have to pay a dear price.

Source: “조선민주주의인민공화국 사회안전성 대변인발표 (Spokesman for DPRK Ministry of Public Security Releases Statement),” *Korean Central News Agency* (state-controlled news service), 18 October 2024. <http://kcnk.kp/en/article/q/31281702f661bf24e69b10aab3345c6e.kcmsf>

Pyongyang, October 18 (KCNA)—On Friday morning, rubbish scattered by a large balloon sent by the ROK scum was found again in Hwaam-ri and Munbong-ri of Phyonggang County in Kangwon Province and in Ryonghak-ri of Cholwon County of the province near the southern border of the DPRK.

The security organs in those areas blockaded and searched the areas and forensically examined and disposed of the collected rubbish.

The Ministry of Public Security informed the KPA General Staff of the results of the examination.

Source: “김여정 조선로동당 중앙위원회 부부장 담화 발표 (Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong),” *Korean Central News Agency* (state-controlled news service), 10 June 2024. <http://kcpa.kp/article/q/8ec19906a01596bdfc2ca10bf9f8d555.kcmsf>

Pyongyang, June 10 (KCNA)—Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, issued the following press statement on Sunday.

The ROK connived at the provocative act of scattering the political agitation rubbish across the border of the DPRK again on June 6 and 7 despite our repeated warning against the intemperate psychological warfare of the scum who defected from the DPRK, thus aggravating the situation.

In the period between June 6 and 8, the despicable political agitation rubbish was discovered in Singye and Thosan counties of North Hwanghae Province, Janghung County and Phanmun District of Kaesong Municipality, Kosan, Phyonggang and Cholwon

counties of Kangwon Province and other areas of the DPRK near the border.

This is a prelude to a very dangerous situation.

Politicians of Seoul are trying hard to justify their stand with the only and strange deformed logic in the world that regulates and judges the “freedom of expression” and “provocation” in the windward direction. And they formalized their behavior just like a guilty filing the suit first that they have resumed the loudspeaker broadcasting smear campaign again against the DPRK’s counteraction against their challengeable act, thus creating a new crisis.

We strongly denounce the despicable and childish behavior of the ROK and clarify our stand responding to it.

Notes:

- 1 Kim Yo Jong comments are likely intended to convey authoritative messages from the PRK government without restraining leader Kim Jong Un’s options. Her messages are undoubtedly authoritative, but not final.

Arabic-Language Media Divided on Hezbollah's Future

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

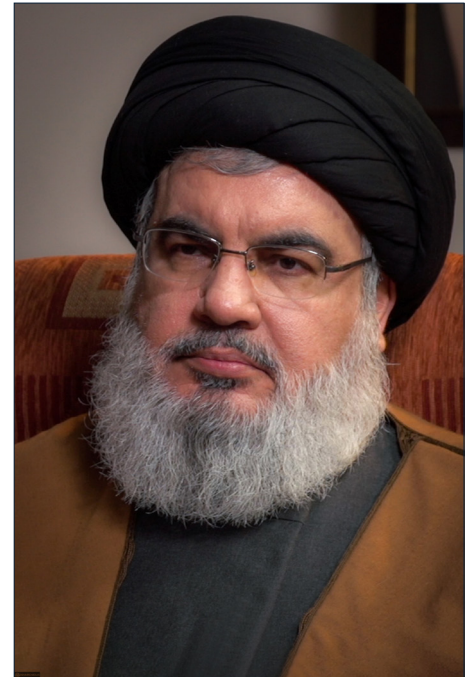
Hezbollah's future has become a subject of intense speculation in Arabic-language media following the group's loss of its top leadership in Israeli strikes earlier this year, including that of Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024.¹ Hezbollah's friends and foes alike agree that the leadership decapitation was a painful blow, but they disagree on the degree to which the group will be able to adapt and reconstitute in the aftermath. Ultimately, predictions of Hezbollah's future hinge largely on whether Hezbollah is seen primarily as a hierarchically organized Iranian proxy or as a grassroots Lebanese political movement. Those who view Hezbollah as a hierarchically organized Iranian proxy are more likely to see the leadership decapitation as a critical blow, while those who emphasize its grassroots Lebanese identity tend to view the losses as difficult but surmountable.

The first two accompanying excerpts, from the UAE think tank Emirates Policy Center and the Kuwaiti daily *al-Jarida*, illustrate the type of analysis that emphasizes Iranian influence and hierarchical organization as central components to Hezbollah's strength. The first excerpt warns that the loss of old-guard leadership and the transition to a younger generation beholden to Iran

is unlikely to be seamless and risks creating fissures that will fracture the group into smaller—arguably more dangerous—territorial-based factions. The second excerpt, meanwhile, suggests that Tehran may seek greater direct control over Hezbollah to prevent fragmentation and ensure organizational cohesion.

On the other hand, however, supporters and sympathizers of Hezbollah argue that the movement is resilient enough to reconstitute internally in the aftermath of the losses. Although the loss of Nasrallah and other top leaders is significant, they view it as a setback rather than a death blow for an organization designed to be adaptable. Writing in the wake of Nasrallah's death, the editor-in-chief of the pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar* explains how the group can be expected to restructure and rebuild in a way that addresses the vulnerabilities that allowed Israel to decimate its leadership.

Ultimately, despite varied predictions—whether of fragmentation, increased Iranian control, or adaptive transformation—all analyses seem to agree on one point: Hezbollah, even after these substantial leadership losses, will continue to exert a powerful influence on the regional strategic landscape.



Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah during a discussion with officials from supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei's office, circa 2019. Nasrallah was killed in an Israeli strike in late September 2024.

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

“If [Nasrallah’s] lasting lesson for us is to turn a threat into an opportunity, then the resistance today has an opportunity to reorganize its affairs in a way that opens the door to a qualitative renewal on several levels in its mentality, management, programs, and work tools...”

Source:

تداعيات تغييب الجيل المؤسس لـ «حزب الله» اللبناني: إعادة التشكيل، أم التشظي والانفراط؟

“The repercussions of the absence of the founding generation of the Lebanese Hezbollah: Restructuring, or fragmentation and disintegration?” *Emirates Policy Center* (UAE think tank), 9 October 2024. <https://www.epc.ae/ar/details/brief/tadaeiat-taghyib-aljil-almuasis-li-hezbollah>

In the case of Hezbollah, the absence of the “charismatic leader” is accompanied by strategic shocks and numerous major absences, which have put the fate of the entire party in question...

The new leadership of the party is likely to be formed from the generation of youth who were educated and trained in Iran, a generation that speaks Persian fluently no less than Arabic. These sons grew up in a time of prosperity, when the party had abundant resources, its revenues were abundant from various sources, and its weapons were advanced and plentiful...

But the sudden absence of the older generation, and the rise of the new generation of sons will create a huge void. It is a generation that does not enjoy the same historical ties that their fathers enjoyed; its decisions are controlled by Shiite doctrine and Iranian

directives without any significant influence from Lebanese motives...

Perhaps the greatest danger to Lebanon and the region is the possibility of Hezbollah splitting and fragmenting into a group of competing terrorist organizations and gangs spread across the Lebanese arena... Such a dangerous scenario should never be allowed to be repeated in Lebanon...

In short, the series of Israeli assassinations against Hezbollah leaders has a tactical effect that Israel wants on the battlefield; it will reduce the party’s ability to manage and fight the battle, but it will open the doors of Lebanon and the region to the unknown, and put Hezbollah on the brink of fragmentation, sliding into more extremism, chaos, and the rise of warlords...

Source:

«إيران تعين «وصياً» على «حزب الله»

“Iran appoints Hezbollah ‘guardian,’” *al-Jarid* (Kuwaiti daily), 10 November, 2024. <https://www.aljarida.com/article/77625>

A source in the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps revealed to al-Jarida that Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh, the assistant commander of the force, has been appointed as a “supervisor” of the Lebanese Hezbollah, pending the appointment of the party’s new secretary-general after the assassination of its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah...

The source indicated that Fallahzadeh, who was the shadow of the former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, and who has extensive experience

in managing wars and field battles, will temporarily supervise the party, and his appointment will not require any organizational procedures within the party, nor will it result in any change in the party’s political structure. He stressed that the party’s political decision will remain in the hands of its “Lebanese leaders,” who will remain in their positions and communicate with other Lebanese forces and with the Lebanese authorities, explaining that Fallahzadeh’s mission lies only in helping to manage the current war with Israel, and securing communication and logistical support for the party.

Source:

“The resistance launched a workshop to restore its structure and capabilities,” *al-Akhbar* (pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily), 10 October 2024. <https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/385253/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87>

First, the blow that the resistance received at the level of its central leadership was very harsh, very large, and very broad, and left a direct impact on everything...

Until now, it can be said that the hierarchy and mechanism for issuing essential and urgent decisions, and the sequence of work and implementation orders, are being organized in a way that provides the best organizational environment for the work of the resistance military units, whether those present in the field or those awaiting orders to join...

[Nasrallah's] role had grown after the martyrdom of leaders from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran during the past two decades, which forced him to distribute their tasks to others, but he had his share

of every issue, which was reflected in the past ten years in an extreme centralization in the leadership structure and decision-making in the party. This is what made the enemy bet that the assassination of the Sayyed constitutes a blow to the backbone not only of Hezbollah, but of an entire axis.

Therefore, we must all adapt to the new situation, and not place the burden on whoever takes over the matter after him as was the case before, and not ask anyone, not even God, to bring us an identical copy of the martyred Sayyed. If his lasting lesson for us is to turn a threat into an opportunity, then the resistance today has an opportunity to reorganize its affairs in a way that opens the door to a qualitative renewal on several levels in its mentality, management, programs, and work tools...

Notes:

- 1 The speculation is hardly confined to Arabic-language media. For a sample of the debate within the U.S. think tank community, see for instance: Sarah E. Parkinson and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl. “Targeted Killings Won’t Destroy Hezbollah,” *Foreign Affairs*, 11 November 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/targeted-killings-wont-destroy-hezbollah>; Bruce Hoffman. “The Nasrallah Killing Is a Crushing Blow to Hezbollah,” Council on Foreign Relations, 28 September 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/nasrallah-killing-crushing-blow-hezbollah>; “Experts react: Hassan Nasrallah is dead. What’s next for Hezbollah, Israel, and Iran?” Atlantic Council, 28 September 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react/experts-react-hassan-nasrallah-is-dead-whats-next-for-hezbollah-israel-and-iran/>

Nigerian Senator Proposes Employment of Private Military Companies Against Boko Haram

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Nigeria is a country that has historically shied away from employing private military companies (PMCs) as a matter of national sovereignty. When the country has employed PMCs, including a South African-led contingent¹ that combatted Boko Haram in 2015, it has not yielded success beyond short-term gains. However, the excerpted *Daily Trust* article indicates that an influential politician in Boko Haram's heartland, Borno State, is now calling for Nigeria to again employ PMCs. According to the article, Borno South Senator Mohammed Ali Ndume² is urging Nigerian President Bola Tinubu to temporarily hire PMCs because the Ni-

gerian military and Civilian Joint Task Force are making progress against Boko Haram but are unable to secure victory. However, the claims that progress is being made against Boko Haram is debatable. For example, the article notes that, among other larger attacks, Boko Haram (likely the faction of the late Abubakar Shekau³) had just raided Ngoshe in the Gwoza local government area and abducted numerous civilians and killed six farmers.

In addition, Ndume's suggestion that the PMCs would only operate "temporarily" raises questions about whether they could secure victory, given the late Shekau faction and the stronger Islamic State in West Africa Province faction and their predeces-

sors have been fighting since 2009. Since then, neither the Nigerian military nor the Multinational Joint Task Force, comprising Nigeria and its four land neighbors and previous PMCs, has come close to defeating⁴ these factions. Furthermore, Ndume has hinted that the PMCs would not only finish Boko Haram in this "temporary" time frame but also combat the possibly even more widespread problem of banditry in northwestern Nigeria. Defeating either Boko Haram or the bandits, let alone both, would be an insurmountable task for Nigeria's military even if several thousand PMC personnel were operating alongside them.

Ndume did not mention the company or origin of the PMCs whom he



Despite being pushed from its core territories in northeastern Nigeria in 2015 by the Nigerian and neighboring armies and South African PMCs, Boko Haram reemerged by 2017, causing mass displacement of civilians and retaking many territories it had lost.

Source: VOA, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:R%C3%A9fugi%C3%A9sMaiduguri2016.jpg>; Attribution: CC x 2.0

is advising Tinubu to employ. Nevertheless, the main option in the region would seem to be Russia's Africa Corps, the successor of the Wagner Group. The recent pro-Russian sentiment exhibited during anti-corruption protests in northern Nigeria, as well as the Russian efforts to displace the West, including France in the Sahel

and potentially the United States in Nigeria, could represent the beginning of Russian efforts to pull Nigeria closer into its orbit for the first time since the end of the Soviet era. If Ndume's proposal gains traction, it could herald new geopolitical contestation in Nigeria, but few favorable

outcomes for counterinsurgency or counter-banditry in the country.

“These contractors will work with our military and Civilian JTF, who understand the terrain.”

Source: “Ndume asks Tinubu to hire military contractors to flush out Boko Haram,” *Daily Trust* (most widely circulated newspaper in northern Nigeria, which covers the region's affairs from a critical perspective), 2 October 2024. <https://dailytrust.com/ndume-asks-tinubu-to-hire-military-contractors-to-flush-out-boko-haram/>

Senator representing Borno South, Mohammed Ali Ndume, has called on President Bola Ahmed Tinubu to temporarily hire the services of “military contractors” to wipe out the remnants of Boko Haram terrorists in Borno State. Ndume, who hailed the gallant performance of the military and Civilian JTF, said they are ill-equipped to carry out the task of eliminating the remaining insurgents who operate within. “All across the world, governments hire the services of military contractors to engage in certain places. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu can consider this as a short measure. These contractors will work

with our military and Civilian JTF, who understand the terrain.”

“These contractors will come with their equipment and military hardware. In a very short time, they'll eliminate those Boko Haram terrorists. The contractors can also be used to eliminate those bandits operating in the North West. His comment comes after Boko Haram terrorists launched a fresh attack in Ngoshe, Gwoza Local Government Area of Borno, where they slaughtered six farmers and abducted five others including women.

Notes:

- 1 In 2015, ISWAP lost territory after the armies of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon and South African PMCs led by a former apartheid-era South African Defence Force officer supported the Nigerian army to expel ISWAP from towns it had controlled in northeastern Nigeria. Nevertheless, disputes over payments of the PMCs, ISWAP's retreat into rural areas, and ISWAP's retaliatory attacks against Niger, Chad, and Cameroon undermined the counter-ISWAP offensive's momentum. The PMCs and Nigeria's three neighboring countries all eventually left Nigeria and ISWAP and the Shekau faction both renewed operations in 2017 to recapture territories and overrun Nigerian military outposts and bases.
- 2 Ndume himself was suspected of supporting Boko Haram and even jailed early in the insurgency in 2012 when he reportedly contacted Boko Haram leadership 73 times in one month. It later surfaced that he was, however, attempting to negotiate.
- 3 Since the Shekau faction split from ISWAP in 2016, Gwoza has remained one of its strongholds. In addition, mass abductions and killings of civilian farmers is typical of the Shekau faction's brutality, whereas ISWAP has generally avoided tactics that alienate and brutalize the local population.
- 4 The Nigerian president from 2015 to 2023, Muhammadu Buhari, notoriously claimed that Boko Haram was “technically defeated” after coming into office only to see the two main factions resurface stronger than before by 2017.

Chadian President Threatens Withdrawal From Multinational Joint Task Force

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 28 October 2024, Boko Haram carried out a significant attack against Chadian soldiers in Barakaram on Lake Chad, killing at least 40.¹ Chadian President Mahamat Idris Deby Itno reacted to the Barakaram attack not by requesting greater collaboration with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF),² which Nigeria has done in response to Boko Haram attacks. Rather, according to the excerpted article from the French-language website *airinfoagadez.com*, Deby Itno is considering withdrawing Chad from the MNJTF altogether, which could add further stress to the 20-year-old organization. Niger, which itself withdrew from the MNJTF in June after alleging the Economic Community of West African States was interfering in its internal affairs, had in late August reported to Nigeria that it would

renew cooperation with the MNJTF. But now a Chadian withdrawal could undermine the force.

“The MNJTF is today hampered by the “lack of mutualization of efforts” needed to confront this common enemy [Boko Haram].”

According to the accompanying article, Deby Itno sees insufficient “mutual” contributions to the MNJTF, perhaps implying that Niger’s wavering about staying in the organization contributed to the inability to stop Boko Haram from augmenting its ranks on the lake or that Chad is shouldering an excessive burden in the force. More specifically, the president’s office alleged that the MNJTF had become “lethargic,” which

hindered Chad’s ability to engage in counterterrorism operations. The article suggested that if Chad operated outside the MNJTF, it could operate more autonomously and secure the country’s borders. The article did, however, claim that a Chadian withdrawal from the MNJTF would exacerbate the security vulnerabilities of other Lake Chad countries, including Niger, even though the Chadian president hinted that withdrawing from the MNJTF would not cause Chad to abandon its commitment to the regional fight against terrorism.

It is possible that Chad simply no longer needs the MNJTF for counterterrorism against Boko Haram, or at least that Deby Itno is confident in relying on his own army, despite tactical defeats such as that in Barakaram. Alternatively, Deby Itno may be using the threat to withdraw from the MNJTF to solicit more international support for the force, a demand he has also made.³ Indeed, given that the MNJTF is based in N’Djamena, Chad, Deby Itno’s comments represent an existential threat for the MNJTF if they become reality.

Chadian president Mahamat Idris Deby Itno is threatening to withdraw from the MNJTF and conduct counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram autonomously in response to the group’s latest massacre of Chadian troops in Barakaram.

Source: André Kodmadjingar (VOA), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahamat_Idriss_Deby_\(en_boubou_blanc\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahamat_Idriss_Deby_(en_boubou_blanc).png); Attribution: CC x 2.0



Source: “Le Tchad envisage un retrait de la Force Multinationale Mixte (FMM) (Chad Considers Withdrawal from the Multinational Joint Task Force),” *airinfoagadez.com* (media group combining Air-Info Agadez, RADIO Sahara FM, Agadez Web TV in Agadez, Niger and covering Sahelian political and security affairs), 3 November 2024. <https://airinfoagadez.com/2024/11/03/le-tchad-envisage-un-retrait-de-la-force-multinationale-mixte-fmm/>

Chad announced it is considering a possible withdrawal of its troops from the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), citing a “lack of mutualization of efforts” in this regional coalition against Boko Haram. This decision, announced on November 3, comes after a recent deadly attack by the Boko Haram sect against Chadian forces in Barkaram, in Lake Chad province. On the ground, [President Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno] oversaw security reinforcement measures and ordered the launch of Operation

Haskanite to track down the attackers.

The MNJTF “seems to be falling into lethargy,” which undermines the effectiveness of the joint fight. If the withdrawal were confirmed, Chad could opt for autonomous operations and concentrate resources on securing its borders. Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno reaffirmed the duty to protect Chadian citizens first and foremost, while emphasizing that the country would continue to uphold its commitments in the regional fight against terrorism.

Notes:

- 1 The recent Boko Haram attack on Barakaram is the deadliest since a raid on the Chadian base in Bohoma along Lake Chad in 2020. Nearly 80 soldiers were killed in the Bohoma raid, showcased in a Boko Haram video revealing beheadings, soldiers fleeing the base, and a helicopter flying overhead to assess the situation in the aftermath of the attack.
- 2 The MNJTF was founded in 1994 to curb banditry. In 2015, the force, which by then comprised Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Benin, expanded its scope to ending the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin region. Its headquarters was also in the Chadian capital of N’Djamena, but the force was largely Nigeria-centric, given that it collaborated alongside multiple Nigerian counter-insurgency operations against Boko Haram.
- 3 “Chad urges international community to boost support after Boko Haram attack,” *france24.com*. 30 October 2024. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20241030-chad-urges-international-community-to-boost-support-after-boko-haram-attack>

Kazakhstan Expands Opportunities for Volunteers To Join the Armed Forces



By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Kazakhstan’s armed forces began to draw operational and tactical lessons from the war in Ukraine not long after Russia invaded in February 2022.¹ The accompanying excerpted article from the independent news website *Fergana Agency* reports that Kazakhstan is again using the example of the war in Ukraine to introduce a new law that allows citizens to volunteer for the military in the event of a war. The new law envisions volunteers joining units serving on the front lines or units operating in rear areas.² In addition to the proposed law on volunteers, the article goes on to note that Kazakhstan will potentially set up a reserve force in 2025. The law stipulates that potential reservists will come from a wide age range (18-50 years old for enlisted and NCOs, and up to 60 years old

for officers) and that they can serve in their home region. The article points out—as the war in Ukraine has revealed—that solving mobilization issues and having a trained reserve is important in modern armed conflict. In response, the new plan has the potential to draw in significant numbers of volunteers.

Remember, Kazakhstan has been concerned about Russia annexing its northern regions since it became independent in 1991. Following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a group of Russian officials amplified this concern by suggesting Kazakhstan’s northern regions belong to Russia.³ Despite these comments, Kazakhstan and Russia have maintained good overall relations. However, the war in Ukraine and the need to have a force available for a potential conflict are pushing Kazakhstan to adapt and

◀ A U.S.-produced HMMWV of Kazakhstan’s Ground Forces equipped with a Russian-produced Konkurs anti-tank ground missile on parade.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HMMWV_Казахстанской_армии_с_установленным_ПТРК_Фарот.JPG; Attribution: CCO 1.0

expand opportunities for volunteers to join the armed forces.

“Deputies of the Majilis (the lower house of parliament) of Kazakhstan have adopted a bill that allows citizens to volunteer for the army during periods of mobilization, martial law, and also in wartime.”

Source: “В Казахстане появятся «добровольцы» для обороны в военное время (In Kazakhstan there will be “volunteers” for defense in the event of a war),” *Fergana Agency* (independent Russian-language news website focusing on Central Asia), 30 October 2024. <https://fergana.agency/news/135448/>

Deputies of the Majilis (the lower house of parliament) of Kazakhstan have adopted a bill that allows citizens to volunteer for the army during periods of mobilization, martial law, and also in wartime...

The document, in particular, introduces the concept of “volunteer” into legislation. “Self-defense formations, which will include volunteers, will be formed on the basis of local military command units and will be directly subordinate to them. In peacetime, a number of activities have already been planned during the preparation process, including the training of volunteers,” — Deputy Minister of Defense Sultan Kamaletdinov reported...

He added that if volunteers carry out combat missions, they will be led by military command units. If they are engaged in “provision” in the rear, they will be subordinate to local executive bodies...

It was previously reported that in 2025 in Kazakhstan a new type of military service could emerge – service in the reserve. Citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan from 18

to 50 years of age (this applies to soldiers and sergeants) and up to 60 years of age for the officer corps will be voluntarily accepted. Only those who have passed the medical examination and special check will be included in the reserve. It is assumed that these will be people who have already completed military service or short-term military training courses, and also studied at military departments at universities.

Reservists will be trained in military units, weapons and military equipment will be assigned to them. They will serve only in their region.

The Ministry of Defense of Kazakhstan has begun to propose changes to the concept of service against the backdrop of events in Ukraine. Several years ago, the department noted that modern armed conflicts have revealed a number of problematic issues related to the mobilization of armed forces, the preparation and availability of military-trained reserves, as well as the timely arrival of military personnel from the reserve to replenish losses or rotate personnel.

Notes:

- 1 Kazakhstan’s army trained on defending against unmanned aerial systems after observing how Ukraine and Russia utilized them in the first year of the war, while Kazakhstan’s armed forces incorporated several operational and tactical lessons from the war into its annual joint, large-scale exercise in 2023, see: Aygerim Ummat, “Токаеву показали, как проходят военные учения ‘Батыл тойтарыс – 2023’” (Tokayev was shown how the armed forces carried out the exercise “Batyl toytarys – 2023”), *Informburo* (a semi-independent Russian-language news website in Kazakhstan), 5 September 2023. <https://informburo.kz/novosti/tokaevu-pokazali-kak-proxodyat-voennye-uceniya-batyl-toitarys-2023>
- 2 Even as this new legislation takes effect, Kazakhstan has been working to reduce the number of conscripts in the armed forces by enticing those conscripted, through offers of good wages and other benefits, to sign contracts after their one-year conscription period ends. This is part of a long-term effort that began in 2013 to have an all-volunteer force, though no timetable has been set for when this transition will be completed. It is estimated that Kazakhstan’s armed forces are now made up of 70 percent contract soldiers with the rest made up of conscripts.
- 3 A few months after the invasion of Ukraine, several members of Russia’s State Duma (lower house of parliament) questioned whether Kazakhstan’s northern territories belong to Russia, causing concerns in Kazakhstan that the comments could be a pretext to the territory being annexed or invaded, even though nothing further came of it, see: “Токаев выразил недоумение неуместными высказываниями российских деятелей в адрес Казахстана (Токаев expressed surprise at the inappropriate statements of Russian officials directed at Kazakhstan),” *Vlast* (an independent Russian-language news website in Kazakhstan), 17 June 2022. <https://vlast.kz/novosti/50438-tokaev-vyrazil-nedoumenie-neumestnymi-vyskazyvaniami-rossijskih-deatelej-v-adres-kazahstana.html>

Latin America's Dictators Scramble To Join BRICS

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

In recent years, the BRICS grouping—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—has emerged as a major challenger to the Western-supported international order.¹ Led by major emerging market economies on five continents, BRICS has increased its influence over matters of global financial governance, reform of multilateral institutions, and support of a Global South agenda. The group has also pushed to expand its ranks and influence, with five countries from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa joining in 2023. At least three Latin American countries, Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia, sought entrance to the organization at the 2024 BRICS Summit, held in Kazan, Russia.²

“Venezuela was left out of the final list of countries that aspired to be partners, at the request of Brazil... Venezuela has not commented on Brazil’s refusal to allow it to join the bloc.”

As *CNN en Español* notes, the regional outlet of the U.S. media company, the Maduro regime in Venezuela has pushed the hardest to gain entry. The outlet reports that Maduro traveled to Kazan, Russia, to press his



The principal members of the BRICS grouping pose for a photo at the 2018 BRICS Summit.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brics_Leaders_2016.jpg; Attribution: CC BY 2.0

country’s case and meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. As the Colombian digital news outlet NTN24 relays, this was Maduro’s first international trip after elections widely considered to be fraudulent and stolen in Venezuela.³ Maduro’s intention, the outlet states, is to establish diplomatic partnerships to reduce his international isolation and secure economic lifelines to avoid increasing sanctions. Both outlets report that Brazil vetoed Venezuela’s membership over concerns related to its election conduct in July 2024. For their parts, Bolivia and Cuba, two other autocratic regimes in Latin America, secured “partner status” on their way to membership in the BRICS.

This development signals that dictatorships in Latin America see the BRICS grouping as an economic and political lifeline amid difficult economic and diplomatic moments. Relatedly, the inclusion of a greater number of Latin American countries in BRICS will bring China and Russia further into the Western Hemisphere, where both have been increasing their influence of late.

Source: “Maduro se reúne con Putin durante cumbre de los BRICS en Rusia (Maduro meets Putin during BRICS summit in Russia), *CNN en Español* (the regional outlet of the US network), 23 October 2024. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/10/23/reunion-maduro-putin-cumbre-brics-orix>

Putin, who is chairing the meeting, said he supported Venezuela’s aspiration to join the group of emerging economies. The Russian president also highlighted that both nations have several projects to cooperate in economics, politics, science and culture, among other issues. The group, which began with Russia, Brazil,

China, India and South Africa, recently included Iran, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Venezuela was left out of the final list of countries that aspired to be partners, at the request of Brazil... Venezuela has not commented on Brazil’s refusal to allow it to join the bloc.

Source: “Maduro llega a Rusia para solicitar sumarse al BRICS en su primer viaje después de las elecciones (Maduro arrives in Russia to request to join BRICS on his first trip after the elections),” *NTN24* (a Colombian digital news outlet with excellent regional coverage), 22 October 2024. <https://www.ntn24.com/noticias-politica/maduro-llega-a-rusia-para-solicitar-sumarse-al-brics-en-su-primero-viaje-despues-de-las-elecciones-520339>

Maduro’s visit is for the BRICS meeting, in which around twenty countries, including Venezuela, are asking to join the bloc in order to boost their economies. Maduro is traveling on the same day that marks one year since the primary elections that sparked an unprecedented citizen movement to elect the opposition candidate to face Maduro in

the presidential election...One of the countries that has demanded that Maduro show the minutes and respect the will of the people [after another fraudulent election] is the president of Brazil, Luis Inacio Lula Da Silva, who is part of the BRICS and said a day earlier that he would refuse to include Venezuela in the BRICS due to what happened in the elections.

Notes:

- 1 For more information about the BRICS grouping and its recent efforts at expansion, see: Mariel Ferragamo, “What is the BRICS Group and Why is it Expanding?,” Council on Foreign Relations, 18 October 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-brics-group-and-why-it-expanding>
- 2 For more analysis on Latin America’s dictatorships seeking entrance into the BRICS, see: Ryan C. Berg, Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Rubi Bledsoe, and Henry Ziemer, “Why Are Latin American Dictators Seeking Membership in BRICS+?,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 28 October 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-are-latin-american-dictators-seeking-membership-brics>
- 3 For more information on Venezuela’s July 2024 elections, see: Ryan C. Berg and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, “Can Maduro Pull Off the Mother of All Electoral Frauds?,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, 1 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-maduro-pull-mother-all-electoral-frauds>

Maduro Shakes Up Top Security Posts in Venezuela Following Disputed Election

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

In the aftermath of a deeply contested election, the Maduro regime in Venezuela has undertaken a major reorganization of security positions to consolidate control around the dictator.

The Maduro regime in Venezuela confronted its toughest challenge yet in July 2024 as it faced a united opposition and a singular candidate in Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia. By most accounts, Maduro did not count the actual votes—which he likely lost by a ratio of more than 2:1—and declared himself the winner through his control of the country’s National Electoral Council.¹ Following the disputed election, the Maduro regime has engaged in a massive campaign of repression, imprisoning thousands.² As reported in the excerpted article from major Spanish daily *El País*, Maduro has also fired several high-level regime insiders, part of his effort to solidify control. The article reports that Maduro has selected a new head of civilian and military intelligence and that he also fired several high-level generals considered close to the ruling elite.

The excerpted article from Colombian digital outlet *NTN24* reports that Alexis Rodriguez Cabello, nephew of regime insider and recently promoted Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, has assumed the role of intelligence

chief. The *NTN24* article also reports that among other firings and personnel shuffling, the regime reconfirmed Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez to his current position. Lopez has been a loyal regime insider for more than a decade.

The shuffle within the upper ranks

“These adjustments occur amid repeated attempts by the opposition to force the Armed Forces to ‘respect’ the results of the elections of July 28, after which the Chavez leader was proclaimed reelected amid allegations of fraud.”

of the security forces is an important development for Venezuela’s operational environment. Following the election, which the opposition challenged by uploading to an online platform the polling place tally sheets showing Maduro’s electoral drubbing, Maduro is closing ranks around his regime. In these efforts, we are likely to see further purges and infighting as Maduro seeks to prevent Venezuela’s opposition from exacerbating fractures within the regime. It is highly noteworthy that Maduro has



Nicolas Maduro casts his vote in the 2024 Venezuelan presidential election.

Source: https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicol%C3%A1s_Maduro_casting_his_vote_%282024%29.png?uselang=de%7Chttps://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicol%C3%A1s_Maduro_casting_his_vote_%282024%29.png; Attribution: CC BY 3.0

confirmed faith in the current defense minister.

Source: “Maduro cambia a sus altos cargos de inteligencia acusados de violaciones a los derechos humanos (Maduro replaces top intelligence officials accused of human rights violations),” *El País* (the Spanish newspaper of record with excellent regional coverage), 15 October 2024. <https://elpais.com/america/2024-10-15/maduro-cambia-a-sus-altos-cargos-de-inteligencia-acusados-de-violaciones-a-los-derechos-humanos.html>

‘I ordered changes to be made to the Higher General Staff of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces,’ Maduro said in a message on Telegram that he accompanied with a video during a visit to the Military Academy where he reported on the appointments. ‘These changes serve to strengthen cohesion, organization, discipline, and Venezuela’s ability to defend itself.’...These adjustments occur

amid repeated attempts by the opposition to force the Armed Forces to ‘respect’ the results of the elections of July 28, after which the Chavista leader was proclaimed reelected amid allegations of fraud... Maduro’s government lacks legitimacy after the presidential elections in July and its stability is fundamentally supported by its ironclad control of the military forces.

Source: “Maduro hizo cambios en la Fuerza Armada, ratificó a Padrino y designó a nuevos jefes de la DGCIM y el Sebin (Maduro made changes in the Armed Forces, ratified Padrino and appointed new heads of the DGCIM and the Sebin),” *NTN24* (a Colombian digital news outlet with excellent regional coverage), 14 October 2024. <https://www.ntn24.com/noticias-politica/maduro-hizo-cambios-en-la-fuerza-armada-ratifico-a-padrino-y-designo-a-nuevos-jefes-de-la-dgcim-y-el-sebin-518953>

On Monday, October 14, Nicolás Maduro ordered changes in the Higher General Staff of the National Armed Forces, however he kept his Minister of Defense, Vladimir Padrino López. General Domingo Antonio Hernández Larez will also remain in his current position as head of the Strategic Operational Command. The brother of the head of CEOFANB, Johan Alexander Hernández Larez, is appointed

General Command of the Army...At the head of the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) and the Presidential Honor Guard (GHP), Major General Javier Marcano Tábata has been appointed. Major General Alexis Rodríguez Cabello heads the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN).

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the brazen election theft that occurred in Venezuela in July 2024, see: Ryan C. Berg and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, “Can Maduro Pull Off the Mother of All Electoral Frauds?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-maduro-pull-mother-all-electoral-frauds>
- 2 For more information on the post-electoral crackdown, see: Ryan C. Berg and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, “A Question of Staying Power: Is the Maduro Regime’s Repression Sustainable?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21 August 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/question-staying-power-maduro-regimes-repression-sustainable>