

OEWATCH



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Taiwan Suspects Chinese Ship of Cutting Undersea Data Cables

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

According to the excerpted article from Taiwan-based *Taipei Times*, on 3 January, an undersea data cable near Taiwan's Keelung Harbor was cut by "a Chinese freighter," the *Shunxin-39*. Upon the alert that the cable had been cut, Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) intercepted the *Shunxin-39* north of where the incident took place, demanding that the ship return to Taiwan for inspection. However, the CGA was unable to detain the ship. The incident is the latest suspected cable-cutting incident by ships thought to be af-

filiated with China but flagged in African countries. The article notes that the *Shunxin-39* was flagged out of Cameroon.

“China has a long history of sabotaging Taiwanese infrastructure using maritime tactics.”

The *Taipei Times* article also notes this is not the first time Chinese vessels have been suspected of sabotaging or cutting Taiwan's undersea cables, noting, “China has a long history of sabotaging Taiwanese

infrastructure using maritime tactics.” A tweet on *Special Taiwan* on X noted that this was the 21st time Chinese ships have cut Taiwanese undersea cables. However, the tweet did not provide any evidence to support this number of incidents. The tweet also referred to the incident as a “grey zone warfare tactic,” a term widely used to describe sabotage or obstruction without crossing the threshold of armed aggression.¹ Still, as the number of undersea cable-cutting incidents continue to rise, these acts of sabotage should be considered capable of leading to military conflict.²



A Taiwanese Coast Guard patrol and rescue ship, the Lian Jiang, is moored in front of the Customs Building on the west bank of Keelung Port.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CG_125_Lienchiang_shipped_in_Keelung_20170309.jpg; Attribution: CC0 1.0

Source: Fang Wei-li and Jake Chung, “Chinese ship cuts cable near Keelung Harbor, *Taipei Times*. 5 January 2025. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2025/01/05/2003829674>

The Coast Guard Administration (CGA) and Chunghwa Telecom yesterday confirmed that an international undersea cable near Keelung Harbor had been cut by a Chinese ship, the Shunxin-39, a freighter registered in Cameroon.

Chunghwa Telecom said the cable had its own backup equipment, and the incident would not affect telecommunications within Taiwan.

The CGA said it dispatched a ship under its first fleet after receiving word of the incident and located the Shunxin-39 7 nautical miles (13km) north of Yehliu (野柳) at about 4:40pm on Friday.

The CGA demanded that the Shunxin-39 return to seas closer to Keelung Harbor for investigation over

the issue, adding that it has forwarded all evidence and statements to prosecutors.

Kuma Academy chief executive officer Ho Cheng-hui (何澄輝) said yesterday that while the incident was pending investigation, China has a long history of sabotaging Taiwanese infrastructure using maritime tactics.

Ho said that the incident was a Chinese ploy to gauge the point at which the international community would draw a red line in an attempt to escalate its “gray zone” tactics.

Ho said such tactics were one reason Taiwan is working to launch its own low and medium Earth orbit satellites and increase telecom resilience.

Source: Special Taiwan @TaiwanSpecial, on X (formerly Twitter), 5 January 2025. <https://x.com/TaiwanSpecial/status/1876104109390287285>

In what might be a China grey zone warfare tactic against Taiwan, a Cameroonian registered freighter with a Chinese name SHUNXIN39 cut a Chunghwa

Telecom undersea cable off Taiwan’s north coast on Saturday. This is the 21st time Chinese ships have cut Taiwanese undersea cables.

Notes:

- 1 In the wake of a spat of suspected cable cutting by China, U.S. based Newsweek reported that Chinese scientists may have been trying to standardize undersea cable sabotage. See: “Exclusive—Chinese Patents Reveal Aim to Cut Undersea Cables,” *Newsweek*, 10 January 2025. <https://www.newsweek.com/china-conflict-undersea-cables-cutting-internet-data-subsea-marine-baltic-taiwan-2012396>
- 2 See: Dodge Billingsley, “Potential Flashpoint Stemming From Undersea Data Cable Network Access Restrictions,” *OE Watch*, 06-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/potential-flashpoint-stemming-from-undersea-data-cable-network-access-restrictions/>; and Dodge Billingsley, “Damage to Undersea Cables in Baltic Hint at China – Russia Collusion,” *OE Watch*, 01-2025.

How China Is Challenging U.S. Maritime Dominance



By Cindy Hurst
OE Watch Commentary

A recent Chinese report claims the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is preparing a new electronic warfare (EW) strategy to challenge U.S. maritime dominance. While the report, published by Chinese magazine *Defense Industry Conversion*, which is supervised by the State Administration of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense, is not readily available online, various media sources have written about it. The first article excerpt, published on the privately owned, digital Indian-Canadian news site *The Eurasian Times*, looks at a report on China's possible plans to challenge maritime dominance through the lens of the outbreak of cross-Strait conflict. It explains that China has been expanding its arsenal of anti-ship ballistic missiles.¹

Understanding the importance of aircraft carriers and destroyers in puncturing through any potential blockade, the article envisions China employing these weapons to prevent U.S. forces from entering the Western Pacific. To further increase its military effectiveness and gain the strategic advantage, the PLA has created a list of targets—a “Kill List”—within U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups to keep the U.S. Navy at bay. Mo Jiaqian, an electronic countermeasures expert with the PLA's 92728 Unit,² authored the *Defense Industry Conversion* article. According to him, China will likely target “specifically labeled U.S. military radars, sensors, and communication systems in a hypothetical battle.” This would “disrupt the U.S. carrier group's defensive abilities and render it vulnerable to attack.” Drones and other platforms might be used

The AN/Spy-1 carried on a U.S. guided-missile destroyer. A report published in Chinese magazine *Defense Industry Conversion* indicates that the AN/Spy-1 is the main target for the PLA's EW attacks.

Source: RoyKabanlit, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Antenna_of_the_AN_SPY-1_Radar.JPG;
Attribution: CC BY-SA 4.0

to create noise and false targets by approaching key U.S. radars, “significantly reducing its detection accuracy and impacting the overall effectiveness.” They could also hack into key networks to mimic a friendly response or to overload the adversary's nodes to wreak havoc.

“The PLA's electronic warfare unit ... has crafted a technological road map designed to neutralize America's maritime dominance.”

It is unclear whether China actually possesses the capabilities it describes in its “blueprint” to “fundamentally reshape modern naval warfare,” as

the second article excerpt, broadcast on YouTube by Indian English language news broadcast *WION News*, puts it. Perhaps the statements represent the PLA's vision or an attempt to deter U.S. forces. It is worth noting a past press report, published by the regional English-language pan-Asian

digital news platform *Asia Times*, which claimed China's EW capabilities are "surging."³ According to the article, the PLA Navy now possesses integrated radar systems and communication strategies that "allow PLA Navy warships to form a 'kill web' to counter (U.S.) attacks." The PLA is

clearly seeking ways to gain the upper hand, and the capabilities outlined in the report should not be ignored.

Source: Sakshi Tiwari, "China 'Threatens' To Paralyze U.S. Aircraft Carriers By Attacking Its Radars & Sensors: Hit Them With 'Carrier Killer' Missiles," *The Eurasian Times* (a privately owned, digital Indian-Canadian news site), 19 December 2024. https://www.eurasiantimes.com/china-threatens-to-paralyze-u-s-aircraft/#google_vignette

China has a powerful stockpile of anti-ship missiles, and its strategy to prevent U.S. forces from entering the Western Pacific is centered on these weapons.

*China's arsenal of anti-ship ballistic missiles, also known as "carrier killers," has grown dramatically. China's primary anti-ship missiles include the **DF-21**, **DF-26**, **YJ-12**, **YJ-18**, and **YJ-83**. Moreover, it also has **YJ-21** and DF-27 hypersonic missiles that have the potential to penetrate air defenses and destroy U.S. Navy ships. Some of these weapons have been used in simulated strikes on U.S. carriers.*

China's EW "Kill List"

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) electronic warfare unit has created a list of targets for a coordinated attack on U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups.

*This was disclosed in the latest issue of the Chinese magazine *Defence Industry Conversion*, which is supervised by the State Administration of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defence. The magazine seeks to promote the involvement of civilian organizations and businesses in military technology and arms production.*

Mo Jiaqian, an electronic countermeasures expert with the PLA's 92728 Unit, states in the report that China's electronic warfare weapons are likely to target specifically labeled U.S. military radars, sensors, and communication systems in a hypothetical battle—all to disrupt the U.S. carrier group's defensive abilities and render it vulnerable to attack.

The report further states that the AN/SPY-1 phased array radar on Aegis ships is the main target of the PLA's electronic warfare attacks.

Source: "China's Kill List Targets US Carrier Strike Groups," Posted on Youtube, published by *WION* (Indian English language news channel), 16 December 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSfoPYpeDv8>

The Chinese Navy is casting an ominous shadow over US naval supremacy in the Pacific. As geopolitical tensions simmer, the People's Liberation Army unveils a chilling blueprint that could fundamentally reshape

modern naval warfare...

The PLA has identified and mapped precise vulnerabilities in US aircraft carrier strike

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groups, presenting a kill list that sends tremors through Pentagon war rooms. At the heart of this unprecedented revelation lies a meticulously researched strategy targeting the US Navy's most sophisticated defense systems.

The PLA's electronic warfare unit has not just created a list, it has crafted a technological road map designed to neutralize America's maritime dominance...

Source: Gabriel Honrada, "China's Electronic Warfare Surge Shocks US in South China Sea," *Asia Times* (A large, regional English-language pan-Asian digital news platform), 18 July 2024. <https://asiatimes.com/2024/07/chinas-electronic-warfare-surge-shocks-us-in-south-china-sea/>

China's cutting-edge electronic warfare (EW) capabilities are transforming the balance of power in the South China Sea, as shown by a recent encounter between US and Chinese forces.

*This month, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported on China's enhanced EW capabilities by shedding light on a December 2023 incident between a US EA-18 Growler carrier-based EW aircraft and China's **Type 055** cruiser Nanchang in the contested South China Sea.*

It (the article) claims that the EA-18G, manufactured by Boeing, has been upgraded since 2021 for future warfare but faces new challenges from the PLA-Navy's (PLA-N) integrated radar systems and communication strategies.

SCMP notes that these advancements allow PLA-N warships to form a "kill web" to counter the EA-18G's attacks. It also says that the Nanchang's reported proactive tactics and successful engagement with US forces illustrate a shift in the PLA-N's EW approach.

Notes:

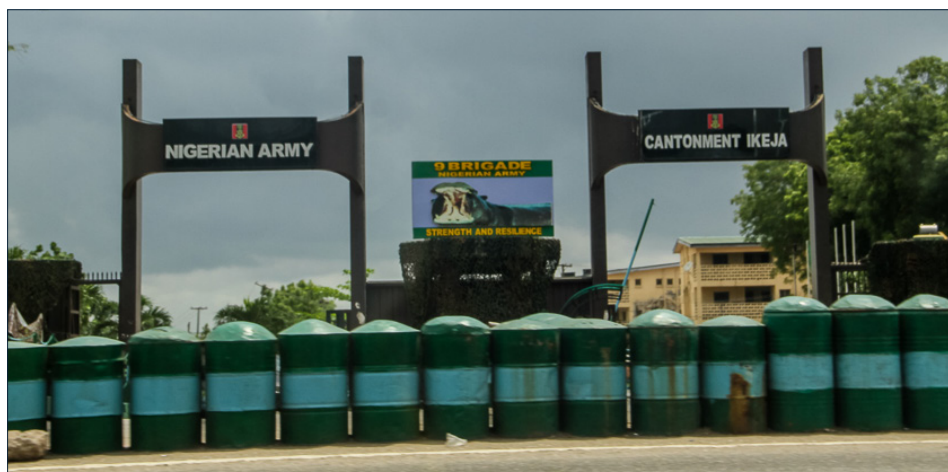
- 1 The article lists these anti-ship ballistic missiles, known as "carrier killers," as the DF-21, DF-26, YJ-12, YJ-18, and YJ-83, as well as the YJ-21 and DF-27 hypersonic missiles. For more information on these missiles, see Dmitry Filipoff, "Fighting DMO, P.8: China's Anti-Ship Firepower and Mass Firing Schemes," *Center for International Maritime Security* (A non-partisan website that publishes reader submitted content on international maritime security), 1 May 2023. <https://cimsec.org/fighting-dmo-pt-8-chinas-anti-ship-firepower-and-mass-firing-schemes/>
- 2 Due to the secretive nature of the PLA, exact details, to include function and location, about Unit 92728 do not appear to be publicly available. However, it appears to be a main, high-tech unit that focuses on electronic warfare. Based on patent applications by Unit 92728, some of the military capabilities they are working on include frequency domain measurement; electromagnetic radiation interference signal detection and identification; methods for training in multi-aircraft collaboration; detection of satellite navigation deception jamming system; methods of IMINT. They are also developing various storage types for the rapid deployment of clustered drones. Patents viewed on <https://www.patentguru.com/>.
- 3 It is worth noting that the *Asia Times* article derived its information from Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, which has been accused of sensationalism as well as being a tool for the Chinese government to spread its propaganda.

China Upgrades Strategic Partnership With Nigeria

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

On 10 January, the Chinese foreign ministry reported on a meeting between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar in Abuja. According to the first excerpted article, Wang Yi proclaimed three significant results of the meeting: first, upgrading Chinese-Nigerian relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership;” second, holding the inaugural China-Nigeria Intergovernmental Committee; and, third, pledging to work together to promote the development of the Global South. More broadly, despite China’s global influence being far greater than that of Nigeria or other African states, and despite China’s antagonism toward smaller and weaker states in the South China Sea, the Chinese foreign ministry’s narrative remains that China is an ally to the developing world.¹

As per the second excerpted article from the Nigerian media website *newscentral.africa*, the upgraded military partnership between the two countries will involve China supporting Nigeria to locally produce more arms to combat Boko Haram, the Islamic State–West Africa Province, and other terrorist and criminal groups more effectively. Although there was no explicit mention of the United States, the article notes that Chinese support for Nigeria’s arms production would help Nigeria bypass delays and



The Nigerian army, whose largest base in southern Nigeria is located in Cantonment Ikeja, is upgrading its relationship with the Chinese government, which will support Nigeria’s domestic weapons production. This will allow the Nigerian army to overcome potential procurement restrictions from the West over concerns about Nigerian human rights abuses.

Source: Kaizen Photography, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nigeria_Army_Cantonment_1.jpg; Attribution: CC x 4.0

“Nigeria and China have announced a significant military partnership, focusing on local arms production and military training as part of efforts to improve security in Nigeria and across Africa.”

regulatory issues associated with international procurement.² China and Russia have gained influence in the region by providing military aid to West African governments without conditions attached.³ In the long run, weapons in the hands of undisciplined militaries in West Africa will often be used against civilians, political opponents, or other marginalized groups and lead to resentment against those regimes and their foreign backers. This has been seen in northern Mali, where Fulani and Tuareg groups have sought vengeance against the Malian Army’s Africa Corps backers.⁴

Lastly, the *newscentral.africa* article notes that during Wang Yi’s visit to Nigeria, the Chinese foreign ministry committed to train 6,000 troops in Africa and support an African standby force and rapid response force to carry out counterterrorism and peacekeeping operations. This resembles the China-centric Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Central Asia, which has a similar function and has been a means of projecting Chinese military influence in that region.⁵ However, RATS has not been a major tool for counterterrorism in Central Asia, and a similar force in Africa may

also become an avenue for China to extend its own military influence without any tangible security benefit

on the continent. Nonetheless, this African force, according to the article, safeguards African rights and avoids

bullyism, which indicates its existence is also part of a Chinese narrative war in Africa against the West.

Source: “中国和尼日利亚关系取得三大突出成果(China-Nigeria relations have achieved three outstanding results),” fmprc.gov.cn, (official Chinese-language website of the foreign ministry of the People’s Republic of China), 10 January 2025. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202501/t20250110_11530245.shtml

Wang Yi introduced the circumstances of his visit to Nigeria and stated that under the strategic guidance of President Xi Jinping and President Tinubu the evolution of China-Nigeria relations achieved three outstanding results: First, the two heads of state jointly announced that China-Nigeria relations have been upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Second, a new

basis for unity and cooperation was established. The first plenary session of the China-Nigeria Intergovernmental Committee was successfully held. Third, international cooperation has reached a new level. The two sides closely coordinated in international and regional affairs and worked together to promote the mutual rise and development and revitalization of the “Global South”.

Source: “Nigeria Partners with China for Local Arms Production, Military Training,” newscentral.africa, (southern Nigerian newspaper focusing on politics and African affairs), 10 January 2025. <https://newscentral.africa/nigeria-partners-with-china-for-local-arms-production-military-training/>

Nigeria and China have announced a significant military partnership, focusing on local arms production and military training as part of efforts to improve security in Nigeria and across Africa. [Tuggar] expressed the nation’s desire to establish local production of military equipment, which would help bypass the delays and regulatory issues often associated

with international procurement. [Wang Yi] pledged a CN¥1 billion military assistance package to help improve peace and security across the continent. The package includes training for 6,000 military personnel and 1,000 police officers from various African countries, including Nigeria.

Notes:

- 1 The article and other Chinese foreign ministry statements, for example, portrayed China as seeking “international fairness,” combating “climate injustice” presumably caused by the West, and advocating multipolarity and inclusive economic development in contrast to a supposedly “unilateral” or exploitative Western-led order. *Fmprc.gov*. “Wang Yi: Set a Benchmark for China-Africa Community with a Shared Future for the New Era.” 8 January 2025. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202501/t20250108_11529111.html
- 2 The United States has historically prohibited, at least temporarily, the sale of certain weapons to Nigeria, such as AH-1Z Cobra attack helicopters and Super Tucano fighter jets, due to concerns about Nigerian army human rights abuses. Therefore, the article was subtly indicating that China would overlook such concerns.
- 3 See: Andrew Korybko. “Western pressure fails to waver African states’ determination. *Global Times*. 29 July 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1295280.shtml>.
- 4 See: Assala Khettache. “Mercenary Politics: Algeria’s Response to Wagner in Mali,” *RUSI*. 3 October 2024. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mercenary-politics-algerias-response-wagner-mali>
- 5 An article in *The Diplomat*, for example, argued that “The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO remains a mere monument of the organization’s objectives against combating terrorism, but it is toothless in practice.” Syed Hassan, “The SCO Needs To Be More Than a China-Russia Front Against the West.” *The Diplomat*. 6 August 2024.

Russia Suspected of Distributing Former Syrian Military Assets To Mali



Mali recently received a number of heavy weapons from Russia including T-72B3 Main Battle Tanks, like this one on display in Moscow, circa 2017. Russia was known to have T-72B3 tanks in Syria, leading to speculation that the tanks arrived in Mali were part of Russia's Syrian arsenal.

Source: Vitaly V. Kuzmin, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T-72_-_media/File:Alabino05042017-40.jpg; Attribution: CC By-SA 4.0

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

Officially, Russia has remained silent regarding the whereabouts of its Syrian stockpile of weapons since the fall of the Assad regime. Previous reporting tracked Russian cargo planes loading military equipment, including air defense systems, arrived in Libya shortly after leaving Syria.¹ A 17 January video published by Bamako-based *Mali Cap+* on its Facebook page suggests at least a portion of Russia's Syrian arsenal is now in Mali. According to an analysis of the *Mali Cap+* video by South Africa-based news aggregator DefenseWeb, the shipment, which included **T-72** tanks, **BMP-3** infantry fighting vehicles, **BTR-82A** 8x8 armored personnel carriers, **D-30** towed artillery, and a variety of armored personnel carriers, "may have come from Syria."² The *Mali Cap+* journalist notes the convoy arrived from Guinea. If accurate, the

convoy could have offloaded by ship to rail in the port city of Conakry. There is a railroad from Conakry to Kanan; in Kanan, the weapons could have been offloaded onto trucks before crossing into Mali.³ However, according to the excerpted article from French news service *Le Monde*, the equipment was put on trucks in Conakry and traveled by road through Siguiiri before crossing the border into Mali. Notably, according to *Le Monde*, the weapons came from Murmansk rather than Syria—aboard two ships, the *Alder* and the *Siyanie Severa*. The *Alder* is operated by a company under U.S. and Western sanctions.

Mali's military partnership with Russia has increased dramatically following a series of military takeovers of the country, the last one in 2021, and the formal withdrawal of French-led Operation Barkhane in November 2022. Russia's Africa Corps, formerly the Wagner Group, began operating in Mali prior to the withdrawal of the last French troops. In addition to the implications of how these Russian weapons got to Mali, or how they are used, the arrival of Russian heavy weapons to Mali on 17 January further cements the relationship between Moscow and Mali's military government.

"The most powerful weapons of the latest generation have arrived in Mali, which will strengthen the capacity of the Malian army."

Source: “Bravo Les armements les plus puissants de dernière génération sont arrivés au Mali, ce qui va renforcer la capacité de l’armée malienne (Bravo the most powerful weapons of the latest generation have arrived in Mali, which will strengthen the capacity of the Malian army),” *Mali Cap+* Facebook Channel, 17 January 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/CapMaliPlus/videos/8603016179803509>

The most powerful weapons of the latest generation have arrived in Mali, which will strengthen the capacity of the Malian army.

I think this will be the new format in the fight against terrorism.

Source: “Russia Delivers Military Hardware to Mali,” *DefenseWeb* (South Africa based defense news portal covering military and security news on the African continent), 17 January 2025. <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/african-news/russia-delivers-military-hardware-to-mali/?referrer=newsletter>

Russia has delivered over 100 military vehicles to Mali, including tanks, trucks, and infantry fighting vehicles.

It is suspected the shipment may have come from Syria following the departure of Russian troops after the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

It appears Mali could be another recipient of this equipment: on 17 January, a convoy of over 100 vehicles arrived in Mali’s capital Bamako, where it was captured on video by local media company Cap Mali+. Half the vehicles in the convoy were trucks (including armoured Kamaz trucks and engineering vehicles) and the remainder included T-72B3M tanks, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, BTR-82A 8×8

armoured personnel carriers, and Spartak, Linza, and Tiger 4×4 armoured personnel carriers. Also seen were three D-30 towed artillery pieces, two anti-aircraft cannons, and a couple of boats.

Frontelligence in its analysis of the convoy stated the vehicles were not sourced elsewhere and sold to Mali because they have Cyrillic text and Russian military markings. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (MoD) said markings indicated the equipment had at one point been transported by rail – possibly in Russia....

Most likely, the equipment will be distributed between the Wagner PMC units and government forces as part of strengthening the counteraction to paramilitary units in the country and terrorist organizations.”

Source: “La Russie livre des dizaines de chars et de blindés au Mali et réorganise son dispositif militaire en Afrique (Russia Delivers Dozens of Tanks and Armored Vehicles to Mali and Reorganizes its Military Deployment in Africa),” *Le Monde* (major French daily), 24 January 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2025/01/24/au-mali-la-russie-procede-a-une-importante-livraison-de-blindes-et-reorganise-son-dispositif-militaire_6514120_3210.html

These Russian military vehicles were unloaded at the port of Conakry, in Guinea, before forming the convoy that took the road to Siguiri and the border with Mali. They were probably transported aboard two Russian ships. The first, the Adler, belongs to the company M Leasing LLC, placed under American and European

sanctions for its role in Moscow’s military logistics.

This company is suspected of having delivered weapons from North Korea to Russia, according to the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs. On December 14, 2024, the Adler left the port of

continue on 14

Murmansk in northern Russia and headed for Conakry.

On December 21, a second Russian-flagged cargo ship, the Siyanie Severa, also left Murmansk for Guinea. The ship belongs to the Russian company OJSC Northern Shipping Company, which is also under US sanctions for transporting its country's military equipment.

According to the records of the port of Conakry, the Adler arrived on January 8 and left on the 12th. On board, 1,182 tons of "goods." The Siyanie Severa arrived on January 11 with 834 tons of cargo. On an Airbus satellite image that Le Monde was able to consult (but cannot publish), this second cargo ship is still visible at the quay on January 15. From Conakry, it then takes two days of driving, with such a convoy of trucks, to reach the border with Mali, via Siguiri.

Notes:

- 1 "Russia Withdraws Air-Defense Systems, Other Advanced Weaponry From Syria to Libya," *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 December 2024. https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-air-defense-bases-syria-libya-25810db0?st=jD59wk&reflink=article_email_share
- 2 The convoy or arms also included Russian patrol boats that can be used to patrol the important Niger River. There have been attacks on civilian boat traffic in Mali. See: "Mali: The attack against the civilian boat 'Tombouctou' constitutes a war crime," *International Federation for Human Rights*, 12 September 2023. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/mali-the-attack-against-the-civilian-boat-tombouctou-constitutes-a>
- 3 There are five major ports in Guinea including Conakry and Benti, both capable of receiving larger ships and a variety of cargo. Conakry has a roll-on roll off (ro ro) capability and a railway spur, while Benti intersects vital roadways such as the Trans-West African Coastal Highway that connects all the West African nations including the landlocked nations such as Burkina Faso. For a description of the five major ports, see: "5 Major Ports in Guinea," *Marine Insight*, 22 May 2022. <https://www.marineinsight.com/know-more/5-major-ports-in-guinea/>

Russia Expanding Its Military Influence in Equatorial Guinea

By Jacob Zenn
OE Watch Commentary

Equatorial Guinea is now a target for Russian military influence and expansion on the African continent, according to the excerpted article from a Russian-language website covering Africa Corps and Russian security affairs, *afrinz.ru*. The article reports that Deputy Defense Minister and Africa Corps commander, Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, visited Equatorial Guinea, where he met with President Teodoro Obiang and Minister of Defense Victoriano Bibanga Nsue Okomo.¹ According to the article, Yevkurov has been enhancing military cooperation between Russia and Equatorial Guinea since October 2024.

This bilateral military cooperation follows the already agreed-upon training of soldiers from Equatorial Guinea by Russian military instructors.² The training is consistent with the Africa Corps' other activities on the continent. This training is often accompanied by Russian illicit extraction of mineral resources, specialized security for authoritarian rulers, and human rights abuses during counterinsurgency operations. Equatorial Guinea, with its authoritarian government, lacks any insurgency or security crisis around its borders but possesses petroleum, natural gas, timber, gold, diamonds, and other minerals. As a result, the Africa Corps model for Equatorial Guinea will likely follow the model of



Only five years after Russia's Ministry of Defense, which was then led by Sergei Shoigu, engaged in talks with officials from Equatorial Guinea in 2020, Africa Corps fighters have now landed in Equatorial Guinea to train the country's armed forces.

Source: Mil.ru, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia-Equatorial_Guinea_military_talk_2020.jpg; Attribution: CC x4.0

support for the Equatorial Guinea leadership in return for resource extraction rights for Africa Corps.

“The parties discussed the prospects for the development of military and military-technical cooperation between the two countries, as well as security issues.”

Equatorial Guinea is the latest West Africa country where Russia is expanding its military influence and “replacing” French or Western influence through deploying Africa Corps to those countries.³ The article noted the burgeoning military partnership between Russia and Equatorial Guinea followed previous talks between the Russian Deputy

Defense Minister Yevkurov and the leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Togo. Although Togo is anomalous to these countries because it remains a parliamentary democracy, the country is under pressure from al-Qaeda-affiliated militants and was being “courted” by Yevkurov in late 2024 when he visited the capital, Lome.⁴

Russia's push into Equatorial Guinea comes amid Chinese attempts to court another West African country, Gabon, for a potential new—and what would be China's first—military base in that region.⁵ Russia, like China, considers the West as rivals and supports autocratic regimes in the region. Therefore, Russia's activities in Equatorial Guinea and West Africa more generally have become one component of a broader competition for military influence in Africa be-

tween Russia and China on one end and the West on the other end.

Source: “Российская делегация провела переговоры с руководством Экваториальной Гвинеи (Russian delegation held talks with Equatorial Guinea leadership),” *afrinz.ru*, (pro-Russian Russia-language website tracking Russian military affairs, and especially Africa Corps, in Africa), 2 December 2024. <https://afrinz.ru/2024/12/rossijskaya-delegacziya-provela-peregovory-s-rukovodstvom-ekvatorialnoj-gvinei/>

On December 1, a Russian Defense Ministry delegation headed by Deputy Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov held talks with the President of the Republic Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo and the Minister of Defense of Equatorial Guinea Victoriano Bibanga Nsue Okomo. During the meetings, the parties discussed the opportunities for the furthering of military cooperation between the two countries, as well as security issues. In addition, the participants addressed the issues of training military

specialists and instructors for the Armed Forces of Equatorial Guinea.

Russia and Equatorial Guinea have been cooperating in this area since 2011, when an intergovernmental agreement on military-technical cooperation was signed and a commission on military-technical cooperation was created. Earlier, a delegation of the Russian Defense Ministry leadership held similar talks in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Togo.

Notes:

- 1 Russian media reported on Yevkurov taking over command of Africa corps in February 2023. See, for example: Ilya Lakstigal, “Что известно об «Африканском корпусе» России (What is known about Russia’s “Afrika Korps”). *Vedimosti.ru*, 22 February 2023. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/12/22/1012398-cto-izvestno-ob-afrikanskom-korpuse-rossii>
- 2 See: *Russia Today*, “Russian instructors to train African military personnel.” 10 June 2024. <https://www.rt.com/africa/599072-equatorial-guinea-russia-train-armed-forces/>
- 3 Reports in Russian-language media of 200 Russian military instructors seen on the streets of Equatorial Guinea’s capital, Malabo, in September 2024, provide additional evidence of Russia’s increasing military involvement in Equatorial Guinea. See: Gregory, Sissoev, “Что известно об отношениях России и Экваториальной Гвинеи (What is known about relations between Russia and Equatorial Guinea),” *TASS* (Russian state news service), 26 September 2024. <https://tass.ru/info/21961363>
- 4 See: *BBC Monitoring*, “Briefing: Russia’s Africa Corps chief discusses military cooperation with Togo.” 1 December 2024. <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002vxf>
- 5 See: Jacob Zenn, “China’s Initiates Push To Establish a Military Base in Gabon,” *OE Watch*, 06-2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/chinas-initiates-push-to-establish-a-military-base-in-gabon/>

Chechen Spetsnaz Instructors Training Russian Soldiers in the Arctic Region

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

The Russian Spetsnaz University in Gudermes, Chechnya, has trained tens of thousands of soldiers from all over the Russian Federation since its establishment in 2013. Soldiers from the Kola peninsula, which borders Norway and is home to Russia's sea-based nuclear deterrent, are increasingly bringing the skills they pick up in the North Caucasus and applying them to operational environments in the Arctic, according to a recent report in Norway-based *The Barents Observer*.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, enjoys close ties to the Kremlin. President Vladimir Putin visited Spetsnaz University last August. Kadyrov also exerts influence across Russia's regions, including its north, through VOIN ("Fighter"), a training military organization with offices expanding across Russia, including in Murmansk and Yamal Nenets Autonomous Okrug in north-

western Siberia and central Russia. Part of VOIN's mission is to provide "patriotic education" and combat training for Russian teenagers. The former head of Kadyrov's security detail and combat veteran of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Daniil Martynov,¹ heads up VOIN's organizational development. Training conducted by Chechen commanders include drills in sharpshooting and drone flying.

While potentially symbolic of Russia shifting its focus northward, the significance of these reports is unclear. First, fighting in the Arctic does not resemble fighting in the Northern Caucasus, given its extreme climate conditions, poor infrastructure, and important naval components. It is unlikely that Chechen paramilitaries will be fighting in Norway or the Arctic. More intriguing is whether Chechen spetsnaz trainers will influence the "Arctic way of war" in Russia's far north. Russia recently announced it will be adding up to 50,000 soldiers

to its Leningrad Military District, as well as expanding Northern Fleet's 14th Army Corps into a full Army and establishing a completely new Army Corps in Karelia.²

"A key mission for the VOIN is to provide so-called 'patriotic education' and combat training for teenage youngsters. The organization has centers in at least 12 regions, among them the two far northern regions of Murmansk and Yamal Nenets Autonomous Okrug."

President Vladimir Putin visits Russian Special Forces University in Gudermes, Chechnya, in August 2024.

Source: Kremlin.RU <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news>; Attribution: Public Domain



Source: Atle Staalesen, “Kadyrov’s militant network is expanding into the Russian north,” *The Barents Observer*, 7 January, 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/kadyrovs-militant-network-is-expanding-into-the-russian-north/422803>

Reportedly, more than 47,000 servicemen have undergone training in Gudermes since 2022. Of them, about 19,000 are so-called volunteers. Among them is Sergei Reztantsev from the town of Olenegorsk in the Kola Peninsula. In December last year, the 43-year-old man was awarded a medal for so-called “bravery” during the war in Ukraine. In a ceremony in Olenegorsk, the local town mayor described Reztantsev as “a true role model for patriotism.”

In the ceremony, the warrior carried a uniform with the insignia of the Spetsnaz University. Judging from

Reztantsev’s social media page, he has long experience from several Russian military operations, including in the North Caucasus.

With the training of soldiers from all over Russia, Ramzan Kadyrov is gradually building a network that includes representatives from major parts of the country. In addition, Kadyrov and his men are also exerting growing influence and power across Russia through the VOIN (“Fighter”), a militant organization that is opening offices in a number of Russian regions.

Notes:

- 1 Prior to his position at VOIN, Daniil Martynov was a combat leader of Chechen forces, often referred to as Kadyrovtsy, part of the initial invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022.
- 2 Thomas Nilsen, “Kola and in Karelia likely to get tens of thousands of new soldiers,” *The Barents Observer*, 24 January 2025. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/news/kola-and-in-karelia-likely-to-get-tens-of-thousands-of-new-soldiers/423579>

Russia Shrugs Off Stricter Energy Sanctions, Promises Retaliation

By Lionel Beehner
OE Watch Commentary

After the rollout of new energy sector sanctions in January by the United States and United Kingdom, Russia's Foreign Ministry responded with a mix of indifference and promises of retaliation for the punitive measure. The sanctions target some 200 entities and individuals in Russia, including senior energy officials, and are meant to curb liquefied natural gas projects and curtail the profits of service providers that support the country's energy industry. This includes Moscow's vast "shadow fleet" of vessels that ship oil around the world under third parties to avoid sanctions but have come under fire for allegedly carrying out acts of sabotage in the Baltic Sea.¹

The reaction in Russia has been relative indifference as per the accompanying article from Russia's official news agency, TASS. The article suggests that the sanctions would not impede Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine but that their effects could be "destabilizing" for global energy markets.² Russia comprises roughly 11 percent of global crude oil production (approximately 10.75 million barrels per day (bpd)) and consumes only 3.68 million bpd. According to a statement by Russia's Foreign Ministry, Moscow has promised retaliation. "Of course, Washington's hostile actions will not



A boat next to a large Russian oil platform, taken in July 2017.

Source: <https://timelessmoon.getarchive.net/amp/media/russia-oil-platform-rig-travel-vacation-c8289c>; Attribution: CC0 1.0 Universal

“[The US Administration’s decision to impose restrictive measures against Russian energy sector...] is an attempt to inflict at least some damage on the Russian economy even at the cost of destabilizing global markets ahead of the end of the inglorious term of President Joe Biden.”

be left without response and will be taken into consideration during the calculation of our external economic strategy. We will continue to implement the major projects on oil and gas extraction, as well as import replacement, provision of oil-related services, and construction of nuclear power plants in third countries.”

U.S. attempts to apply economic pressure against Russia in response to its war in Ukraine have not had the desired coercive effect, largely because Russia's energy sector had been spared. Even previous measures, including the imposition of a \$60-per-barrel price cap and targeted sanctions against financial institutions such as Gazprombank, did little to shrink Russia's war chest.³

Source: “Russian Foreign Ministry vows response to new US sanctions,” *TASS* (Russian state news agency), 11 January 2025. <https://tass.com/politics/1897999>

“Of course, Washington’s hostile actions will not be left without response and will be taken into consideration during the calculation of our external economic strategy,” the ministry said. “We will continue to implement the major projects on oil and gas extraction, as well as import replacement, provision of oil-related services and construction of nuclear power plants in third countries.”

The ministry pointed out that Russia has been and remains a key and reliable actor on the global fuel market, “despite the convulsions in the White House and the machinations of the Russophobic lobby in the West, which seeks to pull the global energy sector into the hybrid war, which the US has initiated against Russia.”

The ministry underscored that, amid the “failure of Washington’s bid on Moscow’s strategic defeat and sanctions pressure, which was supposed to undermine

the Russian economy, which has not only survived but continues to develop despite the unprecedented external economic pressure, the efforts of the outgoing White House team aim to complicate or obstruct any bilateral economic ties, including for the American business.”

The ministry added that this process sacrifices interests of US’ European allies, who have to switch to the more expensive and irregular American deliveries, as well as interests of its own people, currently suffering from the massive wildfires in California, whose opinion regarding the fuel price hike, which remained relevant ahead of the elections, now can be completely ignored.

“Therefore, the upcoming president, who is unable to withdraw the abovementioned sanctions without the Congress’ approval, will inherit scorched earth - both literally and figuratively,” the ministry added.

Notes:

- 1 Jake Lapham, “US and UK toughen sanctions on Russian oil industry,” *BBC News*, 10 January 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn8xlj9kkkmo>
- 2 Illya Tsukanov, “US Anti-Russian Energy Sanctions Threaten to Destabilize Global Markets. Here’s How,” *Sputnik International*, 11 January 2025, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20250111/latest-us-anti-russian-energy-sanctions-threaten-to-destabilize-global-markets-heres-how-1121409189.html>
- 3 According to analysis the latest energy sanctions, which target two of Russia’s largest oil companies, Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas, and their subsidiaries, could have more of a desired punitive effect, given recent stresses within the Russian economy. See “Five questions (and expert answers) about Biden’s final round of sanctions on Russia,” *New Atlanticist*, 10 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/five-questions-and-expert-answers-about-bidens-final-round-of-sanctions-on-russia/>

The Evolution of Russian Unmanned Vehicle Doctrine in Ukraine

By Chuck Bartles
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted article from the major Russian daily newspaper *Izvestia* discusses how Russians are adapting to the changing character of war as experienced in its special military operation in Ukraine.¹ One feature of this change has been the pervasive use of unmanned vehicles in the air, ground, and sea. As *Izvestia* explains, Russia will adapt to this change by creating a new branch of arms, Unmanned Vehicle Troops, to operate similar to existing branches of service: infantry, artillery, air defense, etc.² Conceptually, unmanned vehicles and their operators and maintainers will be integrated into the Russian combined

arms concept as the infantry, tanks, artillery, etc., just as the Russians have Air Defense Troops in the Ground Forces, Aerospace Forces, and Navy. The Unmanned Vehicle Troops will now be a branch of arms in a similar fashion. This means that unmanned vehicles will have dedicated training, sustainment, and representation in the General Staff. This representation will enhance unmanned vehicle training and doctrine, future capability development, and ensure integration with the other arms branches. This development suggests that in the Russian view, the use of unmanned vehicles is not an aberration but will be a permanent feature of future wars and armed conflicts. It is important

to note that this announcement does not mean that unmanned vehicles and their operators and maintainers will be found only in stand-alone unmanned vehicle units; they will still almost certainly be found in other types of units, such as infantry, armor, artillery, logistics, signals, and the like.



“The Russian Armed Forces will form a new branch of arms in armed forces — Unmanned Vehicle Troops — in accordance with the order of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief.”

Orlan-30 Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.
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: Mike1979 Russia CC BY-SA 4.0

Source: Yulia Leonova, Vladimir Matveev, Bogdan Stepovoy, “С новым родом: войска беспилотных систем создадут в России (A new branch: Unmanned Vehicle Troops will be created in Russia),” *Izvestiya* (major Russian daily newspaper), 17 December 2024. <https://iz.ru/1808177/ulia-leonova-vladimir-matveev-bogdan-stepovoi/s-novym-rodом-voiska-bespilotnyh-sistem-sozdadut-v-rossii>

The Russian Armed Forces will form a new branch of arms in armed forces — Unmanned Vehicle Troops — in accordance with the order of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. This was announced by the head of the Russian Defense Ministry Andrei Belousov at an extended meeting of the board on December 16.

According to him, their creation will be completed in the third quarter of 2025. “The mass use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has become the most significant breakthrough in the tactics of the Russian Armed Forces,” he emphasized.

In turn, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated the need to increase the production of drones. It is no less important, according to the head of state, to train UAV operators, to prepare them according to programs developed on the basis of combat experience.

Russian troops use more than 3,500 UAVs daily, and this figure is growing, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov said at a departmental board meeting...

As the former commander of the Pacific Fleet, Sergei Avakyants, explained to Izvestia, a branch of arms is an organizational structure, as it is necessary to create a theoretical design of operational art for it. That is, to create a theory and practice of preparing and conducting military actions on an operational scale (operations, battles, strikes), — he noted. — This is a move in the right direction, the main thing is that it is not just a sign on an office door. It is necessary

to think through a system of training both sergeants and enlisted personnel, and officers. To do this, it is necessary to make changes to the curricula — to create special faculties or educational institutions of secondary and higher education. The innovations should also affect existing military academies, in particular the General Staff Academy.

During the special military operation, UAVs became so indispensable that we reached the point of needing to form separate units [часту] and, perhaps, even large units [соединения] with their own infrastructure that would support the use of UAVs. Military expert Dmitry Kornev told Izvestia about this.

According to him, most likely, units, platoons, and separate battalions will be created that will closely interact with other branches of the military and ensure the use of UAVs in their interests.

The Unmanned Vehicle Troops will most likely receive a status similar to that of the Air Defense Troops — military expert Vladislav Shurygin told Izvestia. — Their units will be part of the Ground Forces, the Aerospace Forces, and also in the Navy, where, among other things, unmanned boats will be developed. All used unmanned systems will belong to them. It is possible that they will be united by some common structure that will be engaged in design, development, and testing. It was not for nothing that the minister said that inter-service centers will be created to test the latest and most promising systems...

Notes:

- 1 Moscow uses the term spetsial'naya voyennaya operatsiya (“special military operation”) or spetsoperatsiya (“special operation”) to describe its campaign in Ukraine.
- 2 This new force, род войск, is not to be confused with a branch of service; вид вооружённых сил (Army, Navy, Air Force, etc.).

Revolutionary Guard Chief Downplays Departure From Syria

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

The fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria is a major blow to Tehran, but Iranian officials are not taking the blame. Per reporting by state broadcaster *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)*, on 10 December 2024, just days after Assad's overthrow, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander-in-chief Hossein Salami told a gathering of fellow commanders that "Some in political, intellectual, and the public circles are promoting that the military of the Islamic Republic of Iran has lost its regional arms. No, the system has not lost its arms," referring to its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and the Gaza Strip known as the Resistance Axis.¹ He added, "We make decisions and act based on our internal capacities and capabilities to fight the infidels."²

Salami seemed to cast blame on the Assad regime's military and political apparatus for not heeding their warnings months before about the movements of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other anti-regime groups. Salami, who said the IRGC tried its best to preserve the regime, also justified why

the IRGC did not intervene: "Some expected us to fight instead of the Syrian Army. Is it logical that we involve all the IRGC and basij in a battle of another country when the army of that country is just a spectator?" Still, Salami was proud to note that the IRGC was the last to leave Syria.

"Some in political, intellectual, and public circles are promoting that the military of the Islamic Republic of Iran has lost its regional arms. No, the system has not lost its arms. We make decisions and act based on our internal capacities and capabilities to fight the infidels."

Interestingly, he compared Hezbollah in Lebanon to Assad, noting how the militant group was able to survive the events of recent months—the Israeli onslaught, twin communication attacks, and the assassination of its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah.



IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami speaking in the wake of Bashar al-Assad regime collapse.

Source: Semi-official Islamic Republic News Agency, 12 December 2024. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00ITrZ>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

The commander-in-chief appeared to not give up on Syria and the Resistance Axis. He explained, "It is not that all paths are limited to Syria. It is also possible that there, too, little by little, it will take a different shape again." While much of the Resistance Axis has crumbled, the IRGC is not giving up on its project of exporting the Islamic revolution abroad and is merely re-adjusting its security strategy to the post-October 7 world.³

Source:

(Commander Salami: The children of the IRGC were in Syria until the last moment)," *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 12 December 2024. <https://www.iribnews.ir/00ITrZ>.

سردار سلامی: بچه‌های سپاه تا لحظه آخر در سوریه بودند

According to IRIB, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, on Tuesday, 10 December 2024, in a gathering

of IRGC commanders, explained the causes and consequences of recent security and military events in

continue on 24

Syria, highlighting the most important parts as follows:

Some expected us to fight instead of the Syrian army. Is it logical that we involve all of the IRGC and basij in a battle of another country when the army of that country is just a spectator? Furthermore, all the routes to Syria were closed. Day and night, the system really attempted to help in any way it could. We have to live with the realities of Syria. We see the realities, and we act on the facts. However, let me proudly tell all of you this: The last people in the line of resistance in Syria who left were IRGC folks. The last person who left this battlefield was a guard. Strategies must change according to circumstances. We cannot address many global and regional issues with stagnation and stability in strategies.

From months before, we were aware of the movements of militants and takfiris (referring to Jihadists). Even our brothers were able to use intelligence tactics to find their axes of attack and transfer them to the political and military levels in Syria. However, because there was no will to change, fighting and perseverance did not exist in their true sense; unfortunately, this incident you saw took place. In contrast, look at Hezbollah, which has been

able to pull itself out from under the heavy rubble of bombings and was able to find hope in strength in a truly unbelievable scene.

We thank God Almighty that the resistance front has become independent from our geography. Hezbollah still exists, it's alive, it's vibrant. The face of the Zionist regime (referring to Israel) is now met with political hatred in the world. These are major defeats in any form...

Some in political, intellectual, and the public circles are promoting that the military of the Islamic Republic of Iran has lost its regional arms. No, the system has not lost its arms. We make decisions and act based on our internal capacities and capabilities to fight the infidels. We have a strong political logic to fight, we have a strong legitimacy to defend. We have a great nation to stand firm. We have a great leader to provide guidance and inspiration. We have powerful armed forces. They have not been touched. If we had become weakened, we would not have fulfilled our honest promises.

Now, the paths are open to back the resistance front. It is not that all paths are limited to Syria. It is also possible that there, too, little by little it will take a different shape again.

Notes:

- 1 The Axis of Resistance is a self-described informal coalition of Iranian supported militias and political organizations across the Middle East. The Axis includes Hamas in Gaza, the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon; the Houthi movement in Yemen; and various Shi'ite armed groups in Iraq and Syria. See: "What is Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'?" *Reuters* (global news service), 13 April 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-irans-axis-resistance-which-groups-are-involved-2024-01-29/>; Lucas Winter, "Gaza War's Impact on the Middle East Strategic Landscape," FMSO, June 2024. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2024/gaza-wars-impact-on-the-middle-east-strategic-landscape-lucas-winterjune-2024/>
- 2 The comments were made as many Iranian officials and the public alike began to question the merits of having spent more than a decade propping up the Assad regime financially—between \$30 to \$50 billion—and materially with weapons, training, and troops. See: "'Iran was Defeated Very Badly' in Syria a Top General Admits," *The New York Times*, 8 January 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/world/middleeast/iran-general-syria-defeat.html>
- 3 "Iran has no regrets over Syria costs, says national security chief," *Iran International*, 20 December 2024. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202412207613>.

Iran Projects Confidence Undeterred by Weakening of Resistance Axis



IRGC Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini speaking at an armed forces presser for the Eghtedar drill, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (state broadcaster), 6 January 2025.

Source: <https://www.iribnews.ir/00I22n>; Attribution: CCA-SA4.0 Intl

By Holly Dagues
OE Watch Commentary

Despite the severe weakening of the Iran-led Resistance Axis¹ in recent months, Tehran continues to seek to show itself projecting power. According to state broadcaster Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, on 6 January, *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (IRGC) spokesman and deputy of public relations Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini said, “We tell the enemy that we are always ready to act at the moment,” adding, “When the command is given, we will demonstrate our power as before and change the enemy’s cognition and calculations once again.” The comments were made at an armed forces presser for the Eghtedar drill² on the fifth anni-

versary of the U.S. assassination of IRGC Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani.

Naeini emphasized that Iran’s enemies—the United States and Israel—have “a false enthusiasm and misconception” of recent regional developments. Particularly, he noted their use of “psychological and cognitive warfare” to hide the truth, which, in Tehran’s mind, is that it continues to be in a position of strength. Naeini appeared to be referring to the major setbacks experienced by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, as well as the ouster of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. Despite these major blows to the Resistance Axis, the IRGC

“We tell the enemy that we are always ready to act at the moment, we are not complacent and procrastinators. When the command is given, we will demonstrate our power as before and change the enemy’s cognition and calculations once again.”

spokesman argued, “We never had an intelligence defeat from the enemy. It’s the enemy that always engages with cognitive warfare to make up for its intelligence and military defeats.”

Naeini, presumably taking note that morale was low after Assad’s downfall, emphasized that “Today’s generation of the armed forces is more revolutionary and anti-American than the previous generations” and that it will continue to sacrifice itself for the “Iranian people” and the “oppressed worldwide.” Par for the course of commentary coming out of Tehran for the past four decades, the United States and Israel are to blame for the breakdown of the Resistance Axis.

Source:

(For Iran's security any military action will be done)," *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 6 January 2025. <https://www.iribnews.ir/001Z2n>.

برای امنیت ایران هر اقدام نظامی متعارفی انجام می‌دهی"

According to IRIB, the full statement of deputy of public relations and spokesman [of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini]...

We also commemorate the fifth anniversary of the martyrdom of IRGC Commander Qasem Soleimani and his comrades...

In the past few weeks, due to new developments in the region, a false enthusiasm and misconception have formed in the enemy (the United States and Israel), and the enemy has tried with cognitive warfare to portray the ongoing developments as a weakening of Iran's power. We know the reality is something else.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has long been fully prepared for large, complex, and heavy battles on any scale. We trust in the infinite divine power and our endogenous strength, especially the people-based deterrent power...

The dear nation of Iran should know that the enemy has never had an advantage over us in any battle. We never had an intelligence defeat from the enemy. It's the enemy that always engages with cognitive warfare to make up for its intelligence and military defeats against the Islamic Republic of Iran to weaken its national spirit.

We are in an environment of psychological and cognitive warfare.

Notes:

- 1 The Axis of Resistance is a self-described informal coalition of Iranian supported militias and political organizations across the Middle East. The Axis includes Hamas in Gaza, the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon; the Houthi movement in Yemen; and various Shi'ite armed groups in Iraq and Syria. See: "What is Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'?", *Reuters* (global news service), 13 April 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-irans-axis-resistance-which-groups-are-involved-2024-01-29/>
- 2 The Eqtedar drill is part of a larger joint air defense exercise. See: "Iran Launches 'Eqtedar 1403' (Great Prophet 19) Drills Near Natanz Nuclear Facility," *Islamic World News*, 7 January 2025. <https://english.iswnews.com/37209/iran-launches-eqtedar-1403-great-prophet-19-drills-near-natanz-nuclear-facility/>

Every day, the enemy creates issues and casts doubt to influence national will and spirit. We tell the enemy that we are always ready to act at the moment, we are not complacent and procrastinators. When the command is given, we will demonstrate our power as before and change the enemy's cognition and calculations once again...

Supporting the broad resistance front and developing global basij cores are key principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and is a serious agenda for the IRGC in realizing Islamic civilization. The enemy's military threats have increased the convergence of society and made our armed forces more synergic and integrated. The IRGC moves to strengthen the foundations of security and national power by solidifying its combined power infrastructure with the people and for the people.

Today's generation of the armed forces is more revolutionary and anti-American than the previous generations. Unity and empathy in the IRGC have always been a thorn in the enemy's side. The culture of obedience in the IRGC is based on Quranic culture and the path of leadership. The IRGC considers itself sacrificing its life for the Iranian people and the oppressed worldwide, and the power exercises conducted by the IRGC show the determination and readiness of Islam's guardians to defend Iran's sovereignty and ensure the peace and security of the Iranian people.

North Korean Media Stays Quiet Despite Global Concerns



North Korean state media published this image of its purported new hypersonic vehicle tested on 6 January 25.

Source: <http://kcna.kp/siteFiles/photo/202501/PIC0086739.jpg>; Attribution: KCNA, state news agency of North Korea. Not subject to copyright because North Korea has not signed on to the international conventions protecting its or other state's copyrighted materials.

By Anthony W. Holmes
OE Watch Commentary

In the lead-up to the January 2025 inauguration of U.S. President Trump, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (PRK) media landscape has been rather quiet, focusing instead on domestic political issues and reporting about the news in a matter-of-fact manner, rather than its typically belligerent tone.

Why is the PRK remaining quiet? First, North Korea is dealing with two major political events at once: the return of the Trump administration in the United States and the impeachment and likely removal of the pres-

ident of South Korea. As regards the strategy of silence vis-à-vis the United States, Kim Jong Un had a personal relationship with President Trump that may lead the PRK to decide that discretion is the better part of valor, at least at first. When it comes to South Korea, the PRK media is likely staying silent to preserve its options because it expects the pro-engagement and accommodationist left to win any election to replace the ousted Yoon. This would potentially allow the PRK to receive aid and other concessions from the South.

Indeed, while notable, this approach is not unsurprising. This understated and matter-of-fact account typifies North Korean state media reporting on foreign and military matters in the period between the U.S. presidential election and the inauguration of the new administration on 20 January.

Second, to the extent that it is reporting, what is North Korean media talking about? On 6 January 2025, state central broadcaster KCNA published an article heralding what North Korea claimed to be the successful test of a new type of hypersonic vehicle. The report does not take the characteristic step of labeling the United States as the cause of PRK weapons development, instead focusing on Kim Jong Un's pride in the scientists and how possessing this capability

puts North Korea in the realm of world military powers. The article even notes that the test did not negatively affect the security of its neighbors and is for defensive purposes. KCNA published similar articles for a launch on 14 January 2025.¹

Instead, South Korean media has made little mention of the topics that seem to concern it most. As concerns the South Korean constitutional crisis, North Korea has had just one observed report on the martial law crisis in South Korea in its externally facing media after having spent months issuing threats at increasingly higher levels of authoritativeness. Similarly, North Korean state media did not mention President Trump until a 22 January two-sentence report that he had been inaugurated.² State media has published its commonplace articles detailing observed U.S. military activities in the region³ and a propagandistic accounting of the U.S. defense budget,⁴ but these appear to be pro forma. For the fifth year in a row, Kim Jong Un also did not give a public New Year's Address to the nation.^{5,6} PRK leaders traditionally used annual New Year's addresses to announce major military milestones and defense priorities for the coming year. Moreover, the leaders would lay out foreign policy objectives. These speeches provided valuable insights for those observing the PRK from overseas.

Source: “조선민주주의인민공화국 미사일총국 신형극초음속중장거리탄도미사일시험발사 진행 (DPRK Missile Administration Succeeds in Test-fire of New-type Intermediate-range Hypersonic Ballistic Missile),” *Korean Central News Agency* (North Korean state-owned broadcaster), 7 January 2025. <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/0e333077f3ca892b65f0abad00e47aef.kcmsf>

The Missile Administration of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea successfully conducted a test-fire of a new-type intermediate-range hypersonic ballistic missile on January 6.

The test of the new strategic weapon system is part of the plans for the development of the national defence capabilities to raise the durability and effectiveness of the strategic deterrent against the potential enemies in conformity with the changing regional security environment.

Expressing great satisfaction over the result of the test-fire, the respected Comrade Kim Jong Un, with regard to the new weapon system, said:

The current test-fire proved without doubt that we are steadily upgrading the powerful new-type weapon systems like the intermediate-range hypersonic ballistic missile to cope with different security threats posed by the hostile forces against our state at present.

A few countries in the world might possess such a weapon system.

This is clearly a plan and effort for self-defence, not an offensive plan and action.

The hypersonic missile system will reliably contain any enemies in the Pacific region that can affect the

security of our state.

We have acquired a technical force which is by no means easy to achieve.

This is a remarkable achievement and a special event in strengthening the self-defensive capabilities, which we should be proud of.

I express thanks to all the researchers and technicians and the workers of munitions industry enterprise, who contributed to the successful development of the new-type strategic weapon system.

The hypersonic glide vehicle of the missile, fired northeastward at a launch site in a suburb of Pyongyang, made a flight along the scheduled trajectory, attaining its first peak height of 99.8 kilometres and the second peak height of 42.5 kilometres at the speed amounting to twelve times of the speed of sound, and accurately landed on the simulated target waters in the open sea 1 500 kilometres away.

The test-fire had no negative impact on the security of the neighbouring countries.

The development of the defence capabilities of the DPRK aiming to be a military power will be further accelerated.

Notes:

- 1 For more information, see: “극초음속미사일시험발사 진행 (Hypersonic Missile Launch Test Conducted),” *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA, major state-owned broadcaster), 15 January 2024. <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/64e900f5bd0353837ca02d7babce3ad6c73263e00a38ff0e08c8c90fdb5f0b71866e0c7bc6571e831ca2182de7032d0.kcmsf>
- 2 See: “극초음속미사일시험발사 진행 (Donald Trump Inaugurated as U.S. President),” *Rodong Sinmun* (major

continue on 29

Workers Party-owned newspaper for general consumption), 22 January 2025. <http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?MTJAMjAyNS0wMS0yMi1OMDMxQDE1QDNAQDBAMzE==>

- 3 For more information, see: “조선민주주의인민공화국 외무성 대외정책실장 담화 발표 (Statement by the Director of the Foreign Policy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea),” *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA, major state-owned broadcaster), 18 January 2025. <http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/64e900f5bd0353837ca02d7babcce3ad002dfbba9ac7d0a69e1e969df566d4026a47505ba5268fd7749c0fe11e4b24b4.kcmsf>
- 4 See: “조선중앙통신사 론평 미국의 방위예산증가는 전지구적동란의 증대를 예고한다, (Commentary by the Korean Central News Agency: U.S. Defense Budget Increase Portends Increased Global Turmoil),” *Korean Central News Agency* (primary state-owned broadcaster), 18 January 2025. <http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?MTJAMjAyNS0wMS0xOC1OMDMwQDE1QDJAQDBAMzA==>; for English mirrored link, see: <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1737174772-447573523/kcna-commentary-on-u-s-increase-in-defence-budget/>
- 5 See: “Why Kim Jong Un Ditched the Iconic New Years Speech and Penned a Tender Letter,” *NK News*, 1 January 2021. <https://www.nknews.org/2021/01/why-kim-jong-un-ditched-the-iconic-new-years-speech-and-penned-a-tender-letter/>
- 6 New Year’s is among the most important cultural holidays in Korea. New Year’s is usually celebrated with leaders giving speeches, announcing resolutions, and goals for the year ahead. It is probable that Kim Jong Un still gives these speeches, but they are no longer broadcast for outsiders.

Pakistan's Counterterrorism Efforts Could Ignite Wider Conflict in the Region

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

Pakistan continues to be at odds with the Taliban government in Afghanistan for allowing the Pakistani Taliban safe haven to carry out attacks across the border into Pakistan. On 25 December 2024, Pakistan carried out an airstrike in the Paktika Province, Afghanistan, against members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, resulting in 46 people killed, including civilians. The airstrike was in response to a cross-border attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, by the Pakistani Taliban that killed 16 members of Pakistan's security forces a few days prior.¹ Additional clashes between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani forces have taken place since the airstrike.

The accompanying excerpted article from Pakistan's English-language newspaper *Dawn* reports on a December 2024 press conference given by Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, the Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations of Pakistan's Armed Forces and provides context to Pakistan's efforts to deal with terrorism. General Chaudhry acknowledged the dispute surrounding the Pakistani Taliban safe haven and asserted that "Pakistan will leave no stone unturned to eliminate the terrorist networks and keep our citizens safe." General Chaudhry also referenced Operation Azm-i-Isteh-



A map of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, including part of the Paktika Province, Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, the latter of which is where a number of terrorist attacks have taken place.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afghanistan-Pakistan_-_northern_border._LOC_2010594050.jpg
Attribution: Public Domain

“Islamabad has repeatedly demanded Kabul to take action against hideouts of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on its soil.”

kam, launched in June 2024, in which Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif emphasized that Pakistan could strike targets in Afghanistan.² Chaudhry also mentioned

the high number of operations against terrorists that Pakistan carried out in 2024—a particularly deadly year for Pakistani security forces in the country's fight against terrorism.³

In addition to internal political pressure to combat terrorism,⁴ Pakistan is also under pressure from China to deal with terrorist groups. Attacks on Chinese nationals working on

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor infrastructure projects have escalated in recent years. These projects and Chinese support are vital to Pakistan's economy. As Pakistan remains under

pressure to combat terrorism, additional strikes or clashes by Pakistan against targets in Afghanistan are likely but may come with a cost of fueling a wider conflict with Afghanistan.

Source: "Banned outfits provided with sanctuaries, support on Afghan territory: ISPR," *Dawn* (independent English-language newspaper in Pakistan), 27 December 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1881429>

The press conference took place amid heightened security concerns, with a sharp uptick in the number of attacks targeting security forces and other law enforcement agencies, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa...

During the wide-ranging press conference today in Rawalpindi, the DG ISPR addressed counterterrorism efforts, Pakistan's reservations with Afghanistan... "All evidence related to terrorism can be traced back to the safe havens enjoyed by terrorists in Afghanistan," Gen Chaudhry said... "Pakistan will leave no stone unturned to eliminate the terrorist networks and keep our citizens safe."

Islamabad has repeatedly demanded Kabul to take action against hideouts of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on its soil...

Gen Chaudhry said security forces conducted a total of 59,775 operations this year, noting that Pakistan has rendered a lot of sacrifices in its fight against terrorism.

"During these successful operations, 925 terrorists, including khawarij, were sent to hell while numerous

were arrested," he said, highlighting that the number of terrorists killed was the largest in the last five years...

Answering a query on the effectiveness of intelligence-based operations (IBOs), Gen Chaudhry responded: "In the war against terrorism, there is a fundamental thing that the army and the LEAs fight against the terrorist [but] the nation fights against terrorism. All segments and political parties agree on this point."

Referring to the National Action Plan (NAP) of 2014, its revised version from 2021, and the Azm-i-Istehkam campaign, the ISPR DG stressed that it had been decided that the entire nation had to combat terrorism together with all state institutions...

Speaking on action taken against terrorism in Balochistan, the DG ISPR detailed that some high-value targets were eliminated in the region.

He said that "Baloch terrorists' most-wanted leaders Sana urf Baro, Bashir urf Pir Jan, Niaz urf Gumman, Zareef Shah Jehan, Hazrat Ali urf Asad, Lak Jan Chakirabadi urf Sawara were also sent to hell"...

Notes:

- 1 For more information on the airstrike, see: Mohammad Yunus Yawar, "Pakistani airstrikes on Afghanistan kill 46 people, Taliban official says," *Reuters* (international news agency), 26 December 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/least-46-killed-pakistani-bombardment-afghanistan-afghan-taliban-spokesperson-2024-12-25/>
- 2 For more background on Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, see: "Azm-e-Istehkam operation: Terrorist hideouts may be hit on Afghan soil, says minister," *The News International* (English-language newspaper in Pakistan), 28 June 2024. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/>

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print/1204305-azm-e-istehkam-operation-terrorist-hideouts-may-be-hit-on-afghan-soil-minister

- 3 The Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), an independent think-tank based in Pakistan, published a study which noted that 2024 marked the largest number of casualties that Pakistan's security forces sustained combating terrorists in a decade. Pakistan has been fighting not only the Pakistani Taliban, but also the Balochistan Liberation Army, a group that seeks to gain the independence of the Balochistan Province, in western Pakistan. For the full CRSS report, see: <https://crss.pk/2024-marks-deadliest-year-for-pakistans-security-forces-record-high-fatalities-in-a-decade/>
- 4 Terrorist attacks by the Pakistani Taliban and the Balochistan Liberation Army against civilian and military targets in Pakistan rose considerably in 2024 compared prior years, forcing the government of Pakistan to increase its response. The Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, an NGO in Pakistan, published a report documenting the rise in the number of attacks in the country in 2024, see: https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Overview_PIPS-Security-Report-2024.pdf

Taliban-Fueled Terrorism in Pakistan Threatens Afghans in Exile

By Dodge Billingsley
OE Watch Commentary

The rise of Taliban-fueled terrorism in Pakistan threatens former U.S. and NATO allies hiding out in Islamabad awaiting relocation to the United States and other western destinations. According to the excerpted news clip from U.S.-funded *VOA Dari* on its Facebook page, “there are now massive arrests and operations in Islamabad” against Afghans living in the Pakistani capital. The crackdown comes amidst increasing terrorist activity from Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, i.e., the Pakistani Taliban. According to the *VOA Dari* news clip, the primary reason for the detention and deportation of these migrants is Pakistan’s belief that the terrorism taking place in Pakistan is in part fueled or supported by Afghan refugees living in Pakistan.

The second clip, from *Afghanistan International*, also noted that Pakistani police were sweeping through neighborhoods detaining Afghans, and that in the past ten days, many Afghans have committed suicide rather than return to Afghanistan. The clip also noted that 400 Afghans were rounded up, including former journalists, civil society employees, and former military and security personnel, all of whom cannot return to Afghanistan for fear of imprisonment, torture, and death at the hands of the Taliban government.¹



Torkham Gate area on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, a major crossing point and the location of Pakistan deportation efforts. Most Afghans holding a Pakistani visa are required to cross the border every 30 to 60 days to get their visa stamped. It is a dangerous and harrowing trip.

Source: Global QRF on Instagram; <https://www.instagram.com/p/DFaxW6vPSzj/?next=%2F>; Attribution: By permission of Global QRF

“One of the reasons for the detention and deportation of these migrants is their link to security issues in the country. We are witnessing the security incidents and attacks that are taking place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan.”

Former Afghan military personnel hiding out in Pakistan awaiting visas to the United States and other western countries corroborate the sweeps taking place throughout Islamabad.

Many leave their temporary homes for days at a time waiting for the police to finish detention operations in their neighborhood.² It is a perilous but necessary game of cat and mouse. U.S. visa applicants need to be near a U.S. consulate to process their visa. Also, an active Pakistan visa, which offers some protection from deportation, is harder and harder to get. Pakistan visas for Afghans have been substantially shortened and become more expensive, making it nearly impossible for former Afghan military and political individuals and their families to stay in Pakistan without a foreign donor.

Source:

(Pakistan steps up collection and deportation of undocumented Afghan migrants),” *VOA Dari*, 5 January 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5_3InKmidg

پاکستان جمع آوری و اخراج مهاجران افغان فاقد مدرک را تشدید کرده است”

There are now massive arrests and operations in Islamabad. Afghan harassment in different parts of Islamabad has accelerated in the past week, with a large number of Afghans complaining about this problem. Even today, we have had hourly videos and messages from Afghans saying that police are going from house to house at their workplaces and where they live. They arrest Afghans who are documented or

undocumented, including women and children.

They were in Pakistan and cannot return to Afghanistan.

One of the reasons for the detention and deportation of these migrants is their link to security issues in the country. We are witnessing the security incidents and attacks that are taking place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan.

Source:

(House-to-house search to arrest Afghan migrants in Islamabad, Pakistan),” *Afghanistan International*, 5 January 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPaijVV8eXM>

”بازرسی خانه به خانه برای بازداشت مهاجران افغان در اسلام آباد پاکستان

Today, throughout Islamabad, the police are collecting [Afghan] refugees and not allowing anyone to remain.

happen. I hope that these people who are trying to detain around 600-700 people in the city today.

In the past ten days, many people have taken their own lives. They are facing a very new problem. Their lives are in danger. And God forbid, this will not

They will transfer them to Afghanistan. I think that in the city where we live, around 400 people were taken. These were journalists, Afghans who served in civil society, from the military, they took everyone.

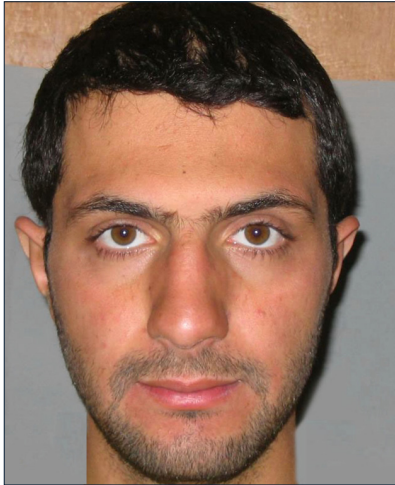
Notes:

- 1 The United Nations published a report confirming 218 extrajudicial killings in the summer of 2023. See: “Afghanistan’s Taliban responsible for revenge killings, torture of former officials,” *UN News*, 22 August 2023. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1139962>; However, Afghans continue to post across various social media and messaging platforms, what is effectively a body count of former military and political officials killed or “disappeared” by the Taliban.
- 2 Author’s conversations with many former ANASOC personnel currently residing in Pakistan.

The Radical Transformation of Syria’s Military Leadership

By Lucas Winter
OE Watch Commentary

After decades of Ba’athist, secular ideology, and Alawite leadership, the Syrian military’s upper echelons are undergoing a radical transformation steered by the one-time Sunni rebels of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).¹ As widely reported in Arabic-language media and discussed in the first accompanying article, from the Lebanese daily al-Nahar, these moves have “raised widespread doubts and fears.” HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly Abu Mohammed al-Jolani) is now the de facto leader of the Syrian armed forces, by virtue of his command over the HTS-led “Military Operations Department” that seized power in Damascus in December 2024. In late December, al-Sharaa



Mugshot of Syrian militant Abu Mohammad al-Jolani after his 2006 capture by U.S. forces in Iraq. In December 2024, al-Jolani became the de facto leader of Syria.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mugshot_of_Abu_Mohammad_al-Jolani.jpg;
Attribution: Public Domain

given the rank of Major General, one of whom—Murhaf abu Qasra—was appointed as defense minister and the other—Ali Nur al-Din al-Naasan—as armed forces chief of staff. Both hail from Tabyat al-Imam, a Sunni town on the outskirts of the city of Hama.² In addition, five leaders were promoted to Brigadier General, three of whom are non-Syrian nationals who were part of foreign jihadist groups that supported the 2010s Syrian armed uprising.³

The promotion of foreign one-time jihadists to top leadership posts in the Syrian Army has “shocked the Syrian street,” according to the al-Nahar piece. Notably absent from the promotions list are former Assad regime

officers who defected to form the Free Syrian Army in 2012, as well as leaders from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, the Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, and armed factions from southern Syria. The dominance of HTS cadres within the new military establishment, as noted in the second accompanying article from the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, seems likely to create a rift between HTS and other opposition armed groups, perhaps most importantly the southern militias. Although al-Sharaa has voiced his intention to create a unified national army, his initial actions suggest an effort to consolidate power within HTS and its allies before other factions are incorporated into the armed forces.

“[O]f the nearly fifty officers who were promoted on Sunday to be supervisors of the establishment of the new army, more than ten of them do not have Syrian nationality.”

issued a decree promoting several HTS and allied commanders to top ranks in the new Syrian military. The list of promotions was headlined by two HTS military leaders who were

Source:

(Al-Jolani sets up his military leadership...a mixture of his supporters, including Arabs and Turkestanis in high ranks),” *al-Nahar* (Lebanese daily), 31 December 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/95k7vder>

”الجولاني يشكّل قيادة جيشه... خليط من أنصاره بينهم عرب وتركستان في رتب رفيعة

While the commander of the military operations department in Syria, Ahmad al-Sharaa (al-Jolani), seemed to be in no hurry to draft a new constitution for the country and hold elections, he is, on the contrary, moving at a rapid pace to restructure the security services and the Syrian military institution. This has raised widespread doubts and fears about his priorities and the reality of their goals, and whether they are related to actually imposing security and safety or point to the desire to impose the pillars of the new rule through newly established security and military institutions that will not change after the elections, which al-Sharaa said may not be held for four years. What reinforced the fears is that out of the nearly fifty officers who were promoted on Sunday to be supervisors of the establishment of the new army, more than ten of them do not have Syrian nationality...

Speaking to Al Arabiya on Sunday, Al Sharaa confirmed that the upcoming Syrian National Conference will witness several measures, including the dissolution of armed factions and the cancellation of the current constitution. This raised many constitutional questions about the extent to which Sharaa has the authority to make such a decision, given that some argue that promoting officers under the current constitution requires the issuance of a presidential decree...

In terms of regionalism, it was noted that Sharaa relied on officers from Hama to assume the highest ranks (Major General), as well as the Minister of Defense, Marhaf Abu Qasra, and the Chief of the

General Staff, Ali Nour al-Din al-Naasan. As for the Brigadier General ranks, which are five, there were only two Syrians among them... The remaining brigadiers are of different nationalities: Abdul Aziz Daoud Khodaberdi, known as Abu Muhammad al-Turkistani, is the leader of the “Turkistani Islamic Party” wing that pledged allegiance to al-Jolani in the past. The second wing is “Foreigners of Turkistan.” Abdul Rahman Hussein al-Khatib is Jordanian and was known in Syria as Abu Hussein al-Urduni. The third brigadier is Omar Muhammad Jaftshi, one of the most prominent military leaders close to Ahmad al-Sharaa. He worked in complete secrecy without revealing his identity and was known by the nickname Mukhtar al-Turki. 42 officers were promoted to the rank of colonel, including several names belonging to non-Syrian nationalities such as Albanian (Abdul Samriz Yashari), Egyptian (Alaa Muhammad Abdul Baqi), Jordanian (Abnian Ahmad al-Hariri), and Tajik (Molan Tarson Abdul Samad). Among these names are a large number who have no military background, but were ordinary civilians before they participated in the fighting against the former regime...

The Syrian street was overwhelmed by feelings of real shock when this formation was issued due to the reliance on different nationalities in building an army that is supposed to be national. However, the supporters of “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham” justified this by saying that the decision to naturalize these people with Syrian nationality will be issued soon, as al-Sharaa promised in previous statements.

Source:

(The Integration of Syrian faction falters: Sharaa treading in a minefield),” *al-Akhbar* (pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily), 11 January 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/95k7vder>

”دمج الفصائل السورية متعثّر: الشرع يسير في حقل ألغام

The commander of the Military Operations Department, which currently runs Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, is walking through a minefield that was planted and nurtured over the past 14 years of war... Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime and the arrival of the factions to Damascus, the signs of a

rift have clearly emerged between the faction that entered Damascus first (the Eighth Brigade and the coalition of opposition factions in southern Syria led by Ahmed al-Awda), and the man who rose to the top of the political and military scene in Syria, namely al-Sharaa...

Notes:

- 1 For the approximately five decades of Assad family rule starting in the 1970s, the Syrian Armed Forces were ideologically linked to the Baath Party, which espoused Arab nationalism and secularism. The military’s top leadership posts were filled by members of the minority Alawite sect, to which the Assad family belongs.
- 2 The city of Hama has deep historical significance to the struggle between the Assad-era armed forces and Sunni rebels, as the site of a major uprising that was violently suppressed in the early 1980s. See: “Why the rebel capture of Syria’s Hama, a city with a dark history, matters,” *AP*, 5 December 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/syria-aleppo-hama-massacre-assad-799f37fd2608532a253ccb48df4e613>
- 3 Of the three foreigners, one is Jordanian, one Turkish and the other a member of the Turkistan Islamic Party, which advocates for Uyghur independence from China. Based on statements made by al-Sharaa, it seems likely they and other foreign fighters will be granted Syrian nationality in the future. For more see: Lucas Winter, “The Knotted Future of the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria,” *OE Watch*, January 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/302489>

Turkish Defense Industry Celebrates Record Year

By Matthew Stein
OE Watch Commentary

The Turkish defense industry is experiencing significant growth and has recently announced a record-breaking year. The accompanying excerpted article from Turkey's state-run news agency *Anadolu Ajansi* reports on the Turkish defense industry's record year of exports in 2024. The article notes several statistics on the defense exports, including the different types of weapon systems Turkey exported and the large number of countries that received Turkish systems. Notably, Turkey exported several hundred unmanned aerial systems to various countries, though the article does not mention specific models. Indeed, the Turkish defense industry has gained a reputation for providing effective

weapon systems at a lower cost than other Western weapon systems. This is specifically due to the use of Turkish **Bayraktar TB2** UAVs by Azerbaijan (in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020) and Ukraine.¹ The article also mentions that Europe emerged as the top market for Turkish exports with a demand for UAVs, among other items.² The article ends by stating that the Turkish defense industry is made up of over 3,500 companies working on over 1,100 projects and that the industry continues to be heavily involved with NATO member states. As NATO increases its defense spending over the next few years and beyond, the Turkish defense industry could be primed for additional growth.

“Europe emerged as the top market for Turkish exports, with demand focusing on UAVs, smart missiles, land vehicles, military vessels, and radar systems.”



Alongside Baykar, Turkish Aerospace Industries has developed unmanned aerial systems like the Aksungur (pictured) for reconnaissance and strike missions.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_Aksungur_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAI_Aksungur_(3).jpg); Attribution: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Source: Zeynep Duyar, “Turkish defense products empower, protect world armies,” *Anadolu Ajansi* (Turkey’s state-run news agency), 24 January 2025. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkish-defense-products-empower-protect-world-armies/3461489>

Türkiye’s domestically produced defense products achieved global prominence in 2024, reaching a record export value of nearly \$7.2 billion...Ranked 11th among global defense exporters, Türkiye’s advancements in mass production, research and development, and technological innovation significantly boosted its global footprint...

Turkish defense products were exported to over 180 countries, with major contributions to land, naval, aerial, and advanced weaponry sectors. Over 4,500 land vehicles were delivered to 40 countries, and 140 naval platforms reached more than 10 nations.

Additionally, 770 UAVs and UCAVs were sent to over 50 countries, while three nations received Turkish-built corvettes.

Other highlights included exports of 1,200 electro-optical and stabilized weapons systems, radar systems to 10 countries, and 1,500 loitering munitions to 11 nations...

Haluk Gorgun, president of Türkiye’s Defense Industry Agency (SSB), emphasized the breadth of the country’s defense production. Türkiye achieved over 80% indigenous technology utilization in its defense products, supported by a research and development budget nearing \$3 billion

...Europe emerged as the top market for Turkish exports, with demand focusing on UAVs, smart missiles, land vehicles, military vessels, and radar systems. A key milestone was the export of Aselsan’s ASELFLIR-500 electro-optical reconnaissance system to 16 countries...

The country’s defense sector comprises over 3,500 firms and more than 1,100 active projects, demonstrating its robust position in global markets. Last year, Türkiye applied for the highest number of NATO projects, solidifying its role as a major contributor to allied defense capabilities.

Notes:

- 1 For more background on the medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) Bayraktar TB2 and its use in recent conflicts, see: Karen Kaya, “Turkey as a Drone Superpower: A Case Study of a Mid-Size Power Driving the Operational Environment,” *FMSO Foreign Perspectives Briefs*, 28 March 2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/2023-03-28-turkey-as-a-drone-superpower-a-case-study-of-a-mid-size-power-driving-the-operational-environment-karen-kaya-update/>
- 2 Turkey not only exported a number of weapon systems to Europe in 2024, the Turkish company Baykar, which produces the Bayraktar TB2, bought Italy’s Piaggio Aerospace in December 2024. While it remains to be seen what Baykar will do with its newfound subsidiary, it marked increased involvement of the Turkish defense industry’s involvement in Europe, see: Ezgi Akin, “Buoyed by drones, NATO deals, Turkey defense exports hit record \$7.1B,” *Al-Monitor* (English-language independent news website focusing on Turkey and the Middle East), 3 January 2025. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/01/buoyed-drones-nato-deals-turkey-defense-exports-hit-record-71b>

Venezuela's Maduro Completes Election Theft and Installs Himself for Another Term



In an earlier photo, Maduro swears in for his second six-year term in office, which began in 2019.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maduro_with_supporters_at_Jan_2019_inauguration.jpg; Attribution: CC0 1.0 Universal

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

In early January 2025, President Nicolás Maduro took the oath of office for another six-year term, setting him up to govern Venezuela for longer than his political mentor, Hugo Chávez. The inauguration, occurring in a tense climate of military deployments throughout major cities, was a product of what many experts consider the regime's most brazen election theft. Unlike previous elections, Venezuela's opposition possesses vote tallies from electronic voting machines proving Maduro lost by a ratio of more than 2:1.¹ Spain's top daily, *El País*, reports that the inauguration was a poorly attended affair.

Presidents Díaz-Canel from Cuba and Daniel Ortega from Nicaragua, leftist allies of Maduro, were the only heads of state from Latin America to attend. In a show of support, Russian President Vladimir Putin did send the head of the lower house, Vyacheslav Volodin.²

Maduro's inauguration for a third term is important for the region's operational environment for several reasons.³ First, despite Maduro's highly authoritarian regime, the brazen nature of the electoral theft, against transparent proof that he lost the election, indicates the regime may no longer care to have a semblance of democracy undergirding claims of legitimacy. Second, after the fall

“Among the only leaders who accompanied Maduro on his day were Commander Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and the heir to Castroism, Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba...Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Duma, was the one Putin asked to travel to Caracas.”

of the Assad regime in Syria, Russia's authoritarian allies have been nervous about continued support from Moscow. The attendance of lower house speaker Vyacheslav Volodin was notable for Putin to demonstrate support for Maduro in the wake of letting Syria fall. Maintaining the Maduro regime in Venezuela is key for Putin in a region where Russia has few natural allies.

Source: “Solo los presidentes latinoamericanos de Cuba y de Nicaragua asisten a la toma de posesión de Maduro” (Only the Latin American presidents of Cuba and Nicaragua attend Maduro’s inauguration), *El País* (Spain’s top daily with some of Latin America’s best coverage), 10 January 2025. <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2025-01-10/solo-los-presidentes-latinoamericanos-de-cuba-y-de-nicaragua-asisten-a-la-toma-de-posesion-de-maduro.html>

Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro is said to be increasingly isolated, but the country’s president did not seem worried about it on Friday during his inauguration in the National Assembly...The number of 125 was somewhat misleading, because not all those present at Maduro’s proclamation were diplomatic officials, and very few were heads of state or foreign

ministers. Among the only leaders who accompanied Maduro on his day were Commander Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and the heir to Castroism, Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba...Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Duma, was the one Putin asked to travel to Caracas...Much of Latin America’s democratic left, however, was absent.

Notes:

- 1 For more on the Maduro regime’s election theft, 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 opposition’s claims to victory and their plans to inaugurate Edmundo González, see: Stefano Pozzebon, “Fear on the streets of Caracas as Maduro’s inauguration looms,” CNN.com, 9 January 2025. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/09/americas/venezuela-protests-maduro-inauguration-intl-latam/index.html>
- 3 For more information on regional insecurity generated by the Maduro regime, see: Ryan C. Berg, “Maduro’s Venezuela Continues Its Campaign of Regional Destabilization,” OE Watch, April 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/383027>

Colombia Signals Intent To Join China's Belt and Road Initiative

By Ryan Berg
OE Watch Commentary

Despite headwinds in its domestic economy, China's strategic advance in Latin America continues.¹ In 2023, Chinese foreign direct investment levels in the region remained high at more than \$9 billion, which is equivalent to six percent of China's total foreign direct investment.² Now more than ten years old, China's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive foreign infrastructure investment program, has proven popular throughout Latin America. In a major announcement, Spain's top daily news outlet, *El País*, reports that Colombia recently signaled its intent to join BRI. The outlet reports that this was an unexpected development. While over 20 countries in the region have joined BRI, Colombia—and the region's other largest countries, Brazil and Mexico—are currently holdouts. In a recent visit to Colombia, *El País* reports, President Petro praised China and raised the level of relations to "strategic partner." Colombia's accession to the BRI will not be immediate, according to Argentine outlet, *Infobae*. The country will form a working group to study how to accede to the BRI and maintain a "balanced" relationship with China.

Colombia's accession to the BRI is an important development. Not only does it signal China's advance with one of the United States' oldest



United Nations Secretary General António Guterres attends the annual Belt and Road Forum in China.

Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/un_photo/35138985312; Attribution: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

“Colombia intends to be part of the Belt and Road initiative...the mega infrastructure program with which China seeks to connect to the world and strengthen its geostrategic position...This is an unexpected diplomatic turn that has gone almost unnoticed.”

allies, but it also is indicative of the increasing phenomenon of hedging that medium-sized powers are undertaking in a world characterized by great power rivalry.³ China, Russia, Iran, and other revisionist powers have positioned themselves to be the beneficiaries of hedging strategies in Latin America.

Source: “Colombia anuncia que se sumará al gran plan estratégico de China, la Franja y la Ruta (Colombia announces that it will join China’s grand strategic plan, the Belt and Road),” *El País* (Spain’s top daily with some of Latin America’s best coverage), 3 October 2024. <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2024-10-04/colombia-anuncia-que-se-sumara-al-gran-plan-estrategico-de-china-la-nueva-ruta-de-la-seda.html>

Colombia intends to be part of the Belt and Road initiative...the mega infrastructure program with which China seeks to connect to the world and strengthen its geostrategic position. This was announced by surprise by the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jorge Rojas, an official very close to President Gustavo Petro, on the occasion of the celebration

of the 75th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China...Ambassador Zhu Jingyang immediately thanked the gesture, and assured that Beijing is willing to ‘accelerate the relevant negotiation, respecting and collaborating with the priorities and needs of Colombia.’ This is an unexpected diplomatic turn that has gone almost unnoticed.

Source: “Colombia estrecha vínculos con China y busca sumarse a iniciativa comercial estratégica (Colombia strengthens ties with China and seeks to join strategic trade initiative),” *Infobae* (Argentine outlet with wide-ranging regional coverage), 13 October 2024. <https://www.infobae.com/movant/2024/10/13/colombia-estrecha-vinculos-con-china-y-busca-sumarse-a-iniciativa-comercial-estrategica/>

Colombia has formed a working group with China to negotiate its incorporation into the Belt and Road Initiative, the ambitious infrastructure and trade project promoted by the Asian giant. The announcement was made during the visit of the Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luis Gilberto Murillo, to Beijing, who stressed that Colombia’s accession will take place ‘in a reasonable time.’... The Colombian minister stressed that his country is seeking balanced cooperation with China at a time when Bogotá is seeking to strengthen its independence

in foreign policy and diversify its international relations...Murillo’s visit is part of a broader strategy that began with President Gustavo Petro’s trip to China in October 2023, when both countries agreed to elevate their relations to a strategic partnership, signing a series of agreements to deepen cooperation in key sectors such as the economy, science, and education...Although Colombia’s official accession to the BRI is still in process, Chinese investments already play a relevant role in the development of the country’s infrastructure.

Notes:

- 1 The Council on Foreign Relations think tank maintains an updated document on major developments in the relationship between Latin America and China. See: “China’s Growing Influence in Latin America,” Council on Foreign Relations, last updated 10 January 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>
- 2 For more information on China’s foreign direct investment activities, see the work of Enrique Dussel Peters: “Monitor of Chinese OFDI in Latin America and the Caribbean 2024,” 13 May 2024. https://docs.redalc-china.org/monitor/images/pdfs/menuprincipal/DusselPeters_MonitorOFDI_2024_Eng.pdf
- 3 Matias Spektor has an excellent article on the phenomenon of hedging among medium-sized powers. See: Matias Spektor, “In Defense of Fence Sitters,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/global-south-defense-fence-sitters>