

Terrorism Monitor

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Islamic State in Greater Sahara Escalates Attacks Against al-Qaeda's Sahelian Affiliate

Jacob Zenn

Since Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)'s August 10 attack in Tessit, Mali that killed 42 soldiers, the group has been resurgent after a period of relatively few attacks. ISGS has ceded contested territories where they have been operating to the al-Qaeda-affiliated rival, Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) (lemonde.fr, August 10). Despite the struggles of Islamic State (IS) in its "core" territories in Syria and Iraq and its inability to get resources to ISGS or other

provinces, ISGS's Tessit attack was one of its most sophisticated since its partnership with IS began in 2015. This is because the ISGS attack involved the coordinated use of drones, explosives, car bombs, and artillery, which defies notions that ISGS has been debilitated by either JNIM or regional armies (aljazeera.com, August 11). ([Twitter.com/@calibreobscura](https://twitter.com/calibreobscura), July 18).

Seizing on its momentum against the Malian army, ISGS followed through with a series of subsequent attacks against JNIM in Gao (garda.com, September 10). Unlike in 2020 when JNIM gained the upper hand against ISGS through a combination of raids on ISGS bases and pressure on ISGS

from French forces, which declared ISGS the top security threat in Africa in January 2020, this time ISGS killed more JNIM soldiers than vice-versa. Moreover, ISGS pilfered a wide array of guns, ammunition, and vehicles from JNIM, which will further bolster the ISGS arsenal ([Twitter/@calibreobscura](https://twitter.com/calibreobscura), November 3).

In October, ISGS continued carrying out attacks throughout Menaka (rfi.fr, October 10). Despite this, JNIM regrouped and retook the town of Tamalate from ISGS by the end of October (imangahdien.com, October 29). ISGS's military resurgence was necessary for JNIM to thwart, as well as the perception that ISGS, and therefore IS, was returning to previous form. Thus, JNIM needed to put to rest any suggestions that ISGS might eclipse JNIM itself (journaldumali.com, November 3). To further reiterate the successful counteroffensive, JNIM issued claims of attacks on ISGS that, according to JNIM, killed "dozens" of ISGS fighters ([Twitter/@menastream](https://twitter.com/menastream), November 1). This was rare for JNIM, which usually does not highlight combat with ISGS and historically had expressed interest in coexisting with ISGS after the group's formation.

IS has increasingly been relying on its African provinces to showcase their remaining global strength, especially with the Southeast Asian provinces weakened and others, such as in Yemen, North Africa, and the Caucasus, defunct or virtually extinct (Terrorism Monitor, November 4). ISGS, which is officially known as IS's Sahel Province is, therefore, now accompanying Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria as well as other IS provinces in Africa as a highlight of their global campaigns. While ISGS's recent resurgence has been surprising, it is likely to continue given the apparent lack

of interest the Malian armed forces are showing towards ISGS. The Malian military regime which came to power by a coup in 2021 are still deflecting attention from their own counter-terrorism failings by blaming France for allegedly backing ISGS (voaafrique.com, October 25). If anything, the main rival holding ISGS back will not be Malian or other regional armies, but its jihadist rival, JNIM.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Sweden Reassures Turkey Concerning Pledge to Prevent PKK Attacks

Jacob Zenn

On November 8, Sweden's new prime minister, Ulf Kristersson, visited Ankara and met with Turkish President Recep Erdoğan and confirmed the country's pledge to "counter terrorism and terrorist organizations like the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] in Sweden" (euronews.com, November 8). Some evidence suggests that Sweden is matching its words with actions. In August, for example, Sweden rejected the asylum application of a PKK member who had been in the country for eight years on grounds that he was a "security threat" and deported him back to Turkey. This occurred only days after Sweden extradited another Turkish citizen back to Turkey, who had been accused by the Turkish authorities of committing various financial crimes (dailysabah.com, August 19). Despite these moves to assuage Turkish concerns, Turkey still claims there are 33 terrorists in Sweden and Finland which those countries

refuse to extradite (turkiyegazetisi.com, August 4).

Pressure on Turkey to admit Sweden into NATO has come from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who met with President Erdoğan in Istanbul on November 4 (nato.int, November 3). Stoltenberg reminded Erdoğan of the Permanent Joint Mechanism by which Sweden and Finland would “strengthen counter-terrorism legislation,” including exchanging information with Turkey on counter-terrorism (dailysabah.com, November 6). The day before meeting with Erdoğan, Stoltenberg had also urged Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to accept Sweden’s and Finland’s plea to join NATO to “send a clear message to Russia” about launching any further military aggression.

The most relevant question regarding Sweden’s accession to NATO, therefore, seems to be whether Turkey will offer its approval if Sweden follows through with its crackdown on the PKK and its Syrian affiliates. Erdoğan stated that the approval would come depending on how fast Sweden follows through with its promises (france24.com, April 11). In addition, according to Çavuşoğlu’s statements earlier this year, once Sweden has demonstrated that it has eliminated the PKK and PKK-affiliated activities in its territory, Sweden and other NATO countries would also have to end their arms embargo against Turkey (dailysabah.com, July 4).

The PKK issue is also an unsettled domestic political issue in Sweden, which risks upsetting the current expectations of Turkey. Sweden’s Social Democrat Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson has asserted that her party will not form an

alliance with the Left Party because of its relationships with the PKK (euractiv.com, August 26). Given Andersson’s success in the last election, Sweden was able to move forward with NATO succession based on the mutual understanding with Turkey. However, if the political climate in Sweden should change in the future, it may once again jeopardize relations with Turkey and, therefore, NATO. Further, the latest PKK attack in Istanbul, which killed six people and resulted in Turkey accusing the U.S of “complicity” will only further Turkey’s resoluteness to see Sweden, Finland, and other allied NATO countries fully renounce and disassociate themselves from the PKK or else risk undermining the succession process entirely (aljazeera.com, November 14).

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Profiling *Ang Bayan*: The Official Newspaper of the Philippines’ Communist Insurgency

Lucas Webber

The Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA) is a nationwide movement comprised of a trans-provincial web of regional and local branches. To keep its leadership, fighters, and supporters up to date on the latest narratives and news developments, the group publishes a newspaper covering militant activity, political happenings, critiques of government and security force actions, and more. This CPP newspaper *Ang Bayan* (“The People”) has been in publication for more than 50 years and remains central to the Communist insurgent and associated activist movement in the Philippines until this day.

To reach its various linguistic target audience segments, issues are published in Filipino and then translated into Bisaya, Iloko, Hiligaynon, Waray, English, and Spanish ([PRWC](#), 2019). The CPP, NPA, and National Democratic Front (NDF) each contribute to the bimonthly newspaper, which is released on the 7th and 21st of each month, with occasional special issues ([Manila Times](#), September 19). The paper functions as a unifying force for the CPP's diverse ethnolinguistic member and supporter base, while providing cues about the movement's political and militant trajectory.

Ang Bayan's Background

Lucia Palpal-latoc Tangi, the journalist and professor, in her history of the newspaper, wrote: "Due to the pivotal role of the press in revolutions, the Communist Party of the Philippines released its official publication *Ang Bayan* just months after it was re-established on December 26, 1968" ([josemariasison.org](#), 2017). She described how the publication was founded by CPP founding chairperson Jose Maria Sison using only a few typewriters and a mimeograph machine to produce the first issue on May 1, 1969. She also noted that *Ang Bayan* became "the CPP's propagandist, agitator, and organizer" and "was instrumental to establish and to maintain party unity and to popularize Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideals."

Ang Bayan was exclusively produced and disseminated as a physical copy until it began to be published on the NDF's website in 1998 and then on its own website in 1999. Hard copies of the newspaper continue to be distributed mostly in parts of the countryside where there is little to no access to electricity ([josemariasison.org](#), 2017). Further, *Ang Bayan* maintains a social media presence on Twitter and a tabbed section on the Philippine Revolutionary Web Portal where its past issues are archived and its new ones are posted and made available in PDF, EPUB, and MOBI formats ([Twitter/@angbayan1969](#), November 8).

The paper also accepts articles and news item submissions, and it has an interactive aspect to it with readers being encouraged to send feedback and suggestions on how to improve the publication ([Ang Bayan](#), October 21).

In addition to its bimonthly newspaper publications, *Ang Bayan* produces daily news and analysis content and provides commentary on its social media accounts ([PRWC](#), November 16). Aside from print materials, *Ang Bayan* also releases video and audio content ([PRWC](#), November 7). This includes news roundups covering the most important weekly events in short two-minute video summations ([Twitter/@angbayan1969](#), November 15). The CPP's media, including its newspaper, is amplified by sympathetic propaganda platforms, such as Red Spark, which supports Communist rebel and dissident groups around the world ranging from Brazil to the Philippines ([Red Spark](#), October 10, 2016).

Ang Bayan's Critique of the Marcos Government

Naturally, the CPP-NPA has weaponized *Ang Bayan* to take aim at the new President of the Philippines Ferdinand Marcos Jr., his administration, and the security forces serving the new government ([PRWC](#), November 11). The *Ang Bayan* media team launched a propaganda offensive against Marcos Jr. during his election campaign and has continued to critique his policies since he assumed the presidency ([Ang Bayan](#), May 7). Just before election day, for example, *Ang Bayan* declared that "Democracy- and freedom-loving people are called upon to unite and take to the streets to manifest their determination to stop the return of the Marcoses to power and prevent the extension of Duterte's reign" ([Ang Bayan](#), May 7).

The election of Marcos Jr. was a highly galvanizing event, given how his father's policies, and particularly his declaration of martial law in the early 1970s, helped fuel the early stage of the armed Communist

rebellion in the Philippines ([Twitter/@NDFevisayas](#), April 24, 2019). To the CPP, the Marcos family represents a political dynasty that is hostile to the interests of the Philippine people. Further, it is considered to be a powerful force backing imperialism and an anti-democratic system of governance ([Militant Wire](#), August 16).

The CPP-NPA has since continued its laser-focused campaign to undermine and delegitimize the new Marcos government. *Ang Bayan* pushes narratives about the Marcos government committing war crimes, corruption, ceding sovereignty to the United States, exploiting workers, and cracking down on unions ([Ang Bayan](#), November 7). The CPP likewise chastises the armed forces by calling them the “#1 recruiters of the NPA” due to their alleged brutality ([Twitter/@prwc_info3](#), November 14).

Conclusion

Ang Bayan remains a pillar of the CPP-NPA’s media warfare campaign against the government, military, and police forces. The insurgent movement’s propaganda apparatus has proven durable and adaptable to all conditions, including the recently intensified pressure from the armed forces and police forces ([Philippine News Agency](#), August 10). This is evidenced by the longevity of the newspaper and its punctuality in publishing on a bimonthly basis.

As the Philippine government and security forces seek to degrade the Communist rebels, they will most certainly target those involved with *Ang Bayan*’s production. This is because of how fundamentally important the publication is to keep geographically disparate Communist insurgent networks on the same page informationally and narratively. Further, the publication has been, and continues to be, a central prong in the CPP-NPA’s propaganda efforts to attack and undermine the government.

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ISKP’s Evolving Propaganda Against Chinese Imperialism

Abdul Basit

Following trends of heightened U.S-China great power competition, the narratives of global jihadist groups are morphing simultaneously. After 9/11, the U.S was at the receiving end of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS)’s propaganda. However, in the context of the U.S-China global rivalry, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) is increasing its focus on Beijing and even going so far as to move beyond the routine anti-China critique. Unlike its ideological critique of China’s repression of the Uyghur Muslim community in China’s western Xinjiang province, ISKP has now turned its attention to political and economic criticism of Chinese “imperialism” ([Voice of Khorasan](#), September 2). This is a reference to Beijing’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to connect Asia with Europe and Africa ([China Daily](#), May 10, 2017).

ISKP’s Magazine and China

The September issue of ISKP’s monthly English-language propaganda magazine, *Voice of Khorasan*, published an article titled “China’s Daydream of Imperialism,” which focused on Beijing’s growing global economic footprint ([Voice of Khorasan](#), September 2). ISKP believes that the global rivalries of the U.S with China regarding Taiwan and with Russia regarding Ukraine can pave the way for the rise of Islamic State (IS)’s self-styled global Sunni Caliphate. In the article, ISKP, for example, maintains that unlike the U.S, which accumulated global influence through its political and military prowess,

China is using its economic resources to spread its global influence. ISKP compares China's BRI with British imperialism, which spread in the Indian Subcontinent through the infamous East India Company ([Global Times](#), October 26).

In the article, ISKP also contends that China's rise as a global power will be short-lived because it lacks a decisive military or technological edge over the West. Rather than comparing China to the West's multi-century dominance, ISKP states China's rise to the global prominence will be like the 13th Century Mongols' Silk Road-based empire, which lasted for a relatively short time of slightly more than 100 years. ([Voice of Khorasan](#), September 2). Further, the article cites recent examples of Chinese companies' closure in Mozambique due to IS-affiliated jihadists' threats ([fides.org](#), June 23). ISKP's threats to China are not empty. In 2017, the group abducted and killed a Chinese couple in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province, where the multi-billion-dollar mega infrastructure project, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is located ([Dawn](#), October 30, 2017).

China in the ISKP-Taliban Rivalry

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, ISKP has emerged as the main anti-China jihadist group in the country ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 16). ISKP's anti-China propaganda initially focused on an ideological critique of Uyghur oppression in Xinjiang, but is now expanding to a critique of China's expanding economic footprint. This change has two key purposes. First, ISKP, and by extension IS, is already positioning itself to stay relevant with changing global geopolitical trends and to exploit the possible openings that such narratives will offer. Second, ISKP seeks to poach disgruntled Uyghur militants from the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Afghanistan into its fold, especially as both the Taliban and al-Qaeda are silent on China's human rights violations in Xinjiang province ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 16,

2021). In doing so, ISKP is, therefore, also trying to create a rift between the Taliban's de-facto regime in Afghanistan and TIP.

Soon after assuming power in Afghanistan, the Taliban relocated TIP militants from northern Badakhshan province near the China-Afghanistan border to central Afghanistan to address China's security concerns ([Gandhara](#), October 4, 2021). Some TIP militants who were angry with the Taliban's ignorance toward Chinese repression returned to Badakhshan this year and recreated their sanctuaries. To exploit strained ties between the Taliban and TIP, an ISKP delegation reportedly met with TIP operatives and managed to win over the loyalties of around 50 Uyghur militants. The ISKP suicide bomber Muhammad al-Uyghuri, who targeted a Shia Mosque last October in northern Afghanistan's Kunduz province, for example, was a former TIP militant ([Tolo News](#), October 15, 2021). ISKP used this ethnic Uyghur suicide bomber to showcase that it has successfully recruited Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. While claiming responsibility for that attack, ISKP also maintained that the attack was against the Shia community and the Taliban regime for expelling Uyghurs on China's demand ([Pak Institute for Peace Studies](#), September 29). In sum, the more the Taliban restrict TIP militants to accord with China's demands and the longer ISKP continues to exploit China's treatment of the Uyghurs, the higher the chances are of TIP militants gravitating towards ISKP.

Conclusion

As the U.S-China global rivalry intensifies, Beijing will feature more prominently in global jihadist propaganda. ISKP needs an arch-nemesis to justify its violence and fuel its recruitment and fundraising campaigns. For the last three decades, U.S interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were the driving factors behind global jihadist groups' propaganda and narratives. In the era of great power competition, Chinese "imperialism" through the BRI is now becoming the focus of groups like ISKP.

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Islamic State's Shiraz Attack Provokes Narrative War with Iran and al-Qaeda

Rami Jameel

On October 26, gunmen opened fire at the Shia shrine of Shah Geragh in the Iranian city of Shiraz, killing and injuring dozens of people. Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack shortly afterwards (arabi21.com, October 26). This was the third major attack inside Iran in recent years for which IS claimed responsibility. However, the way both IS and Iran dealt with the attack raised critical questions about the complexities of Sunni-Shia conflicts in the Middle East.

Iran is clearly the main Shia powerhouse in the Middle East. Despite years of Sunni-Shia violence across the region, especially in neighboring Iraq and in Syria, where Iran has been fighting to support the Alawite Shia president Bashar al-Assad, Iran has experienced few attacks on its own territory. However, the Shiraz attack occurred in parallel with a major political crisis in Iran. Public protests have spread across the country since the death of Mahsa Amini, an Iranian Kurdish woman, in police custody. She had been arrested for not abiding by the strict head and body covering rules imposed by Iran's Islamist government since 1979 (iranintl.com, October 26).

The Shiraz attack also came as a reminder of how important it is to have a closer look at the propaganda used by parties of Middle Eastern conflicts. Ambiguity around some aspects of the attack and both IS's and Iran's propaganda have caused confusion. This article highlights the controversy regarding the conflicting messages surrounding the Shiraz attack within the context of the different positions about Iran held by IS and its rival, al-Qaeda.

Ambiguity on IS's Claim of Responsibility

The first IS claim of responsibility for the Shiraz attack appeared on the group's semi-official Amaq media agency. However, the language of this first claim was starkly different from IS's usual anti-Shia language because it used the neutral term "Shia" instead of the derogatory term "Rawafidh" or "Rafidha," which means "rejecters" and is what most jihadists and other anti-Shia ideologues usually use (i24news.tv, October 26). The shrine was also described with a neutral term like "Marqad," which simply refers to a tomb.

The condemnation and hatred that jihadists in IS and al-Qaeda hold against the Shia notion of glorifying and honoring shrines is also part of the Sunni Salafi faith. A shrine in jihadists' frame of reference is usually described as a "Ma'abad," which means a "temple" in a way that equates it with non-Muslim houses of worship. After the Amaq claim, IS's second statement on the Shiraz attack was fully consistent with IS's own and other jihadists' typical anti-Shia language. The contrast between the language in IS's first and second claims leads to confusion about the nature of IS's Shiraz attack.

Analyzing the language is critically important in this context. Parties to conflicts in the region are known for their controversial propaganda strategies that employ misinformation and disinformation through the use of language. Iran and its allies in the Middle East have long employed conspiracy theories to accuse the U.S of working with Sunni jihadist groups like IS or any group that opposes the Iranian government. Iran, meanwhile, also accused IS of launching the Shiraz attack itself, but it placed it in a wider context that included accusing the U.S, foreign powers, and Iranian protesters of being involved in destabilizing Iran through the Shiraz attack (sputnikarabic.ae, November 8).

Explaining the Initial Contradictory Statements

The reason behind IS's initial contradictory statements is most likely the immense pressure under which the group is operating. As a result of the U.S-led campaign in Syria and Iraq between 2014-2019, the group has lost all the territory it once controlled in those two countries. It also lost many of its commanders, media operatives, and foot soldiers. IS media platforms might have suffered the results of these depleted resources.

As for Iran, its government is well known for promoting its own conspiracy theories which are essential in its discourse. In its propaganda, there is always some kind of a pact between all its perceived enemies despite their differences. The funeral for those who were killed in the Shiraz attack was a government-orchestrated demonstration against the West and the anti-government protest movement with very little condemnation paid to IS at all. The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),

General Hussein Salami, addressed the crowds and condemned the U.S, UK, Israel, and Saudi Arabia for conspiring against Iran. (almayadeen.net, October 29).

In the context of Iranian domestic affairs, the Shiraz attack also occurred on the culturally significant 40th day after the death of Mahsa Amini. That day presented another opportunity for protesters to revive their movement around the symbolic cause of Amini and, more broadly, women's rights. Some in the protest movement did not put it past the Iranian government to employ such an attack as part of its own strategy to repress the protests. The government, for example, has described the protesters as agents of a U.S and Western conspiracy (alaraby.co.uk, October 27). Considering the ongoing protests sparked by Amini's death, it seems Iran could not use the Shiraz attack to rally its Shia majority population behind the government. Conservative hardliners, however, control almost all branches of government. Their main strategy to deal with protests has been to simply use force and intimidation.

With the recurrence of attacks on Iranian soil as exemplified by the Shiraz attack, Iran has become exposed to jihadists like its neighbors and the world. This development might increase the support of government loyalists, but it has also incensed government critics and the protesters. In recent years, Iranians have voiced their dissatisfaction with the government's involvement in other countries' conflicts, which required Iran to dedicate much needed resources to those foreign policy initiatives, while also having the potential of backfiring in the form of attacks inside Iran (alkhaleejonline.com, November 2, 2019).

Islamic State Sharpens its Anti-Shia Rhetoric

After the initial ambiguous IS statement, IS's weekly newsletter, *al-Naba*, published a second statement that was consistent with IS's and jihadists' typical anti-Shia sentiment and terminology. The attacker was named as Abu Aisha al-Omari and the statement renewed allegiance to the IS caliph, despite the fact that his identity has remained unknown since the killing of the previous IS caliph in a U.S operation in Syria in February (i31.co.za, October 26). The difference between the first and second claim was possibly due to the immense pressure that IS has been under since losing its last territorial holdings in Syria and Iraq in 2019.

Different agents in charge of IS communications and propaganda could be operating in different countries and may lack training, vetting and discipline regarding the IS media vernacular. However, the fact that IS managed to launch its third attack inside Iran since 2017 provided the group with a significant morale boost regardless of the atypical language in the first claim (masrawy.com, October 27).

The Iranian government also presented its own more detailed version of the attack. The main attacker was reportedly a citizen of Tajikistan, who died of injuries he suffered during the attack. Another militant from neighboring Azerbaijan was also arrested and accused of being the main facilitator (arabi21.com, November 9). Further, the Iranian authorities arrested 26 foreigners after the attack for alleged destabilizing activities (aljazeera.net, November 7). However, government critics have highlighted the fact that the official story changed regarding how many people

were exactly involved in the attack, where they came from, and how the main perpetrator died (alain.com, November 7).

Conclusion

Iran has been at the heart of the rivalry between IS and al-Qaeda in recent years. IS, for example, grew out of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which itself emerged as a result of the sectarian complexities that increased after the U.S invasion of Iraq, and especially the disenfranchisement of the Sunni community and the domination of Iraq by Iranian-backed Shia factions. IS always considered both Iranian and Iraqi Shias as its main enemies and has played a major role in inciting sectarian violence by attacking Shia civilian targets in Iraq for years. Conversely, al-Qaeda, which was led by Osama Bin Laden and then Aymen al-Zawahiri, avoided going to war with Iran and targeting Shias and instead focused on attacking the West.

In 2014, the jihadist divisions became very clear when IS accused al-Qaeda of being too friendly with Iran (alraimedia.com, May 23, 2014). After the killing of al-Zawahiri in a U.S air strike in Kabul in August, al-Qaeda's relations with Iran appear to have become even more complicated and even embarrassing from a jihadist perspective because potential successors of al-Zawahiri are believed to be living in Iran (al-Arabiya.net, September 9). Since its inception, al-Qaeda has focused on targeting the West and not the regional governments. However, sectarian violence in the region following the U.S invasion of Iraq has led more and more Sunnis to consider Iran the main threat. That means the most deprived within those Sunni populations will become the main recruitment pool for jihadist groups, and IS

stands to benefit more than al-Qaeda from popular animosity against Iran.

With the attack in Shiraz, IS dealt a strategic blow to al-Qaeda because it has demonstrated that it is once again able to strike inside Iran, which al-Qaeda has never been able to do. Neither IS nor al-Qaeda have announced their new leadership and the likely successor to al-Zawahiri is rumored to be Saif al-Adel who has been living inside Iran since 2011. However, with a new focus on attacking Iran, IS has placed itself in a significantly better position than al-Qaeda to appeal to the most frustrated and deprived Sunnis in the Middle East who see Iran more than the U.S and the West as the main enemy.

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