# OE WATCH

*Foreign News & Perspectives of the Operational Environment*

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**Russia Deploys Shadow Fleet of Oil Tankers, Raising Tensions With NATO Members** 18

**Kim's New Year's Message Signals Continued North Korean Battlefield Support to Russia** 25

**Syria Faces Military and Security Challenges One Year After Assad's Fall** 36

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# China Advancing Stealth UAV Into Flight Testing Phase

*By Cindy Hurst*
*OE Watch Commentary*

China's new high-altitude, long-endurance stealth drone, the **CH-7**, conducted its maiden flight in late 2025, marking a significant milestone in the country's development of advanced unmanned aerial vehicles.[1] According to the following article excerpt, published in the China Communist Party news service *Global Times*, the CH-7 incorporates extensive stealth features, including a sleek shape, radar-absorbent materials, stealth coatings, and concealed components, which allow it to operate undetected in heavily defended areas.

> ***"[The CH-7] is expected to be deployed ahead of time to designated combat zones for reconnaissance missions."***

The successful maiden flight of the CH-7 stealth drone marks a continuing shift in China's military capabilities, moving toward sophisticated, long-range reconnaissance and targeting in highly contested zones. The CH-7's advanced stealth features and high-altitude endurance position it as a critical forward sensor, while its subsonic speed makes it unsuitable for direct air combat. Its primary role will likely be to penetrate dense air defenses to identify and designate high-value targets, such as aircraft carriers, for coordinated strikes by other assets. This capability enhances China's antiaccess/area denial strategy, allowing it to project power and hold strategic assets at risk from a distance, without endangering manned aircraft.

**Source:** "Liu Xuanzun and Ma Jun, "China's CH-7 High-Altitude, High-Speed Drone Makes Maiden Flight," *Global Times* (Chinese Communist Party news service), 15 December 2025. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202512/1350559.shtml

*China's high-altitude, high-speed drone, the CH-7, recently successfully completed its first flight at an airfield in Northwest China, the Global Times learned from the 11th Academy of China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp on Monday. The maiden flight marks that the large flying-wing aircraft which has garnered significant attention at the Airshow China previously has now entered the phase of flight testing.*

*Adopting a high-aspect-ratio flying-wing aerodynamic configuration, the CH-7 can carry a variety of high-performance mission payloads, including visible light and infrared sensors. Boasting long endurance, high flight ceiling, fast cruise speed and strong mission capability, it meets the high-end ground observation and data support requirements under complex conditions, according to its developer.*

*CASC's Li Jianhua told the Global Times that the maiden flight is an exceptionally critical milestone for any aircraft…*

*The Global Times learned at the Airshow China 2024 that the CH-7 adopts a flying-wing configuration, which offers optimal stealth effectiveness across all directions. It incorporates radar wave-absorbent designs for high-reflectivity areas along the leading edges, applies stealth coatings to the aircraft's surface, and implements stealth measures for all access panels, landing gear bay covers, and weapon bays, among other components…*

*continue on 6*

*In a demonstration animation presented at the Airshow China 2024, the CH-7 was shown capable of conducting long-duration patrols over target maritime areas. Upon detecting a target, it can relay the information back to rear command via a data link, providing mid-course guidance or even terminal guidance for long-range strike weapons.*

*An expert told the Global Times at the airshow that the CH-7 is capable of undertaking a wide range of missions, including battlefield surveillance and intelligence reconnaissance. Its onboard radar enables long-range air and maritime surveillance, capable of detecting large surface vessel targets. Additionally, it can carry out sustained covert reconnaissance and intelligence gathering in highly contested combat environments, as well as provide target designation for long-range precision strike weapons… Chinese experts told the Global Times that judging by the aerodynamic design of the CH-7, its flight speed is relatively slower compared to modern fighter jets. Therefore, it is unlikely to serve as a traditional wingman drone for close combat support. Instead, leveraging its high stealth capabilities, it is expected to be deployed ahead of time to designated combat zones for reconnaissance missions. Given its high endurance, it is expected to be able to conduct prolonged search and surveillance over target areas. Once a target is identified, it can provide relay guidance or terminal guidance for follow-on aircraft or long-range missiles launched from ground-based strike platforms, all while remaining undetected by adversaries.*

Notes:

1 Alcott Wei, "China's Latest Stealth Endurance Drone, CH-7, Completes Maiden Flight," South China Morning Post (Hong Kong-based English language media outlet), 15 December 2025. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3336520/chinas-latest-stealth-endurance-drone-ch-7-completes-maiden-flight?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article

# China Escalates Cognitive Warfare and Disinformation Campaigns Targeting Taiwan

*By Cindy Hurst*
*OE Watch Commentary*

Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB) recently revealed a significant escalation in China's cognitive warfare operations against the island. According to the following excerpts published in the Taiwanese English-language print newspaper *Taipei Times,* the number of fake online accounts tied to the Chinese government surged from 28,216 in 2024 to 45,590 in 2025. As part of a campaign between the Chinese government and various private companies (especially IT firms), the disinformation campaigns aim to sow doubt about the United States and the Taiwanese military, create social divisions within Taiwanese society, and ultimately sway public opinion towards unification with China. The NSB report identified over 2.3 million pieces of such disinformation.

According to the article, Beijing has deployed five key tactics. First, Chinese tech companies gather personal data on influential Taiwanese individuals and conduct targeted propaganda. Second, Beijing employs a wide array of channels, including fake websites and content farms, to spread this disinformation. Third, a paid "internet water army" is employed to flood social media with pro-China narratives across numerous platforms and languages.[1] Fourth, China is leveraging artificial intelligence to create highly convincing fake content and to precisely target its audience, even using AI to generate videos and voice-based systems. Finally, the Chinese cyber army has been actively hacking into social media accounts and Internet of things devices to spread false information, particularly during times of heightened military tension.

China's cognitive warfare extends beyond Taiwan, encompassing the broader global democratic community, including the United States. This represents a direct threat to U.S. national security, as the same tactics used against Taiwan can be, and are being, adapted to target the United States and its allies. Among a host of possibilities, the spread of disinformation can erode public trust in democratic institutions, influence political discourse, and undermine the integrity of elections.

> ***"More than 2.314 million pieces of [Chinese] disinformation were recorded last year, up from 2.159 million in 2024."***

**Source:** Huang Ching-hsuan and Fion Khan, "Chinese Online Manipulation Sources: NBS," *Taipei Times* (Taiwan English-language print newspaper), 12 January 2026. https://news.ltn.com.tw/amp/news/focus/breakingnews/5306700

*Taiwan's national intelligence community recorded 45,590 fake online accounts last year, up from 28,216 in 2024, the National Security Bureau (NSB) said in a report released yesterday.*

*As part of its cognitive warfare against Taiwan, the Chinese Communist Party has integrated the resources and technologies of the party, government, military and private enterprises to infiltrate online communities to reshape opinions toward "unification," the report said*

*To amplify narratives, manipulate fake accounts and expand external propaganda, China focuses on fostering skepticism toward the US, the Taiwanese military and*

*continue on 8*

*President William Lai, while hyping emotions around selected current events, the NSB said.*

*More than 2.314 million pieces of disinformation were recorded last year, up from 2.159 million in 2024, the report showed…*

*China has adopted a government-civilian partnership model, integrating its collaborative organizations, including information technology companies, marketing firms and Internet groups, employing five major tactics, the report said.*

*First, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the Chinese Ministry of State Security and Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission employ Chinese information technology (IT) companies to collect personal data of Taiwanese political figures, legislators and opinion leaders, including their interpersonal connections and positions on China…*

*Second, China employs a wide range of channels, including fake Web sites, content farms and cover channels, to disseminate disinformation...*

*Third, China employs an "Internet water army" — people paid to flood the Internet with pro-Chinese comments — to conduct influence operations in more than 20 languages across more than 180 social media platforms worldwide…*

*Fourth, Chinese IT enterprises have developed AI models and intelligent guidance systems to concurrently collect data on public, with automated video generation and precise delivery to targeted audiences…*

*Fifth, the Chinese cyberarmy hijacked more than a dozen accounts on the Professional Technology Temple PTT bulletin board system during China's military exercises around Taiwan in April last year…*

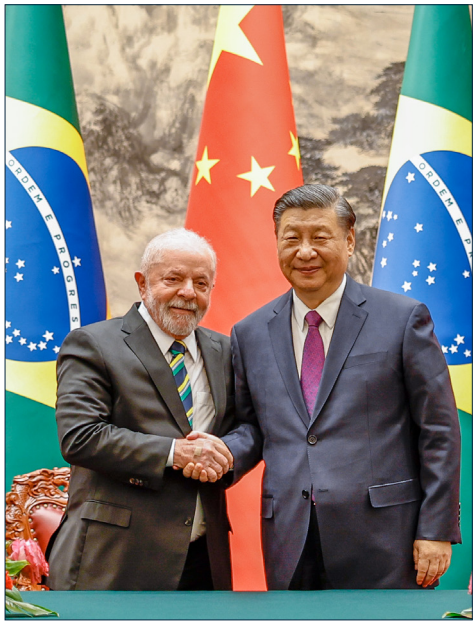
*China has expanded the targets of its cognitive warfare to include countries in the global democratic camp, the bureau said.*

Notes:

1 An "internet water army" is a group of ghostwriters paid to post large numbers of comments online. Interestingly, in July 2021, *China Daily* released an article discussing the negative impact of the "internet water army," which was accused of manipulating online comments to promote products or discredit competitors. The article advocated for stronger regulatory measures to combat these activities, which goes counter to what the Chinese government's reported use of the "internet water army" today. See Feng Xiaoqing, "Time to Fight 'Internet Water Army,'" *China Daily* (English-language daily newspaper owned by the CCP's Central Propaganda Department), 21 July 2022. https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202207/21/WS62d89000a310fd2b29e6d7e1.html

# China and Brazil Establish Joint Space Laboratory To Deepen Space Cooperation

*By Ryan Berg*
*OE Watch Commentary*



Brazil's President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva and Chinese President Xi Jinping pose for a photo after a deal signing ceremony in 2023, including a deal on space cooperation. *(Source: https://tinyurl.com/4mybm84s.)*

> ***"Beijing has used China's rapidly improving space capabilities over the past two decades as a diplomatic tool to increase its influence in… South America."***

As China tapers off its investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, space cooperation has remained a key part of its engagement.[1] Space partnership—which sees China maintaining close links to the country's military and likely has dual-use purposes—now occupies a prominent place in China's bilateral relationships with various Latin American countries, including Argentina, Chile, and, as described below, Brazil.[2]

*CNN Brasil*, one of the largest news outlets in the country, reports that China Electronic Technology Group Corporation (CETC) is moving to deepen space cooperation with Brazil, announcing joint laboratories for deep space technologies. These partnerships will be developed with several local universities, potentially making them more difficult to track. This comes on the heels of China and Brazil building a joint radio telescope together. Local online outlet from Brazil's Paraíba State, *Patos Online*, where the telescope will be located, reports that the BINGO radio telescope—the largest of its kind in South America—should be finished in 2026. In mid-2025, the outlet reports, the last parts of the telescope were sent to Brazil for final assembly this year. The outlet claims that the BINGO can monitor satellite positioning and map orbital dynamics, among other things.

These partnerships alter the operational environment in a critical domain in South America.[3] While Brazil has remained largely politically equidistant between great powers, China has aggressively pursued space cooperation to track many of the world's satellites and other celestial objects through a global network of stations, an activity that has clear military implications. China's promise of technology transfer often entices partner nations, while agreements frequently feature exclusive usage rights for China, with host nations often finding it difficult to exercise oversight over these facilities.

**Source:** "China e Brasil criam laboratório espacial, apesar da pressão dos EUA (China and Brazil create space laboratory, despite US pressure)," *CNN Brasil* (one of the largest news outlets in Brasil), 10 December 2025. https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/china-e-brasil-criam-laboratorio-espacial-apesar-da-pressao-dos-eua/

*China and Brazil have begun building a joint laboratory for space technologies, Chinese state-owned defense electronics firm CETC said, deepening scientific ties as the two countries push ahead with a major telescope project in South America…U.S. officials have described these Chinese telescopes as tools that could be used by Beijing to increase its surveillance capabilities over American soil and Washington's activities in a region it considers crucial for homeland defense…CETC said on Tuesday the joint laboratory would support frontier research for astronomical observation and deep-space exploration…Beijing has used China's rapidly improving space capabilities over the past two decades as a diplomatic tool to increase its influence in…South America.*

**Source:** "China envia últimas estruturas para instalação do radiotelescópio BINGO, em Aguiar, no Sertão da Paraíba (China sends final structures for the installation of the BINGO radio telescope in Aguiar, in the Sertão region of Paraíba)," *Patos Online* (an online platform from Brazil's Paraíba State), 12 June 2025. https://patosonline.com/noticia/265619/china-envia-ultimas-estruturas-para-instalacao-do-radiotelescopio-bingo-em-aguiar-no-sertao-da-paraiba

*The Bingo radiotelescope project–the largest in Latin America–is now entering the installation phase in Brazilian territory, more precisely in the municipality of Aguiar, in the Sertão of Paraíba…The structures shipped from China include the entire arrangement and components of the primary mirror, secondary mirror, and horn towers, the central parts of the telescope. The installation work on the radio telescope is progressing rapidly. The earthworks have been completed, the control room and solar power plant have already been built, and the concrete foundation that will support the towers and reflectors and sustain the entire structure is underway…Unlike optical telescopes, Bingo detects subtle radio waves, invisible to the naked eye. The equipment will also be able to monitor satellites, meteors, and small celestial bodies, expanding its scientific and functional importance.*

Notes:

1 For more information, see: Laura Delgado Lopez, "Orbital Dynamics: The Domestic and Foreign Policy Forces Shaping Latin American Engagement in Space," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 23 July 2024. https://www.csis.org/analysis/orbital-dynamics-domestic-and-foreign-policy-forces-shaping-latin-american-engagement

2 For a catalogue of China's growing space presence in Latin America, see: Matthew P. Funaiole, Dana Kim, Brian Hart, and Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., "Eyes on the Skies: China's Growing Space Footprint in South America," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 October 2022. https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-ground-stations-space/

3 Brazil has also signed the U.S.-led Artemis Accords. For more information on Brazil's delicate balancing act and insistence of "non-alignment," please see: Ryan C. Berg and Carlos Baena, "The Great Balancing Act: Lula in China and the Future of U.S.-Brazil Relations," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 April 2023. https://www.csis.org/analysis/great-balancing-act-lula-china-and-future-us-brazil-relations

# China and Somalia Strengthen Ties Through Mutual Condemnation of "Breakaway" Taiwan and Somaliland

*By Jacob Zenn*
*OE Watch Commentary*

A power struggle is emerging in the Horn of Africa where two entities seeking autonomy or independence—Somaliland and Taiwan—are strengthening ties and increasing cooperation. To counter this effort, China is increasing its support to Somalia.

These dynamics recently played out on 22 December, when Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud conducted an interview with China Global Television Network (CGTN), which rattled Taiwan and Somaliland, and received praise from China. As per the excerpted interview from CGTN, Mohamud stated in a positive tone that "China has the military capacity, and military might to bring back Taiwan." The president's praise of China in the interview, alongside this specific statement, also hinted at Mogadishu's similar desire to militarily rein in its breakaway Somaliland region.

China and Taiwan both reacted immediately to Mohamud's remarks. From its *X* account, the Taiwan Representative Office in Somaliland urged Somalia's government "not to be China's cheerleader in global competition" and noted that "warring rhetoric…undermines international peace, stability, and trust."[1] The Office also condemned China's unilateral military provocations and gray zone tactics. For its part, the Chinese Embassy in Somalia, from its *X* account, assured Somalia that China would work together to safeguard each other's "sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity" and accused Taiwan of "pushing its secessionist agenda" in the Somalia-Somaliland dispute.[2] China and Somalia celebrated their 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations only one week before President Sheikh Mohamud's CGTN interview and highlighted their mutual respect for the "One China Principle" and the "inviolability" of Somalia's territorial integrity.[3]

> ***"We [Somalia] never recognized Taiwan, and China has the military capacity and military might to bring back Taiwan."***

The expanding relationship between Somalia and China also raises questions about future Western counterterrorism support to Mogadishu against al-Shabaab, as well as to the Somali army's elite

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Somalia and China have maintained positive relations since the 1963 official visit of Somali Prime Minister Abdirashid Shermarke to China. Since then the relationship has strengthened diplomatically, economically, and militarily as both confront respective breakaway states—Somaliland and Taiwan. *(Source: 人民画报[Rénmín Huàbào] https://tinyurl.com/y4yv6ef3)*

counterterrorism unit, the Dahab Brigade. Greater Western cooperation with Somaliland is also possible due to Somaliland's close ties with Taiwan, Israel's recognition of Somaliland as a state last December, and calls from U.S. interest groups for Washington to recognize Somaliland.[4] More broadly, any military activity or change of status in China and Taiwan could reverberate in the Horn of Africa—and vice-versa.

**Source:** "Exclusive with Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud," *cgtn.com*, (website of China Global Television Network, which is the global arm of China Central Television (CCTV)), 22 December 2025. https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-12-22/Exclusive-with-Somali-President-Hassan-Sheikh-Mohamud-1Jhok9YiPcY/p.html

*China has always been with us [Somalia], and we have always been with them. We never recognized Taiwan, and China has the military capacity and military might to bring back Taiwan. China went through a difficult era in its history and has survived and even later on prospered. Somalia has difficulty. So, the commonality we have is that in some areas the China approach is useful to Somalia. I know we are looking at how to survive and prosper. There is very rich experience in China and they have been providing us insights, and the civilization.*

*This is again not only about sovereign territory but respect of our two countries to each other. We've never had any problem with China whatsoever. In the last 65 years the relationship was steady and straight.*

Notes:

1 Taiwan In Somaliland (@Taiwan_SLD), "Taiwan Representative Office in the Republic of Somaliland response to false claims regarding Taiwan and Cross-strait Peace by Somalia President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud," 22 December 2025. https://x.com/Taiwan_SLD/status/2003116709960671319

2 Chinese Embassy in Somalia (@ChineseSomalia), "Response to Fallacy from an Illegal 'Office' in Hargeisa," 22 December 2025. https://x.com/ChineseSomalia/status/2003237763056099620

3 See, for example: "Somalia marks 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations with China." *China Daily*, 18 December 2025. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202512/18/WS69435d9ca310d6866eb2f432.html

4 Michael Rubin. "Somaliland Recognition Won't Cause Al-Shabaab Backlash," Middle East Forum, 5 October 2025. https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/somaliland-recognition-wont-cause-al-shabaab-backlash

# Russian Naval Infantry Expands Capabilities for Force Projection in the Arctic

*By Chuck Bartles*
*OE Watch Commentary*

The Russian Navy's naval infantry is one of the three main organizations within the Russian Ministry of Defense that conducts combined arms maneuver in the land domain. As with their ground forces and airborne troops brethren, the naval infantry is in the process of expanding its brigade structure into a division/regimental structure in response to not only the lessons learned in Ukraine but also the expectation of heavy employment after Ukraine is resolved. This development was foretold at a December 2022 Collegium of the Russian Ministry of Defense, when Russia announced a massive expansion of the Russian Armed Forces.[1] According to Putin, two naval infantry brigades will be converted into naval infantry divisions in 2025, two will be converted in 2026, and one will be converted in 2027.[2]

The accompanying excerpted article from a Russian daily newspaper, Izvestiya, states that the 55th Guards Naval Infantry Division (created on the basis of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade) and the 120th Naval Infantry Division (created on the basis of the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade) were the naval infantry divisions created in 2025.

The Russian Naval Infantry has typically been employed as a light mechanized amphibious force.[3] This is perceived to be an important capability by the Russian Armed Forces due to the massive, but sparsely populated, Russian landmass with vast coastlines. The Russian Naval Infantry's ability to conduct amphibious landings is just as much of a defensive capability as an offensive capability in areas that are difficult or impossible for conventional Russian forces to reach. This situation is especially pronounced in the Arctic, as long-distance travel by land is often difficult or impossible. The Russian Naval Infantry also fills important niches involving antiterrorism, antipiracy, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism.

The expansion of the Russian Naval Infantry is further evidence that the ambitious plan for Russian military expansion, as outlined by President Putin and the Russian Armed Forces leadership in 2022, is progressing and was not a "paper tiger."[4]

> ***"The legendary 55th Guards Naval Infantry Division will soon be recreated in Vladivostok on the basis of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade… Another division [120th Naval Infantry Division] will be based at the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade…"***




Naval Infantryman of the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade at the 2013 Victory Day parade. *(Source: https://www.vitalykuzmin.su/Military/VictoryDayParade2013/i-TrjX7r3)*

**Source:** Dmitry Boltenkov, "Штурм на море: как СВО меняет подразделения «черных беретов» (Assault at Sea: How the SMO [special military operation] is Changing the Black Berets), *Izvestiya* (Russian daily newspaper), 27 November 2025. https://iz.ru/1997912/dmitrii-boltenkov/shturm-na-more-kak-svo-meniaiutsia-rossiiskie-podrazdeleniia-chernykh-beretov

*Before the start of the special military operation, a standard naval infantry brigade typically consisted of four battalions: a reconnaissance battalion, an air assault battalion, and two naval infantry battalions, in addition to artillery and anti-aircraft divisions and a tank company. During the special military operation, several more battalions were added to these units. Storm-assault units were created within the brigades. They are actively used to capture Ukrainian Armed Forces field fortifications and in urban combat…Artillery units received significant reinforcements. The naval infantry acquired an unusual weapon for them: heavy 152-mm artillery systems…Tank companies became battalions, and rocket artillery batteries became battalions. Antitank artillery battalions were also reestablished within the brigades. UAV units appeared.*

*As a result, the brigades' numbers have increased exponentially. They not only conduct combat operations but also remain at their bases, actively training reinforcements. For these reasons, proposals to expand the brigades into full-fledged divisions emerged as early as 2022. And in March 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the imminent implementation of these plans…The legendary 55th Guards Naval Infantry Division will soon be recreated in Vladivostok on the basis of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade…Another division [120th Naval Infantry Division] will be based at the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade…*

*Currently, The Black Berets are primarily engaged in combined arms combat missions, gaining relevant experience. But sooner or later, the situation in Ukraine will end. Engaging in [heavy] combat is unusual for the Naval Infantry. These units are designed to engage in combat operations at the interface between two environments — sea and land. These include amphibious or counter-amphibious operations, and anti-amphibious defense…*

*Russia has many remote territories where large formations can only arrive by sea. These primarily include the Far East: Sakhalin, the Kuril Islands, Kamchatka, Chukotka, remote Arctic territories, and the Kaliningrad exclave. The military-political situation around them is deteriorating, and various countries have claims on Russia's integrity: for example, Japan lays claim to the Kuril Islands, and NATO countries are seeking to isolate Russia in the Baltic. This requires strengthening the Russian Armed Forces in these areas…*

*An important mission of the Russian Naval Infantry is to ensure the security of Russian naval forces conducting missions in distant seas. Anti-terrorist teams are deployed aboard warships and support vessels to protect them from potential terrorist attacks. The Naval Infantry are also ready to carry out counter-terrorism operations, similar to the liberation of the tanker Moscow University in May 2010.*

*Russia is actively developing oil and gas production in the Arctic Ocean, deploying floating drilling rigs and other critical equipment. Their protection is also the responsibility of the Naval Infantry. The Russian Navy's leadership understands these challenges well—the Northern Fleet practiced them during the Zapad-2025 exercise and its 14th Arctic voyage…*

*continue on 15*

Notes:

1 The expansion of the Russian military includes an increase from approximately 1 million active-duty uniformed personnel in 2021 in the Ministry of Defense to approximately 1.5 million personnel.

2 On 27 March 2025, President Putin specifically discussed the expansion plans of the Russian Naval Infantry. See: "Владимир Путин посетил атомный подводный крейсер «Архангельск»Vladimir (Putin visited the nuclear submarine cruiser Arkhangelsk)," *Kremlin.ru*, 27 March 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76557

3 The author of the article is keen to note that the heavy combined arms warfare that the Russian Naval Infantry is currently engaged in Ukraine, is not the normal role of the Russian Naval Infantry.

4 If Russia continues to expand its naval infantry capabilities, it is likely that a dedicated military academy will be established to train naval infantry officers, as now most are currently trained at the Ryazan Guards Higher Airborne Command School in Ryazan and the Far Eastern Higher Combined Arms Command School in Blagoveshchensk.

# Russia Exploits High North Populations for Military Recruitment

*By Lionel Beehner*
*OE Watch Commentary*

Russian military recruiters are systematically targeting socially vulnerable men in remote northern villages, particularly those suffering from chronic alcoholism, to fill combat roles in Ukraine. According to Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, recruiters approach Russian men while they are heavily intoxicated and then transport them to enlistment points where military contracts are signed while the individuals are impaired. Family members interviewed by the newspaper confirmed that many recruits had no intention of joining the military and were unable to comprehend the terms of service at the time of signing.

Several cases cited in the reporting involve men who were sent to Ukraine shortly after recruitment and killed within weeks, sometimes days, of arrival. Relatives report receiving death notifications with little explanation or compensation. Medical staff in northern regions also described instances in which newly recruited men were hospitalized for acute alcohol withdrawal, indicating that individuals with longstanding addiction were abruptly removed from their communities and dispatched toward combat zones with little preparation or training.[1]

The pattern described by *The Barents Observer* points to mounting strain on




A bottle of Stolichnaya Vodka, a Russian staple. *(Source: https://www.pickpik.com/vodka-ruska-alcohol-drunkenness-problem-bottle-128615)*

Russia's manpower reserves as the war in Ukraine continues. Rather than relying solely on formal mobilization or voluntary enlistment, local authorities and recruiters appear to be exploiting marginalized populations in economically depressed regions where oversight is limited, and resistance carries social or legal risk. Northern villages, already affected by depopulation, unemployment, and weak social services, offer a pool of men who are less likely to attract public attention when casualties occur. These practices contrast sharply with official Kremlin messaging that emphasizes professionalism, patriotism, and voluntarism within the Russian armed forces.[2]

> ***"It turns out that in a few hours these military managed to get our men drinks, process them, take them to the nearest police station, issue a military ID for my husband and sign the documents."***

The coercive nature of recruitment described in the reporting also raises questions about unit cohesion, combat effectiveness, and morale among forces composed partly of unwilling and unprepared personnel. While Russia (and to be fair, Ukraine) has previously relied on ex-convicts, the targeting

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of intoxicated civilians suggests an expansion of extraordinary measures to sustain force generation.[3] If such recruitment methods continue, they may deepen domestic resentment in peripheral regions and further expose disparities in how the burdens of the war are distributed across Russian society. Over time, the reliance on coerced and socially vulnerable recruits may undermine both battlefield performance and the credibility of Moscow's claims regarding popular support for the war effort.

**Source:** Georgii Chentemirov, "Как в российской глубинке вербуют и отправляют на смерть пьющих людей (Russia Recruits Drunk Villagers from the North as Cannon Fodder on the Ukrainian Front)," *The Barents Observer,* 14 January 2026. https://ru.thebarentsobserver.com/kak-v-rossijskoj-glubinke-verbuut-i-otpravlaut-na-smert-pusih-ludej/443158

*The Barents Observer found several more cases when representatives of the Ministry of Defense signed contracts with people who were in a state of intoxication or suffering from alcohol addiction. We have at our disposal an appeal to the military prosecutor's office from Gennady, a resident of one of the remote northern villages, who miraculously escaped being sent to the army in December. In his statement, he complains about recruiters and the head of the municipality who helps them.*

*"Together with the employees of the military commissariat, he carries out detours of the district, during which psychological pressure is exerted on citizens in a similar situation to me. These persons spread knowingly false information that the signing of the contract is allegedly not related to participation in hostilities and is intended only for 'restoration work.' I know from reliable sources that citizens who fell to this misinformation were further sent to the combat zone, where they were seriously injured or died," - it is said in the appeal.*

*A "similar situation" means addiction to alcohol, admits Gennady's brother, a military officer. In a conversation with a journalist, he said that they came to Gennady's house when he was drunk and took him to the local military registration and enlistment office. "The employee started processing to sign the contract. They say—here, the car is standing, sit down, we'll take you to the capital, you'll pass the commission there." He said, "Sorry, I won't go, I'm not ready, I need to take some things with me," the military man said.*

*This procrastination saved the man—his brother found out about what was happening, who called his colleagues and said that they would not succeed. But two fellow countrymen Gennady managed to take away. According to the military, one of them was in such a state that he learned about the signing of the contract only when he woke up in the train that was carrying him to the unit.*

*"If everything is according to the law, you came in your right mind and understand where you are going, it's one story. But when it's such nonsense, I'm against it. I don't understand why this is happening," the serviceman who saved his brother from recruitment comments on what is happening.*

Notes:

1 The news comes on the heels of a report by *The Moscow Times* in October 2025 that found Russian soldiers returning home from the war suffering from abnormally high cases of alcoholism, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts. See: Angelina Trefilova, "Russian Soldiers Confront PTSD, Alcoholism and Suicidal Thoughts After Fighting in Ukraine," *The Moscow Times*, 21 October 2025. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/10/21/russian-soldiers-confront-ptsd-alcoholism-and-suicidal-thoughts-after-fighting-in-ukraine-a90633

2 See: "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," *Kremlin.Ru*, 24 February 2022. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843

3 "From prison to the frontlines: Thousands of Russian convicts sent to fight in Ukraine," *PBS Newshour*, 3 March 2023. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/from-prison-to-the-frontlines-thousands-of-russian-convicts-sent-to-fight-in-ukraine

# Russia Deploys Shadow Fleet of Oil Tankers, Raising Tensions With NATO Members

*By Dodge Billingsley*
*OE Watch Commentary*

Tensions are rising between Russia and multiple NATO states—including the United States, United Kingdom, and France—over the latter group's retaliation against the Western-sanctioned shadow fleet of oil tankers that Moscow uses to move its oil around the world.

The boarding and seizure of Russia's suspected shadow fleet has been ongoing since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, tensions escalated significantly in 2026, when, on 7 January, the United States seized the *Bella 1*, which had only days before hastily reflagged itself as a Russian vessel and renamed to the *Marinera*, all while being shadowed by U.S. naval assets from the Caribbean into the North Atlantic. In a failed effort to stave off boarding and seizure by U.S. forces, Moscow filed a formal protest and dispatched its own naval assets, including a submarine to shadow the tanker, to no avail.[1]

Since then, the UK has publicly announced that it is considering a joint interdiction campaign against Russia's shadow fleet, drawing additional rebuke and threats of retaliation from Russian officials.[2] In response, according to the excerpted article from Russian news outlet *Izvestia*, Moscow said that it "will consider the implementation of the UK's threats to intercept Russian ships as a violation of maritime law." As per the second excerpted article from the UK-based global news network *BBC*, less than two weeks later, on 22 January, the French, assisted by "tracking and monitoring support" from the UK, seized a suspected Russian shadow tanker, the *Grinch*, in the Mediterranean.

Until recently, the enforcement of sanctions has been inconsistent and haphazard.[3] A concentrated effort by

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USCGC Munro shadowing the tanker Bella 1 before it was boarded by U.S. personnel on 7 January 2026. *(Source: U.S. European Command, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_oil_blockade_during_Operation_Southern_Spear - /media/File:Bella_1_aka_Marinera_seen_from_USSCGC_Munro.jpg)*

> ***"Russia will consider the implementation of the UK's threats to intercept Russian ships as a violation of maritime law… this kind of thought process is concentrated, of course, on causing damage to Russian interests."***

EU and NATO states to board, seize, and confiscate vessels moving Russian oil around the world would signal a policy change. If such measures to stop Russian shadow oil tankers continue, they could have significant impacts on the operational environment around the European continent, creating flashpoints in the North Sea, the Baltic, and the Mediterranean.

**Source:** "МИД РФ предупредил Великобританию о последствиях перехвата российских судов (The Russian Foreign Ministry warned Great Britain about the consequences of the interception of Russian vessels)," *Izvestia* (pro-Moscow Russian news service), 15 January 2026. https://iz.ru/2025300/2026-01-15/mid-rf-predupredil-velikobritaniiu-o-posledstviiakh-perekhvata-rossiiskikh-sudov

*Russia will consider the implementation of the UK's threats to intercept Russian ships as a violation of maritime law. This was reported to journalists at a briefing on January 15 by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova.*

*According to her, London has begun to study the issue of using the national law on sanctions and money laundering as a legal basis for the use of armed forces to detain ships on the high seas.*

*"First of all, this kind of thought process is concentrated, of course, on causing damage to Russian interests. The implementation of such aggressive intentions will be considered as a direct violation of the provisions of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the British themselves are so faithfully committed to preserving," the diplomat said.*

*Zakharova added that Moscow calls on London to abandon the escalation of international tension and return to a respectful dialogue.*

*On January 7, the Russian Foreign Ministry reported that Russia is monitoring the situation with the Marinera oil tanker, which is being persecuted by the U.S. and NATO military in the international waters of the North Atlantic. The ministry emphasized that the tanker sails under the state flag of the Russian Federation and in full compliance with the norms of international maritime law.*

**Source:** "France seizes suspected Russian 'shadow fleet' tanker," *BBC* (UK based global news network), 22 January 2026. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdexxr2y907o?at_medium=RSS&at…n=rss&utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=mil-ebb

*France says it has seized an oil tanker in the Mediterranean suspected of being part of Russia's sanction-busting "shadow fleet." French President Emmanuel Macron said the tanker, named the Grinch, was "subject to international sanctions and suspected of flying a false flag."*

*The French navy, with the assistance of allies including the UK, boarded the vessel on Thursday morning between Spain and Morocco. French maritime authorities said that a search of the vessel had "confirmed the doubts as to the regularity of the flag."*

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*The Grinch was travelling from the Arctic port of Murmansk in northern Russia when it was intercepted, French authorities said. The vessel had been flying a Comoros flag, according to ship tracking websites marinetraffic and vesselfinder.*

*Announcing the seizure on X, Macron said, "We are determined to uphold international law and to ensure the effective enforcement of sanction." The activities of the "shadow fleet" contribute to financing the war of aggression against Ukraine, he said, adding that the vessel had been "diverted."*

*Defence Secretary John Healy said the UK navy had provided "tracking and monitoring" support, with HMS Dagger monitoring the tanker through the Straits of Gibraltar. He added, "Alongside our allies, we are stepping up our response to shadow vessels to choke off the funds that fuel Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine."*

Notes:

1 See: "Russia Sends Submarine to Escort Tanker the U.S. Tried to Seize Off Venezuela," *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 January 2026. https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-sends-submarine-to-escort-tanker-the-u-s-tried-to-seize-off-venezuela-4bd78dc7?mod=article_inline

2 See: "Russia Warns UK Not to Interfere With Shadow Fleet Tankers," *The Maritime Executive*, 19 January 2026. https://maritime-executive.com/article/russia-warns-uk-not-to-interfere-with-shadow-fleet-tankers

3 A handful of Russia's shadow fleet have been apprehended by NATO member state navies since 2023 in and around the Baltic Sea in relation to suspected undersea cable cutting incidents.

# Russia Delivers Liquified Natural Gas Carrier Despite Sanctions



The *Aleksey Kosygin*, Russia's first domestically built LNG carrier conducting sea trials, 2025. *(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexey_Kosygin_(2025_ship) - /media/File:LPG_Alexei_Kosygin.jpg)*

*By Les Grau*
*OE Watch Commentary*

Russia recently launched the *Aleksey Kosygin*, the country's first domestically produced Arc7 liquified natural gas (LNG) carrier, after years of delays. The delays illustrate the impact of Western sanctions, and possible future implications, on Russia's shipbuilding industry, according to the excerpted article from Norway-based *High North News*. According to the article, South Korean shipbuilder Samsung Heavy Industries built and delivered large sections of the ship's hull before sanctions were in place following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Following these events, a series of technological challenges, normally addressed by Western companies, proved difficult for Russian shipbuilder Zvezda to overcome.[1] Moving forward, the article points out that Russia will remain challenged to replace sanctioned Western technologies and know-how, while the hulls for two more Arc7 LNG carriers, under contract to be completed by Samsung Heavy Industries, will likely remain halted while Western sanctions on Russia remain in place.

> ***"Russia has completed its first domestically assembled Arc7 LNG carrier after years of sanctions-driven delays, offering a rare boost to Novatek's Arctic LNG 2 project but underscoring the deep challenges still facing Russia's shipbuilding ambitions. The vessel will double the project's winter export capacity."***

**Source:** Malte Humpert, "Russia Delivers First Domestically Assembled Arc7 LNG Carrier After Years of Sanctions Delays", *High North News* (independent newspaper published by the High North Center at the Nord university, Bodo Norway), 5 January 2026. https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-delivers-first-domestically-assembled-arc7-lng-carrier-after-years-sanctions-delays

*Russia has launched and handed over its first domestically assembled Arc7 ice-class liquefied natural gas carrier, the Aleksey Kosygin, to state-controlled shipping company Sovcomflot, marking a rare piece of good news for the country's shipbuilding ambitions after years of delays caused by Western sanctions and technology shortages.*

*The vessel, designed to operate year-round in Arctic conditions, had originally been scheduled to enter service several years ago but was repeatedly delayed as sanctions cut off access to key equipment, engineering support and expertise.*

*Large sections of the vessel's hull were not built in Russia. Instead, they were constructed by South Korean*

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*shipbuilder Samsung Heavy Industries and towed to Zvezda for final assembly, highlighting the limits of Russia's domestic shipbuilding capabilities for complex LNG carriers.*

*In total, Samsung supplied five Arc7 hulls under contracts signed before Western sanctions were imposed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

*The Aleksey Kosygin's prolonged construction and testing underscore the challenges Zvezda has faced in completing Russia's first-ever domestically assembled LNG carrier of this class. The ship underwent roughly a year of on-and-off sea trials, reflecting technical issues and delays as the yard sought to integrate propulsion systems, cargo handling equipment and ice-class features without the full participation of Western suppliers.*

*Replacing or localizing that technology has proven difficult and is widely seen as a bottleneck for future deliveries.*

Notes:

1 See: "Shipbuilding Industry: Russia – Mt. Aleksey Kosygin As Russia's First Domestically Built LNG Carrier Begins Sea Trials." *Global Mariner*, 27 December 2024. https://globalmariner.com.vn/shipbuiding-industry-russia-mt-aleksey-kosygin-as-russias-first-domestically-built-lng-carrier-begins-sea-trials/

# Russia Courts Madagascar Junta With Military Aid, Replicating Sahelian Playbook

*By Jacob Zenn*
*OE Watch Commentary*

On 23 December, the Malagasy daily *Midi-Madagasikara* published the excerpted French-language article, which focused on increasing Russia-Malagasy military ties. According to the article, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov met in Cairo with the Malagasy Minister of the Interior and Decentralization, Velonjara Tiaray Rakotonandrasana, to establish a strategic rapprochement between the two countries, with a focus on military affairs. The article states that Russia now plans to provide military training and equipment, including weapons, to Madagascar, and specifically its presidential guard.

The article also suggests that Russia's defense cooperation with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Togo could be a model implemented with Madagascar. Madagascar's potential to follow their lead is evidenced in the article by several examples, including the president of the National Assembly's official visit to Russia in November, President Michaël Randrianirin's multiple meetings with the Russian ambassador in Antananarivo since October, and an exclusive interview of Randrianirin, broadcast on *Russia Today*, which highlighted his closeness to Russia.[1, 2] Randrianirin, moreover, follows in the footsteps of other African—and especially Sahelian—military commanders because soldiers under his command overthrew Madagascar's previous president Andry Rajoelina, took control over the country's government, and installed him as leader in what the article describes as having "all the hallmarks of a coup."[3, 4] The article indicates that the risk of



Malagasy soldiers, as seen in the adjacent image, are likely to receive increasing weapons and training from Russian soldiers and Africa Corps as a result of the government's military cooperation with Moscow. *(Source: Sgt.* Jennifer Healy, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madagascar_JCET_Opening_Ceremony_(8556077).jpg)

Western sanctions and the suspension of international aid as a result of the overthrow of civilian rule could push Randrianirin towards Russia, which would gain influence in Madagascar, just as it has in the Sahelian countries.

The shipment of Russian weapons to Madagascar's Presidential Guard in December, escorted by 40 Russian soldiers, is ample evidence that the Kremlin is intent on backing Randrianirin's government.[5] Moreover, the Kremlin would be continuing its strategy of contesting and replacing U.S. and Western influence in Africa. An attempt to assert Russian Africa Corps fighters in Madagascar is also likely.

> ***"Cooperation between Madagascar and Russia is reaching a new level, particularly in the military domain."***

**Source:** "Coopération Madagascar-Russie: Des avancées dans le domaine militaire [Madagascar-Russia Cooperation: Advances in the Military Field]," *Midi Madagasikara* (Antananarivo-based leading daily newspaper published in French and covering national international and domestic news), 23 December 2025. https://midi-madagasikara.mg/cooperation-madagascar-russie-des-avancees-dans-le-domaine-militaire/

*Growing signals confirm a strategic rapprochement between Antananarivo and Moscow, with military cooperation expected to play an increasingly visible role. Cooperation between Madagascar and Russia is reaching a new level, particularly in the military domain. A high-level Russian delegation of around forty people, including military personnel, recently arrived in Madagascar aboard a private jet. The information was confirmed by the President of the National Assembly, Siteny Randrianasoloniaiko. This official mission was received by the President of the Republic, during a strategic meeting focused on strengthening bilateral relations. The discussions focused mainly on military training and donations of equipment to the presidential guard, including weapons, according to the President of the National Assembly.*

*The visit of this Russian mission, which had already made visits to several African capitals, notably Lomé and Kinshasa, illustrates a clearly progressing dynamic of Russian-Malagasy cooperation, particularly in the defense sector…. Security issues comprise a central place in this common vision shared between Moscow and African capitals.*

Notes:

1 See: "Rossotrudnichestvo Leadership Agrees with Madagascar's National Assembly Chair on Opening Partner Russian House and Expanding Cooperation," *Rs.gov.ru,* 11 November 2025. https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/rukovodstvo-rossotrudnichestva-dogovorilos-s-predsedatelem-naczionalnogo-sobraniya-respubliki-madagaskar-ob-otkrytii-partnerskogo-russkogo-doma-i-rasshirenii-sotrudnichestva/

2 See: "Corruption fight is key policy-Madagascar's interim leader," *Russia Today*, 28 November 2025. https://www.rt.com/africa/628571-corruption-fight-key-policy-madagascar/

3 Randrianirina served as the head of the Army Corps of Personnel and Administrative and Technical Services abbreviated (CAPSAT) before launching the coup.

4 Randrianirina denied that a coup had taken place, saying that his soldiers had only "answered the people's calls." See: Jean-Philippe Rémy, "Madagascar's coup leader Michaël Randrianirina seeks legitimacy," *Le Monde*, 19 October 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2025/10/19/madagascar-s-coup-leader-michael-randrianirina-seeks-legitimacy_6746579_124.html

5 See: "Madagascar Junta Signals Shift With Russian Military Arrival." *Townpress.co.za*, 25 December 2025. https://townpress.co.za/madagascar-junta-signals-shift-with-russian-military-arrival/

# Kim's New Year's Message Signals Continued North Korean Battlefield Support to Russia

*By Anthony W. Holmes*
*OE Watch Commentary*

A statement from North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un to his troops in Ukraine suggests that North Korea will continue to provide support for Moscow in its conflict there. In a New Year's message published by the *Korean Central News Agency* and directed to his troops fighting on behalf of Russia in its war in Ukraine, Kim Jong Un promised "the coming year 2026 will be another year of the great DPRK along with the remarkable feats you will perform on the overseas battlefields." The statement, combined with Kim's various public pronouncements in 2025, suggests that it is safe to conclude that Kim sees military support for Russia as a long-term endeavor. Kim's statement also addressed "the fraternal Russian people" and said his soldiers' sacrifices were further solidifying the "militant fraternity" and "invincible alliance" of Moscow and Pyongyang.

The timing of the message is also important. New Year's is culturally the most important holiday in Korea. In North Korea, state-run media outlets historically publish "joint editorials" in which all the outlets run the same text laying out the year's agenda. Traditionally, the ruling Kim also makes a detailed New Year's address, which external analysts rely on heavily to discern the country's intended trajectories on items related to the military, economy, social front, and the like. This year's speech notably included continued support for Russia, a recap of military modernization efforts, and praise for various economic successes.

> ***"As the whole country is enveloped in a festive atmosphere of greeting the new year, I all the more miss you, who are fighting bravely on the battlefields in the alien land even at this moment, true to the order of your fatherland."***




In this 1 Jan image released by North Korea's state news agency KCNA, Kim Jong Un poses with the families of "commanding officers of the overseas operations units" fighting for Russia against Ukraine. According to PRK state-run media, these families "longed for Kim Jong Un even in their dreams." *(Source: KCNA via Chosen Tamgu (Explore DPRK), https://tinyurl.com/559e6tms, Public domain under North Korea Copyright Act of 2006.)*

**Source:** "경애하는 김정은동지께서 해외작전부대 장병들에게 새해축하전문을 보내시였다 (Dear Comrade Kim Jong Un sent a New Year's message to soldiers of overseas operational units)" *Korean Central News Agency/ KCNA* (primary state-owned news outlet for general audiences), 31 December 2025. http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/64e900f5bd0353837ca02d7babcce3ad99168a6e7d1216026efc1e93a00440066837a75abf5c6249d0e39ee758e763ea.kcmsf

*On behalf of our Party and state and in reflection of the tender feelings of our people, the officers and soldiers of the entire army, and your parents, wives and children, I send new year greetings to all the commanding officers and combatants of the overseas operations units.*

*As the whole country is enveloped in a festive atmosphere of greeting the new year, I all the more miss you, who are fighting bravely on the battlefields in the alien land even at this moment, true to the order of your fatherland.*

*Though you are now far away from your homeland, our Party and people always think of you first, the proud sons of our country.*

*2025, the year we are seeing off with great pride and dignity, is shining more brilliantly thanks to the imperishable honour you have defended at the cost of your blood and lives.*

*All of you have safeguarded heroically the dignity and honour of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.*

*The coming year 2026 will be another year of the great DPRK along with the remarkable feats you will perform on the overseas battlefields.*

*For the fraternal Russian people,*

*For the mettle and characteristics of our people, for the spirit and dignity of the Korean people and for the immortal honour of our state,*

*And for the undying fame of our army,*

*Be brave.*

*Behind you are Pyongyang and Moscow.*

*Thanks to your self-sacrificing and devoted struggle, the militant fraternity and friendship and invincible alliance between our country and Russia grow firmer.*

# Kim Jong Un's Letter to Putin Highlights North Korean-Russian Ties While Revealing Limitations

*By Anthony W. Holmes*
*OE Watch Commentary*

In December 2025, North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un sent a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin, addressing him as "dearest comrade" and pledging to "unconditionally respect and…support all of your policies and decisions" and that this choice will "be immutable and last forever." The letter was carried by a broad swathe of North Korean state-run propaganda outlets, including state broadcaster the *Korean Central News Agency*, party daily newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the newspaper for the cabinet and presidium of the ruling party, *Minju Joson*.[1]

Kim also addressed Putin personally, saying he "will always be with you [Putin]" for "[your sake] and the sake of your [Putin's] Russia." Kim also referred to his friendship with Putin as "the most precious thing." The international media has extensively reported on its content and tone. In North Korea's highly planned, controlled, and disciplined propaganda apparatus, statements attributed to Kim Jong Un are infallible and represent the highest level of direction of state, party, and social policy. The letter's broad dissemination, fawning tone, and pledges of fealty are thus wholly intentional.

However, while the letter is revelatory, it should also be read with a degree of context and not be overanalyzed. Kim uses highly respectful Korean language in dealing with foreign leaders, which his translators are adept at interpreting.

> ***"I will unconditionally respect and unconditionally support all your policies and decisions and I have a willingness to be always with you for the sake of you and your Russia."***

Occasionally this interpretation sounds awkwardly polite and fawning, as English and many Western languages do not possess the Korean language's difficult-to-translate polite, formal, informal, and casual conjugations. Yet, even as such translational issues may exist, it remains the case that Kim Jong Un has gone to great lengths to publicize and celebrate his country's

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In this 19 January 2024 image released by the Office of Russian President Vladimir Putin, he and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un walk through Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, North Korea where giant portraits of Putin and Kim have been hung side-by-side to evoke the same style of the omnipresent portraits of Kim Jong Un's father and grandfather. *(Source: Www.kremlin.ru, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:North_Korea_people_are_welcoming_Kim_Jong-un_and_Vladimir_Putin_at_Kim_Il-sung_square.jpg.)*

relationship with Russia, including reaffirmation of long-term support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Kim has made the decision to link his regime's fortunes to Russia and make sure all elements of his society and the international community understand that choice.

**Source:** "경애하는 김정은동지께서 로씨야련방 대통령에게 회답서한을 보내시였다 (Dear Comrade Kim Jong- un sent a reply letter to the President of the Russian Federation)" *Korean Central News Agency/ KCNA* (primary state-owned propaganda broadcaster), 9 January 2026. http://kcna.kp/kp/article/q/d890173b8a6c0122f40727d47c15c420.kcmsf

*My dearest comrade,*

*I received your warm congratulatory letter with pleasure.*

*Through this, I have come to feel once again the true comradely relations between us and availing myself of this opportunity, I'd like to emphasize that I regard the friendly relations with you as the most precious ones and pride.*

*Our close cooperation will continue in various spheres in the future, too, in conformity with the spirit of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the DPRK and the Russian Federation, the strategic interests of the two countries and the aspirations and desires of the two peoples.*

*I will unconditionally respect and unconditionally support all your policies and decisions and I have a willingness to be always with you for the sake of you and your Russia.*

*This choice will be immutable and last forever.*

*The letter you sent is a deep expression of your friendship and trust in me, my comrades and all the Korean people.*

*I express thanks to you for this again.*

*Dear Vladimir Vladimirovich, I sincerely wish you good health and greater success in all your important undertakings. I wish the fraternal Russian people success and victory only and extend warm wishes to them.*

Notes:

1 The propaganda newspaper for the North Korean military *Joson Inmingun* is not publicly published by the regime, making it likely the only major PRK propaganda outlet Pyongyang restricts.

## Terrorist Attack in Kabul Kills Chinese National

*By Dodge Billingsley*
*OE Watch Commentary*

The Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) branch was quick to take responsibility for a 19 January suicide bomb attack at a Chinese-owned restaurant in a well-to-do neighborhood of Kabul. The blast killed one Chinese national and at least six Afghans. According to the excerpted article from UK-based *Afghanistan International,* ISIS-K confirmed the attack, stating that Chinese nationals were targeted over what the group [ISIS-K] "described as China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims." Ironically, the Chinese national killed in the attack was a Muslim from China's Xinjiang province, identified as Abdul Rahman. The attack is the latest to target Chinese nationals. China, which has not formally recognized the Taliban government, has many interests in Afghanistan. According to an official statement by China's Foreign Ministry, China has "urged Afghanistan to make every effort" and "do more to keep Chinese nationals, projects, and institutions safe" operating in Afghanistan.[1]

More broadly, the recent attack is illustrative of Afghanistan's complicated security environment, where it is widely recognized that multiple militant groups operate outside the Taliban structure.[2] There is also increasing international concern that Afghan-based terrorism will continue to strengthen beyond Afghan borders and into Central Asia and beyond.[3]

The Islamic State group's Khorasan branch, known as ISIS-K, has claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a Chinese restaurant in Kabul's Shahr-e Naw area… Chinese nationals were targeted over what the group [ISIS-K] described as China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims."




Logo of the Islamic State's Khorasan Province. *(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_–_Khorasan_Province - /media/File:Islamic_State_–_Khurasan_Province.svg)*

**Source:** "ISIS-K Claims Kabul Bombing That Killed Seven, Including Chinese Citizen," *Afghanistan International* (UK based Afghan focused international news outlet), 20 January 2026. https://www.afintl.com/en/202601205545

*The Islamic State group's Khorasan branch, known as ISIS-K, has claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a Chinese restaurant in Kabul's Shahr-e Naw area.*

*The explosion occurred at about 3 p.m. local time on Monday, January 19. Taliban authorities have confirmed that seven people, including one Chinese national, were killed and that 13 others were wounded.*

*In a statement published by ISIS's Amaq News Agency, the group said a suicide bomber entered a Chinese restaurant in Shahr-e Naw and detonated explosives among Chinese nationals and their guards.*

*ISIS-K claimed the attack killed and wounded Chinese citizens, Afghan civilians and Taliban members guarding the site. Without providing evidence, the group said the total number of dead and wounded was 25.*

*The statement said Chinese nationals were targeted over what the group described as China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims…*

*Taliban officials said the Chinese national killed in the blast was a Muslim from China's Xinjiang region, identified as Abdul Rahman.*

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**Source:** "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on January 20, 2026," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 20 January 2026. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202601/t20260120_11817009.html

*China has made urgent representations with Afghanistan and has urged Afghanistan to make every possible effort to save and treat the injured, do more to keep Chinese nationals, projects and institutions safe, get to the bottom of the attack, and bring the perpetrators to justice as soon as possible. Officials of the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan have visited the injured in hospital.*

*China strongly condemns and firmly opposes any form of terrorism, and supports Afghanistan and regional countries in jointly fighting all forms of terrorist and violent activities.*

*Given the current security situation in Afghanistan, the Ministry once again advises Chinese nationals not to travel to Afghanistan in the near future and asks Chinese nationals and companies already in Afghanistan to take extra precautions, step up security and depart high-risk regions as soon as possible.*

Notes:

1 In November 2025, five Chinese nationals were killed in two separate attacks on the Afghan-Tajik frontier. There has been some uncertainty as to who carried out the attacks but general consensus that multiple terrorist groups operate inside Afghanistan. See: "Who Killed The Chinese Workers? Questions Persist Weeks After Afghan-Tajik Border Attacks," *Radio Free Europe (RFE)*, 4 January 2026. https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-workers-killed-tajikistan-afghanistan-border-investgiation/33634252.html

2 See: Luke Coffey, "Terrorism Assessment for Afghanistan," Hudson Institute, 29 March 2025. https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/terrorism-assessment-afghanistan-luke-coffey

3 In addition to reports from multiple international organizations, including the UN, U.S. intelligence estimates suggest ISIS-K is a significant threat to the U.S. See: "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 2025. https://www.odni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf

## Latin American Criminal Groups Expand Drone Use

*By Ryan Berg*
*OE Watch Commentary*

Latin America's formidable criminal organizations are constantly evolving. In recent years, many have firmly integrated widely available commercial technology, such as drones, to spy on rival groups, surveil territory, and conduct asymmetric attacks on the state and police forces.[1] In several countries in the region, Latin America's criminal organizations appear to be using drones in battles against one another, in challenging state sovereignty, and increasingly, against unarmed civilians.[2]

The excerpted article from Colombian daily *El Tiempo* documents the alarming adoption and widespread use of drone technology by criminal groups since 2024. In Colombia, for instance, the article cites over 400 drone attacks since April 2024. It notes that drones are mostly Chinese-made, expendable, and often purchased over the counter or online for very little. *El Tiempo* reports a horrific Christmas attack in Colombia that deployed a drone swarm, injuring at least seven personnel in a military barracks. The article notes that Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico all find themselves as unprepared as Colombia for this latest stage of conflict with non-state armed groups. The second excerpted article, from Argentine outlet *Infobae*, reports that Colombia will spend upwards of $1.6 billion to build an antidrone shield. The shield will include equipment for jamming and other methods for protecting civilian populations.

While the incorporation of drones into the toolkit of Latin America's criminal organizations was likely only a matter of time, it could yield battlefield advantages for such groups. Drones are inexpensive, expendable, and can hold both the state at bay and civilian populations in harm's way. With the increased use of drones in Mexico, there are obviously operational environment implications for homeland defense of the United States and the country's southern border.[3]

> ***"According to official Colombian data provided by the newspaper, since April 2024, there have been nearly 400 drone attacks, which have left at least 58 members of the public force dead and almost 300 injured."***




A drone jammer, likely the kind of equipment that Colombia will purchase to build its anti-drone shield. *(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CPM_Wilson_3B_Anti_Drone_Jammer.jpg.)*

**Source:** "Uso de drones por el narcotráfico se expande en América Latina: este es el panorama que enfrentan los gobiernos y que siguen de cerca en EE. UU. (Drug trafficking uses drones to expand in Latin America: this is the scenario facing governments and closely monitored in the U.S.)," *El Tiempo* (Colombia's daily with the highest circulation), 13 December 2025. https://tinyurl.com/yc5uftsa

*The use of armed drones by drug trafficking and criminal organizations has become one of the most serious and difficult threats to security in Latin America…these cheap and easily adaptable devices are transforming the firepower of illegal groups in countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, and Brazil. In the case of Colombia…the phenomenon has reached alarming levels. A few days before Christmas, a swarm of drones loaded with explosives killed seven soldiers inside a military base in the northeast of the country. According to official Colombian data provided by the newspaper, since April 2024, there have been nearly 400 drone attacks, which have left at least 58 members of the public force dead and almost 300 injured. 'The impact was very severe. The sudden appearance of a capability that, frankly, was not on our radar,' acknowledged Major General Juan Carlos Correa, one of the Colombian Army officers in charge of designing strategies to counter these attacks…According to military sources, most of the devices used are commercial models made in China that cost only a few hundred dollars and are modified to carry homemade explosives.*

**Source:** "Gobierno colombiano invertirá más de 1.600 millones de dólares en un escudo antidrones (The Colombian government will invest more than $1.6 billion in an anti-drone shield)," *Infobae* (Argentine online media outlet with excellent regional coverage), 11 January 2026. https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2026/01/10/gobierno-colombiano-invertira-mas-de-1600-millones-de-dolares-en-un-escudo-antidrones/

*The Colombian government will invest more than six trillion pesos (about $1.615 billion) in the National Anti-Drone Shield project, a security strategy to combat the use of drones in criminal activities and protect both the civilian population and the public forces, the Ministry of Defense reported. 'Colombia is launching one of the boldest and most innovative strategies for our national security and defense. We will develop the National Anti-Drone Shield project,' stated Defense Minister Pedro Sánchez Suárez, presenting the initiative, which seeks to respond to what he described as a 'new challenge' for the country. The project seeks to strengthen airspace control against the use of drones by illegal armed organizations, such as guerrilla groups and criminal gangs.*

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Notes:

1 For more information on how drones have been deployed by Mexican and Colombian criminal groups, see: Ryan Berg, “Latin American Criminal Groups Increase Drone Use,” *OE Watch*, September 2025, https://g2webcontent.z2.web.core.usgovcloudapi.net/OEE/OE%20Watch/2025/16SEP2025_TRADOCG2_FMSO_OEW_Issue7_anonymous.pdf; see also Henry Ziemer, “Illicit Innovation: Latin America is Not Prepared to Fight Criminal Drones,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 11 June 2025. https://www.csis.org/analysis/illicit-innovation-latin-america-not-prepared-fight-criminal-drones

2 To understand how Latin American criminal organizations are adapting to the latest tactics in drone technology, see: Henry Ziemer, “The Future of Criminal Drone Use in Latin America,” *War on the Rock*s, 9 September 2025. https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/the-future-of-criminal-drone-use-in-latin-america/

3 The Commander of U.S. Northern Command admitted in recent congressional testimony that there may be more than one thousand drone incursions per month into the United States. See: Matthew Olay, “NORAD Commander: Incursions by Unmanned Aircraft Systems on Southern Border Likely Exceed 1,000 a Month,” U.S. Department of Defense, 14 March 2024. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3707785/norad-commander-incursions-by-unmanned-aircraft-systems-on-southern-border-like/. Also see: Henry Ziemer, “The United States Needs a Southwest Drone Wall,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 December 2025. https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-needs-southwest-drone-wall

# Israel's Somaliland Recognition Likely Deepens Saudi-Turkish-Egyptian Security Coordination in Horn of Africa

*By Lucas Winter*
*OE Watch Commentary*

Israel's official recognition of the breakaway republic of Somaliland last December is likely to deepen Saudi-Turkish-Egyptian security coordination in support of the Somali government, according to multiple Arabic-language media reports.[1]

As described in the first accompanying article, an opinion piece in Egypt's semi-official *al-Ahram*, the recognition of Somaliland "may push Egypt, Turkey, and perhaps Saudi Arabia into an 'alliance of necessity' to support the Somali federal government." This assessment is echoed by the accompanying excerpts. The second accompanying article, an opinion piece from *al-Jazeera*, points out how Israel's recognition of Somaliland is likely to accelerate Saudi-Turkish-Egyptian convergence on regional security. The third piece from Independent Arabia news report notes the emergence of a new security bloc "led by Saudi Arabia in coordination with Egypt, Turkey, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan." The fourth excerpt, from *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, points to growing security coordination between Cairo and Mogadishu. *Independent Arabia* further reports that the Saudi ambassador—accompanied by diplomatic delegations from Sudan, Turkey, and Egypt—recently traveled to northern Somalia, including Las Anod, a regional capital claimed by Somaliland and contested until 2023 but currently controlled by forces aligned with the Somali government.

Taken together, these developments suggest that Israel's recognition of Somaliland has accelerated a convergence of interests among Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt around supporting Somali territorial integrity, even in the absence of a formal alliance. While each actor approaches Somalia from a distinct strategic vantage point, they appear united in their concern that an Israeli-aligned independent Somaliland could unfavorably alter the Red Sea security environment and establish precedents with implications extending beyond Somalia.

**Source:** "تطور خطير» في القرن الإفريقي"»

"A dangerous development' in the Horn of Africa," *al-Ahram* (semi-official Egyptian daily), 29 December 2025. https://tinyurl.com/5kdf42nc

*Israel's recognition of Somaliland may push Egypt, Turkey, and perhaps Saudi Arabia into an "alliance of necessity" to support the Somali Federal Government by all means, especially with Ankara's military support for Mogadishu, and Cairo's efforts to prevent border changes that may inspire separatists in Sudan, at the hands of the Rapid Support Forces militia led by Hemedti, or in other countries in the region.*

**Source:** آثار اعتراف إسرائيل بإقليم أرض الصومال

"The Implications of Israel's Recognition of the Somaliland Region," *al-Jazeera* (Qatari media outlet), 16 January 2026. https://tinyurl.com/4nytfy7v

*Israel has taken a big step by making this decision, and no matter how confident it is about the reactions, it has unwittingly created an atmosphere conducive to strong alliances that could form in the near future to con-*

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*front this threat. Even before this step, regional understandings had emerged, involving Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, on important issues such as Gaza, Sudan, and Yemen. If this alliance is formed and expanded, the equation is expected to change in more than one country, such as Sudan, Yemen, and Libya, especially since more than twenty Arab and Islamic countries have issued a statement rejecting the Israeli move.*

**Source:** "الاقتراب عن بُعد: هل تكسر مصر سياسة الحذر في القرن الأفريقي؟"

"Engagement from a Distance: Is Egypt Breaking Its Policy of Caution in the Horn of Africa?" *Independent Arabia* (Saudi-owned independent daily), 19 January 2025. https://tinyurl.com/hebhvju5

*However, there are indications that Egypt may abandon its old policies in the face of growing threats to its national security. While reports indicate that Saudi Arabia is working to establish a new military alliance that includes both Egypt and Somalia, the Saudi ambassador, accompanied by a Sudanese, Turkish and Egyptian delegation, visited northern Somalia on Saturday, where the Somali president is located. Last Friday, he visited Las Anod, the regional capital disputed with the Somaliland region.*

*According to an informed Egyptian source, there is an Egyptian openness to the alliance. With the Red Sea becoming an arena for reshaping geopolitical balances, the scene is now governed by new equations led by Saudi Arabia in coordination with Egypt, Turkey, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan. This bloc has crystallized through a growing network of maritime agreements and military coordination mechanisms, aiming to encircle the Ethiopian-Israeli axis. While Cairo signed joint defense agreements with both Somalia and Sudan in 2025, Halima points to "cooperation closer to an alliance in positions, orientations, and military cooperation between Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia, and perhaps Djibouti as well."*

**Source:** "اعتراف إسرائيل بـ«أرض الصومال» يعزز التنسيق العسكري بين القاهرة ومقديشو"

"Israel's Recognition of 'Somaliland' Strengthens Military Coordination Between Cairo and Mogadishu," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (prominent Saudi daily), 16 January 2026. https://tinyurl.com/2rzms8va

*Military expert Major General Samir Farag stressed that the Israeli threat in "Somaliland" requires strengthening military cooperation with Somalia, and that Cairo is primarily focused on training and equipping Somali forces to ensure the full extension of state sovereignty over Somali lands, noting that cooperation and coordination has been ongoing since 2024, not just now.*

Notes:

1 For a recent update on deepening Turkish-Egyptian military cooperation, see: "Increasing Turkish-Egyptian Defense Cooperation Could Shift Regional Security Dynamics," *OE Watch*, Issue 1, 2026. https://g2webcontent.z2.web.core.usgovcloudapi.net/OEE/OE%20Watch/2026/T2COM_OEW01_2026_anonymous.pdf; Bloomberg has also reported on purported talks between Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Somalia, to form a "military coalition." See: "Saudi Arabia in Talks With Egypt, Somalia on Military Coalition," *Bloomberg*, 16 January 2026. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-01-16/saudi-arabia-in-talks-with-egypt-somalia-on-military-coalition

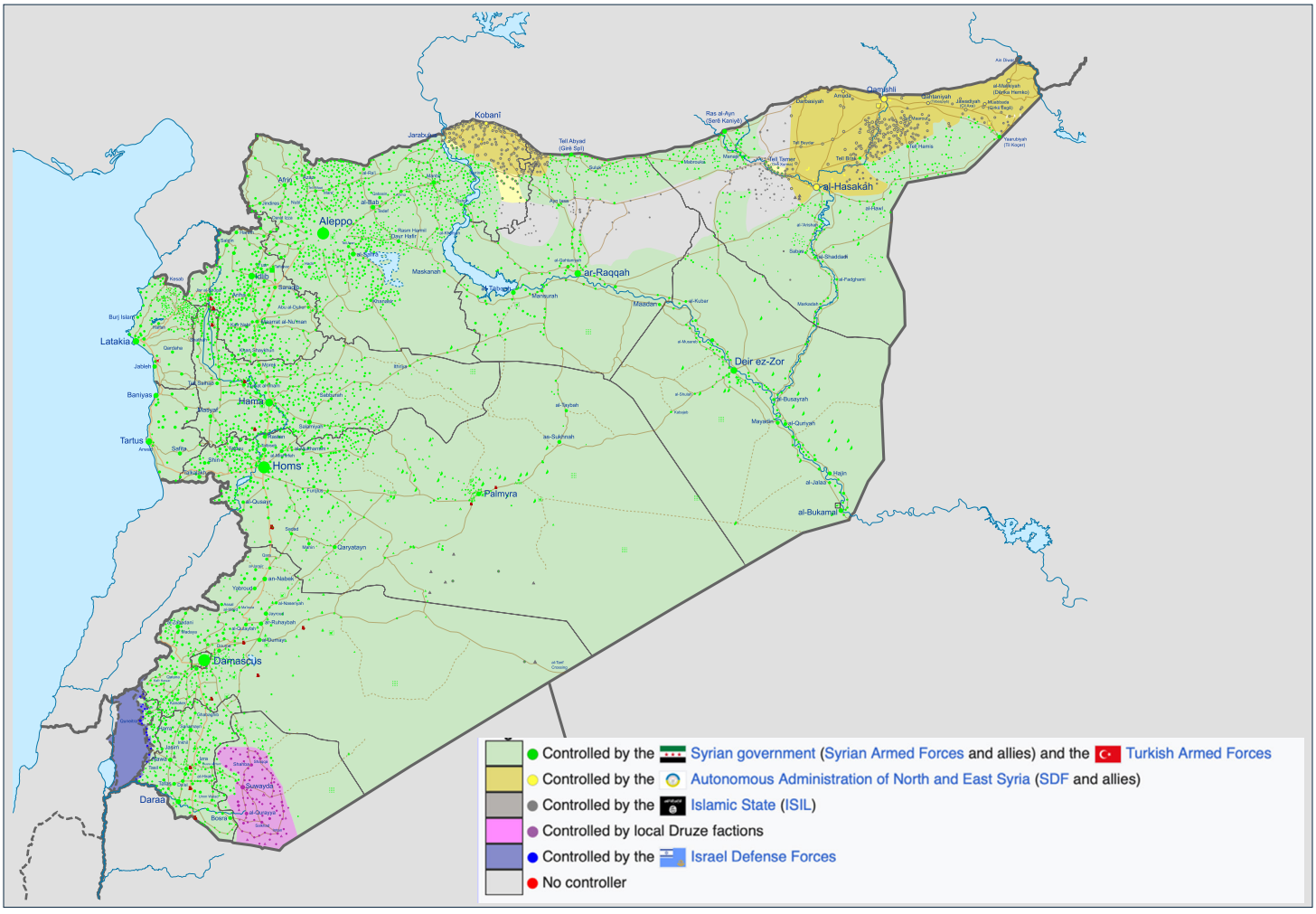
# Syria Faces Military and Security Challenges One Year After Assad's Fall

*By Lucas Winter*
*OE Watch Commentary*

One year after the fall of the Assad regime, Syria's military and security landscape remains in flux. According to two recent articles authored by a Qatari-based Syrian analyst from the independent Lebanese news website *al-Modon*, Syria's landscape is one in which authority is intentionally decentralized and negotiated to manage immediate risks. As the author describes it, the landscape is in "a phase of dissection and diagnosis, not reconstruction."

The first of the two articles, written on 8 December 2025, examines the evolving organization of the new Syrian military, which has divided the country into military regions overseen by deputy ministers of defense, many with "factional backgrounds."[1] While this move was intended as a temporary, transitional measure to restore control and prevent chaos in the aftermath of the downfall of Assad, *al-Modon* warns that this arrangement risks solidifying into permanent military fiefdoms if not accompanied by clear accountability mechanisms and doctrinal reform. The central challenge, the author argues, lies in redefining loyalty away from

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Map of territorial control in the Syrian civil war (as of January 2026).
*(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_Civil_War_map.svg)*

factional or personal ties and toward loyalty to the state and military chain of command.

The second article, written on 23 December 2025, emphasizes how economic dynamics continue to shape Syria's security outcomes. It describes an entrenched "economy of security information," in which informants and intermediaries trade intelligence to multiple actors to consolidate influence or settle local disputes. As a result, the author argues, security decisions are shaped less by unified assessment than by competing narratives. Weapons proliferation follows a similar logic: the arms trade has become an economy, rendering disarmament as much an economic challenge as a security one.

Together, these articles suggest that Syria's central challenge in the period ahead—if it is to remain a unified state—will be reconstituting a coherent system of central authority in which force structure, intelligence, and disarmament are governed by coherent doctrine rather than negotiated power, factional loyalty, or economic necessity.

***"The year between the fall of the regime and today reveals that Syria is not in a phase of reconstruction, but rather one of dissection and diagnosis."***

**Source:**

"سوريا عسكرياً وأمنياً بعد الأسد: مرحلة تشريح لا بناء"

"Syria Military and Security-Wise After Assad: A Phase of Dissection, Not Construction," *al-Modon* (independent Lebanese daily), 8 December 2025. https://tinyurl.com/39cm3ut5

*Consequently, every step toward redeployment or disarmament became a negotiation between local power centers, former military commanders, tribal leaders, and external actors. This resulted in a multi-layered military structure with a central core that the state sought to strengthen to secure the capital and sovereign institutions; a broad belt of local units granted temporary legal cover with the hope of gradual integration; and a chaotic periphery operating outside any institutional control, reproducing itself according to a logic of profit and loss and the fragile security situation in the outlying areas…*

*The arms trade had become an economy in its own right, with local traders, brokers, and liaison officers, making the disarmament file more related to the economy than to security… In this context, the economy of security information has become the most traded currency, with the emergence of networks of informants, influential figures, and intermediaries who provide information to multiple agencies, and sometimes to external entities. They use this information to settle local scores or to consolidate political or security influence. This has led to the creation of a complex security environment in which central state agencies compete with parallel agencies belonging to local factions, and with networks linked to Israel, Iran, or Arab parties. As a result, security decisions are not based on unified information, but rather on conflicting narratives...*

*The year between the fall of the regime and today reveals that Syria is not in a phase of reconstruction, but rather one of dissection and diagnosis. The new state is still dismantling a heavy security and military legacy, dealing with armed actors who have become part of the social fabric, and facing external interventions that are reshaping the rules of engagement from the south to the east. Therefore, controlling weapons, building a unified security doctrine, and determining who has the monopoly on defining the enemy and the threat remain unresolved variables. Indeed, they are at the heart of the state-building process that will continue in the coming years and may well determine the shape of Syria's political and security system for the next decade.*

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**Source:** "بناء الجيش السوري: إعادة الهيكلة ومعضلة التحول المؤسسي"

"Building the Syrian Army: Restructuring and the Dilemma of Institutional Transformation," *al-Modon* (independent Lebanese daily), 23 December 2025. https://tinyurl.com/39f2a4am

*The Syrian Ministry of Defense's decision to appoint deputies to the Minister of Defense, each responsible for a specific military region, represents a significant step in the reorganization of the military establishment following the fall of the Assad regime. This decision cannot be interpreted as a routine administrative procedure, but rather as a deliberate attempt to redistribute military authority on the ground and regulate the relationship between the central command and the periphery in a country just emerging from widespread security collapse. Instead of relying on a centralized command burdened by the details of various fronts, a model was adopted that distributes executive responsibilities among deputies, each overseeing a specific geographical sector, while remaining subject to the strategic decisions issued by the Ministry of Defense.*

*This arrangement demonstrates an early awareness of the limitations of rigid centralization during a transitional phase, where security challenges vary from region to region, ranging from border control and confronting remnants of factions or irregulavr networks to managing relations with local communities. Furthermore, the selection of figures with factional backgrounds and field experience for these positions reflects the new leadership's reliance on the legitimacy of control as a temporary tool for re-establishing discipline in the absence of a fully structured, professional military apparatus…*

*The division of the country into military zones can be considered a transitional measure imposed by the post-conflict phase, where the priority is restoring control and preventing chaos, rather than building a fully-fledged military model. However, the danger lies in this division transforming from a temporary organizational tool into a permanent structure that reproduces the logic of military fiefdoms, if it is not accompanied by clear mechanisms for accountability, leadership rotation, and linking field performance to rigorous central evaluation.*

Notes:

1 In this context, "factional backgrounds" refers to commanders who previously held leadership roles in opposition armed groups formed during the Syrian conflict, rather than officers developed through pre-war state military institutions.

# Kazakhstan Establishes Unit To Counter Drone Threats

*By Matthew Stein*
*OE Watch Commentary*

In 2025, there were several notable incidents of Ukrainian and Russian drones straying into Kazakhstan's territory and crashing.[1] In October 2025, for instance, one of these drones exploded near a village in Western Kazakhstan, though no casualties were reported.[2] In response, Kazakhstan has created a new unit to protect against external drones.

> ***"We have created mobile air defense groups and placed helicopters and fighter jets on alert."***

The accompanying excerpted article from the news website *Fergana Agency* reports that Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defense has recently created mobile air defense groups and put rotary and fixed-wing aircraft on alert to better protect the country's airspace against drones, following multiple incursions in the past year. The article notes that the creation of the unit to defend against drones comes alongside Kazakhstan's establishment of operational communications with neighboring states. To date, Kazakhstan has not reported that it has shot down any Russian or Ukrainian drones, with most such external drones appearing to have crashed due to other circumstances. Moreover, despite Kazakhstan's wariness of them, Ukrainian and Russian drones entering Kazakhstan do not appear to have yet caused any major diplomatic issues.[3]



The West Kazakhstan Oblast, highlighted in red, is one of the closest regions of Kazakhstan to the war in Ukraine. *(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:West_Kazakhstan_Region_in_Kazakhstan.png)*

**Source:** "В Казахстане создали подвижные группы ПВО для защиты от дронов (Mobile air defense units for protection against drones have been created in Kazakhstan)," *Fergana Agency* (news website reporting on Central Asia), 20 November 2025. https://fergana.agency/news/143012/

*Kazakhstan has taken measures to protect itself from drones flying into the country. Defense Minister Dauren Kosanov announced this on the sidelines of the Senate, Kazinform reports.*

*"We have taken preventative measures. We have created mobile air defense groups and placed helicopters and fighter jets on alert. We have also established operational communications with neighboring states," Kosanov said.*

*Reporters asked if it was known where the drones that crashed in Kazakhstan had come from. Kosanov replied that they were "coming from countries where there is a military conflict,"...*

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Notes:

1 The drones have included a variety of reconnaissance types, though one photograph of a crashed drone appeared to be a Shahed loitering munition, see: "Беспилотник снова упал на территорию ЗКО (A drone has again fallen on the territory of the Western Kazakhstan Oblast)," *Uralskaya Nedelya*, 18 March 2025. https://www.uralskweek.kz/2025/03/18/bespilotnik-snova-upal-na-territoriyu-zko/

2 The drone exploded in the West Kazakhstan Oblast, where most of the drones that have strayed from the war in Ukraine have crashed. The drone reportedly had markings in Ukrainian, though it was unclear what caused the explosion, see: Zarina Fayzulina, "Debris Resembling Drone Found in West Kazakhstan Region," *Orda*, 23 October 2025. https://en.orda.kz/debris-resembling-drone-found-in-west-kazakhstan-region-8955/

3 While stray drones crashing in Kazakhstan have not caused diplomatic issues, a Ukrainian drone strike on a single point mooring in the Black Sea outside the port of Novorossiysk, Russia caused a diplomatic dispute between Ukraine and Kazakhstan. While the infrastructure belonged to Russia, around 80 percent of Kazakhstan's oil exports flow through the port of Novorossiysk. The damage to the single point mooring will cost tens of millions of U.S. dollars to repair and will limit Kazakhstan's oil exports to Europe for several months, see: Oksana Matvienko, "Kazakhstan Condemns CPC Terminal Strike, Warns Incident Damages Ties With Ukraine," *Orda*, 30 November 2025. https://en.orda.kz/kazakhstan-condemns-cpc-terminal-strike-warns-incident-damages-ties-with-ukraine-9479/

# Pakistan Transforms Its Military Command Structure

*By Matthew Stein*
*OE Watch Commentary*

In December 2025, Pakistan eliminated the position of the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee and appointed the Chief of the Army Staff, Field Marshal Asim Munir, as the country's first Chief of Defense Forces (CDF). Pakistan established the CDF as part of an amendment passed by parliament in November 2025. The CDF has command over all branches of Pakistan's armed forces, with Field Marshal Asim Munir simultaneously serving as Chief of the Army staff and the CDF.[1]

> ***"The prime minister approved the summary for the appointment of Field Marshal Munir as the chief of army staff and the chief of defense force."***

The accompanying excerpted article from Pakistan's English-language newspaper *Dawn* looks at the impact of the CDF. First, the article notes how Field Marshal Munir's appointment to the CDF resets his tenure as Chief of the Army Staff for another five years. Munir had already served three of five years as Chief of the Army Staff when he became the CDF. The article notes that the recent amendment establishing the CDF also allows the government of Pakistan to appoint Munir as CDF for a second term and potentially remain in the position until December 2035.[2]

Perhaps just as significant as the CDF taking control over all three branches of the armed forces, the amendment that established the CDF also created a new four-star position as commander of the National Strategic Command (NSC). The NSC will ostensibly replace the National Command Authority, which has control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. The article states that the new NSC commander will be appointed by the prime minister on the recommendation of the CDF.[3] The government claimed that establishing the CDF would modernize the armed forces and have them better prepared for future conflicts through a unified command. In sum, the change provides Pakistan's army with significant influence over the other branches of the armed forces and will allow Pakistan's army to have greater influence over the country's nuclear strategy and management of the nuclear arsenal.



Official 2025 portrait of Field Marshal Asim Muni, Pakistan's first Chief of Defence Forces (CDF). *(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Field_Marshal_Asim_Munir.jpg)*

**Source:** Syed Irfan Raza and Malik Asad, "President appoints Field Marshal Munir as country's first chief of defence forces," *Dawn* (English-language newspaper in Pakistan), 4 December 2025. https://www.dawn.com/news/1959173

*Chief of the Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir was appointed Pakistan's first chief of defence forces (CDF) on Thursday after President Asif Ali Zardari signed off on the summary recommending the appointment…*

*The CDF position, created under the 27th Constitutional Amendment, will replace the now-abolished office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) chairman, which formally ended on November 27. It would be a dual-hatted position combined with the office of the army chief…*

*According to a statement released by the Prime Minister's Office, the premier said that the appointment of the chief of defence Forces is aligned with contemporary and modern warfare requirements and will further strengthen the country's defence…*

*The prime minister approved the summary for the appointment of Field Marshal Munir "as the chief of army staff and the chief of defence forces,"…Field Marshal Munir's appointment for both roles is for a period of five years, the statement said…*

*In the wake of the 27th Amendment, the ruling coalition made certain changes to the Pakistan Army Act 1952 (PAA), resetting Field Marshal Munir's tenure as the COAS upon his appointment as the CDF.*

*A pending decision is the appointment of the commander of the National Strategic Command (NSC), a new four-star position created to assume the nuclear manager role previously exercised by CJCSC.*

*Officials believe this appointment will be made only after the CDF notification is issued.*

*The NSC commander will be appointed by the prime minister on the recommendation of the COAS "concurrently the chief of defence forces", as per the now-amended Article 243 of the Constitution.*

*Meanwhile, the National Command Authority Act, which pertains to the command and control of strategic assets, still requires amendment to reflect the abolition of the CJCSC and the emergence of the CDF and NSC commander under Article 243.*

*The changes are expected to be complex, particularly regarding the placement of the new posts relative to the Pakistan Air Force and Pakistan Navy chiefs and whether the air force and navy heads will retain representation in the NCA once their strategic commands are subsumed under a unified NSC commander…*

Notes:

1 Whereas the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee did not have command over Pakistan's army, navy, and air force, which was previously held by a separate branch chief, the CDF has command over all three branches. For more historical context on the transition from the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee to the CDF, see: Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Analysis: One chief to rule all military services," *Dawn*, 9 November 2025. https://www.dawn.com/news/1954032

2 Even prior to being appointed CDF, Munir was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal in May 2025 following clashes with India. Munir became only the second person in the history of Pakistan to become Field Marshal, equivalent to a five-star general officer. Munir's promotion to Field Marshal took place alongside his increasing involvement in economic and government affairs, see: Kashif Imran, "Pakistan army chief General Asim Munir promoted to field marshal," *Arab News*, 20 May 2025. https://www.arabnews.com/node/2601487/pakistan

3 For a brief explanation of the change from the National Command Authority to the National Strategic Command, see: Rahul Bedi, "How the 27th Amendment Shifts Pakistan Army's Military Control Over Nuclear Weapons," *The Wire*, 21 November 2025. https://thewire.in/security/how-the-27th-amendment-shifts-pakistan-armys-military-control-over-nuclear-weapons