

The weekly briefing | 7 April 2014

Political and security risk updates

Africa: Chad commences withdrawal of troops from Central African Republic peacekeeping mission following allegations of unprovoked attack on civilians.

Americas: Earthquake in Chile puts new president to the test.

Asia and Pacific: North and South Korean naval forces exchange fire.

Europe: Tensions continue to rise between Russia and the West after annexation of Crimea.

Middle East: Triple bomb attack in Egypt kills two people, including senior police officer.

Polar regions: Cooperation between Russian and Norwegian state energy companies to continue despite Ukraine crisis.

Africa

Chad commences withdrawal of troops from Central African Republic peacekeeping mission following allegations of unprovoked attack on civilians

On Friday 4 April, Chad commenced the withdrawal of its 850 soldiers from the Central African Republic (CAR) peacekeeping mission in protest against a report by the UN Human Rights Office that accused regular Chadian soldiers, not part of the peacekeeping mission, of killing 30 civilians and wounding more than 300 during an alleged unprovoked attack in a crowded market in the capital, Bangui, on 29 March. Survivors of the incident stated that a convoy carrying Chadian soldiers had entered the market area and commenced firing. Chad's foreign minister, Moussa Faki Mahamat, denies the allegations, and has claimed that the soldiers were reacting to an ambush by Christian anti-balaka militia. This is the latest in a string of allegations involving Chadian forces in CAR, including accusations that its troops have been aiding Muslim Séléka rebels within the country.

Reprisal attacks and increasing violence have adversely affected the country since the seizure of power by mainly Muslim Séléka rebels last year. Outside observers have repeatedly voiced concerns over the risk of genocide, as intercommunal violence has spiralled out of control since its onset last December. Human Rights Watch revealed evidence of massacres in remote villages in southwest CAR, accusing both Séléka and anti-balaka of large-scale killings in February, before the Séléka moved eastwards. Despite the recent appointment of a second interim president, Catherine Samba-Panza, there is no effective government in the CAR, with anti-balaka militias increasingly gaining the upper hand.



open briefing
the civil society intelligence agency

Open Briefing
27 Old Gloucester Street
Bloomsbury
London WC1N 3AX

t 020 7193 9805
info@openbriefing.org
www.openbriefing.org

The United Nations, warning of worsening humanitarian conditions and a million displaced persons, is trying to establish safe locations for resettling fleeing Muslims. In many areas, only a few Muslim communities remain, with the majority having already fled to neighbouring Chad and Cameroon. A European Union mission of 800 troops is expected to deploy to CAR within the coming days, supporting 2,000 French troops already in the country, though the increase in manpower is now effectively being neutralised by Chad's withdrawal.

Other developments

An eastern Libyan rebel group has agreed to end its seizure of several oil-exporting ports in the Cyrenaica region within the next few days, marking progress in an eight-month standoff with the central government in Tripoli. The group's leader, Ibrahim al-Jathran, who commanded rebel forces against Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, announced the decision on rebel television on 2 April. A central government delegation is expected to visit the group's base in Ajdabiya, situated in northeastern Libya, to agree on the details. Talks with eastern Libyan rebels were reinvigorated following the US Navy's capture of a tanker that had loaded oil at a rebel port, which destroyed rebel hopes of bypassing the central authorities in selling crude oil. Just before the announcement on cooperation, the Tripoli government had released three fighters who were aboard the tanker, in a further effort to break a stalemate that has pushed Libya into a budget crisis due to dramatically decreased oil production and exports.

Fifteen civilians have been killed in a suspected Boko Haram suicide attack on a state oil company facility in northern Nigeria. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack on 1 April in Borno state, northeastern Nigeria, but given the current government forces' campaign against Boko Haram, a reprisal attack is likely. While the Nigerian government has repeatedly attempted to weaken rebel forces in a military crackdown, the militant group remains the primary security threat to Nigeria and continues to broaden its range of attacks within the country. A new strategy to target petroleum infrastructure in Africa's leading oil producer would have devastating consequences for the Nigerian economy.

Two weeks ahead of elections, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika made a rare public appearance on 3 April to discuss security cooperation in the Maghreb region with US Secretary of State John Kerry. Since suffering a stroke over a year ago, Bouteflika has rarely been seen in public, with his health being questioned as he prepares to run for a fourth term after 15 years of rule backed by the National Liberation Front (FLN). Opposition parties have called for a boycott of the election, with a potential political transition being watched closely in Europe, given Algeria's role as a key gas supplier and an important partner in the fight against militants in the region.

On the radar

- **Muslim civil society groups have threatened mass protests in Mombasa, Kenya**, over the recent assassination of Muslim cleric Sheikh Abubakar Shariff.
- **Increased security expected in Guinea-Bissau** due to risk of unrest surrounding presidential and legislative elections on 13 April.
- **The UN Security Council will hold consultations on Sudan and South Sudan this week.** A report by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) is due on 10 April.

Americas

Earthquake in Chile puts new president to the test

An earthquake with a magnitude of 8.2 struck the northern region of Chile on the morning of 1 April. The epicentre of the earthquake was located in the Pacific Ocean, 100 kilometres northwest of the northern city of Iquique. The seism triggered landslides, blackouts, fires and a small tsunami. Six people died and more than 900,000 had to seek refuge on higher ground. In the hours after the earthquake, 300 female prisoners escaped from a penitentiary whilst it was being evacuated, around 100 inmates were then either recaptured or voluntarily returned to the jail with the Chilean army being deployed to search for the remainder. On 2 April, the local authorities cancelled the tsunami alert while Chile's President Michelle Bachelet declared a state of emergency in the region as 100 riot police were deployed by military aircraft to support 300 troops on the ground to prevent looting. Several aftershocks have since been reported, though not exceeding 6.2 in magnitude.

The earthquake provided the first test for the newly-appointed president, who returned to power on 11 March after serving as president from 2006-10. During her previous term in office, Bachelet received much criticism for her handling of the country's last major disaster that occurred towards the end of her first term in February 2010. At that time, an 8.8-magnitude earthquake hit central Chile, killing over 500 people, destroying 200,000 houses and causing an estimated \$7 billion dollars of damage. In a recent public release, the local branch of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) praised the Chilean government for its handling of the recent earthquake and the issuing of timely tsunami warnings. However, the seism did expose the increasing environmental risks faced by Chile, as experts forecast that the magnitude and recurrence of further earthquakes in the country is likely to increase in the coming years.

Although the government's reaction has been praised, the recent events will provide Bachelet with only little political breathing room in her pursuit of an ambitious reform agenda. During her presidential campaign, she promised to enact 50 reforms within the first 100 days of her term. The reforms mostly touch on the country's severe social inequality. Among those, she pledged to establish free education by raising corporate tax from 20% to 25%. Chile scores poorly in terms of wealth distribution, with the widest gap between rich and poor among countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Last month, tens of thousands of protesters marched through the capital, Santiago, demanding that she keeps her election promises.

Other developments

On 5 April, more than 1,000 Brazilian troops, reinforced by tanks, helicopters and armoured vehicles, were deployed to Brazil's most violent favela in the Mare district of Rio de Janeiro. The military were deployed in retaliation for attacks on local police units by organised armed criminal groups. It underlines the limits of the pacification efforts that began in November 2008. It is expected that other military operations will be staged in the most insecure areas in order to create a safer and more appealing environment ahead of the FIFA World Cup in June.

On 2 April, a radio programme revealed that a member of Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) is at the centre of a prostitution network. Cuauhtémoc Gutiérrez de la Torre, the party's president in Mexico City, was accused of maintaining a prostitution network on the party's payroll for his personal use. Gutiérrez denied the allegations, claiming that he is the victim of a media campaign, which the Democratic Revolution (PRD), who govern Mexico City, may be behind. However, he was swiftly placed on leave by the PRI and a police investigation has begun. The PRI has ruled Mexico during most of the past century, and returned to power in 2012 with the election of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

On 4 April, the Cuban government harshly criticised the US government for creating a 'subversive' social network similar to Twitter on the island. ZunZuneo was developed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a federal agency responsible for administering civilian foreign aid. According to a USAID spokesman, ZunZuneo was developed to promote democracy in Cuba. The revelations undermine the fragile US-Cuba relationship amid the emergence of a national debate about the future of the Cuban embargo.

On the radar

- **Increased security to be expected in the United States** surrounding the anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings on 21 April 2013.
- **Activists plan to rally on 15 April in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil,** against the forthcoming FIFA World Cup tournament.
- **Protests almost certain to continue across main cities in Venezuela** amid the ongoing political crisis.
- **Presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in Panama** on 3 May.

Asia and Pacific

North and South Korean naval forces exchange fire

On 31 March, in a fax message to South Korea, North Korea declared that it would be carrying out live-fire exercises in several sections of the border area between South Korea and North Korea. The South Korean military forces subsequently reported that North Korea then fired more than 500 shells, 100 or more of which landed in South Korean territory, thus violating its territorial waters. Prior to the incident, the South Korean government indicated that it would not hesitate to retaliate to cross-border fire. The South Korean military thus responded by firing more than 300 shells into North Korean waters. The incident lasted around three hours and no casualties were reported.

Such exchanges of fire are not uncommon between North Korea and South Korea. In 2010, a South Korean ship was sunk off the coast of Baengnyeong Island. South Korea alleged that the North was responsible for this attack, which killed about 40 people. North Korea denied involvement. Also in 2010, North Korean shells killed four South Koreans on a neighbouring island. In late 2011, shells were again exchanged between the two countries' militaries. North Korea has also raised international concern over its frequent missile launches. In late March, after a series of short-range SCUD missile tests, North Korea launched two mid-range Rodong missiles (with the capacity to strike Japan). Additionally, as recently as February 2013, North Korea conducted a nuclear weapons test.

While there are no indications that North Korea is preparing for additional nuclear tests, reports that the government has ordered the restart of a massive electrical nuclear reactor serves as a reminder of the multifaceted regional security threat posed by North Korea. However, missile launches and occasional exchanges of fire are not unprecedented between the two countries, and this incident is less serious than previous episodes. As North Korea moves closer to marking the anniversary of its military later this month, it is likely that tensions will remain high. Furthermore, additional periodic missile launches and military exercises are likely, especially given that the joint US and South Korean military exercises are still underway until 18 April. Nevertheless, given the fact that all munitions last week were directed into the sea, and that North Korea gave a warning to South Korea (atypical in military encounters on the Korean Peninsula), the risk of large-scale military conflict remains low.

Other developments

Protests have expanded in southern China over a planned paraxylene (PX) plant. More than 20,000 people turned out on 5 April to oppose the construction of the chemical plant in Maoming, Guangdong province. Smaller protests were seen in several other cities in Guangdong over the same plant. The protest follows an initial demonstration on 30 April attended by approximately 1,000 people. Local security forces were deployed to disburse the protesters. Unofficial reports claim that confrontations with local police led to the deaths of 15 demonstrators and the injury of more than 300 others. Zhou Peizhou, deputy director of Maoming Public Security Bureau, denied these reports. The protesters cite health and environmental concerns as the primary reasons for their opposition to the plant's construction. China has seen increasing numbers of protests over environmental issues. Protests of any size are typically dealt with swiftly and often violently by local security forces.

More than seven million people, out of 12 million eligible voters, turned out to vote in the presidential election in Afghanistan on 5 April. Security across the country was tight, as the Taliban had threatened to violently interfere with the electoral process. Although there were reports of violence in some areas, the election was conducted relatively smoothly. Information from the rural Shinwar district of Nangarhar province indicated that in sharp contrast to more urban areas, threats of violence deterred large numbers of potential voters. There were reports from some areas that polling stations had run out of ballots in Afghanistan's first transfer of power via democratic elections. Voters cast ballots for one of eight candidates, one of whom will follow Hamid Karzai as president.

The Japanese leadership has indicated that they will intercept any missiles launched by North Korea that are deemed a threat to Japanese security. Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera ordered Japan's national defence forces to intercept any missile launched by North Korea with the capability to strike Japan. The order is effective from 3 April to 25 April, which is the anniversary of the founding of the North Korean armed forces. On 5 April, US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel met with Onodera and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to confirm the United States' commitment to Japanese national security. This reconfirmation comes at a time when international tensions are high surrounding territorial disputes with China and North Korean missile launches.

On the radar

- **General elections for the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) will begin in India on 7 April** in a nine-phase process that will last until 12 April.
- **Indonesia will hold legislative elections on 9 April** as election-related violence in Aceh continues to escalate.
- **The Pakistani Taliban have extended a ceasefire until 10 April** after the Pakistani government released several prisoners as part of the ongoing peace talks.
- **Opposition Hindu nationalist Maharashtra Navnirman Sena party (MNS) plan election campaign rallies in India.**
- **Sunni Muslim groups plan to rally in Lahore, Pakistan, on 15 April** to condemn the alleged discretion of shrines in Syria.

Europe

Tensions continue to rise between Russia and the West after annexation of Crimea

On 2 April, following the first meeting of its foreign ministers in Brussels since the Ukrainian crisis, the NATO announced that it would be suspending all civilian and military cooperation with Russia. Russia has warned that neither Russia nor NATO would benefit from freezing any cooperation between both sides. NATO's decision came after Russia was seen to ignore warnings by the West about the annexation of Crimea and the build-up of Russian troops on the border with eastern Ukraine. The organisation also announced further cooperation with Ukraine and aid to the Kiev government in carrying out defence reforms. The previous day, the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill authorising Ukraine to conduct joint military drills with NATO and the European Union, which are scheduled to occur from May to November 2014. Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, hit back at the build-up of the West's military presence, such as the United States' dispatching of six F-15 fighters to patrol the Baltic, 12 F-16s to Poland and a guided-missile destroyer to the Black Sea, and demanded that NATO explain how the build-up corresponded with bilateral agreements. In addition, Russia also threatened to leave the Parliament Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) should the assembly attempt to strip Russian delegation of its credentials before the PACE's spring session, which is scheduled to be held in Strasbourg, France, on 7-11 April.

Russia has also sought to further establish its presence on the Crimean peninsula. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visited Crimea for talks on social and economic development with the breakaway territory's leaders and announced that Russia would launch a new ministry for Crimea and Sevastopol. Medvedev also stipulated that Russian law enforcement agencies should be established in the peninsula immediately and announced that Crimea would be a special economic zone with tax breaks to encourage investment. On 31 March, the Russian parliament approved the termination of the Black Sea fleet agreements with Ukraine. In a statement, the State Duma declared that the Black Sea Fleet agreement was nullified due to the factual end of the legal lease by Russia of the Black Sea Fleet following Crimea's annexation to Russia in March. Under agreements signed in 1997, and extended in 2010, Russia granted Ukraine 30% off gas prices in exchange for extending its lease of the naval base in Sevastopol until 2042.

Ukraine hit back at Russia to stop interfering in its internal affairs after calls by the Russian government for Ukraine to form a federal government and to adopt Russian as its official language. However, Russia dealt Ukraine a potential devastating economic blow: on 1 April, Russian gas company Gazprom announced the cancellation of the discount on natural gas supplies to Ukraine. The CEO of Gazprom, Alexei Miller, reported that the company would be increasing the price from \$268.50 (USD) to \$500 per 1,000 cubic metres, and that the company would not be applying the discount agreed with Kiev last December, due to the Ukrainian government's non-fulfilment of its debt obligations. Miller also said that the company would increase gas transit fees through the Ukrainian pipeline system to Europe by 10%. As a result, the Kiev government has accused Russia of economic aggression and rejected the gas price increase, threatening to take Gazprom to an arbitration court. According to Gazprom, Ukraine's accumulated debt for gas supplies amounted to \$1.71 billion by the end of March 2014, and it is likely that Ukraine could face a gas cut off, such as in 2006 and 2010.

Other developments

On 31 March, French President Francois Hollande appointed a new Prime Minister, Manuel Valls. The appointment follows the resignation of Jean-Marc Ayrault after the ruling Socialist Party suffered losses in municipal elections on 30 March. The Socialists lost control of more than 150 towns to the centre-right party Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the far-right party, the National Front (FN). On 2 April, the French president approved a new government to be led by Valls. The Socialist Party's poor performance is attributed to Hollande's inability to turn France's economy around and alleviate the unemployment problem. The new government shake-up looks to solve this issue with Hollande's replacement of the finance minister, Pierre Moscovici, with Michel Sapin and Arnaud Montebourg as industry minister.

Spaniards continued to protest across Spain last week against the government's austerity measures. Demonstrators took to the streets in Madrid and 53 other cities on 3 April, along with 100 organisations, including trade unions CCOO, UGT and USO. Protesters demanded an end to the Spanish government's plans to increase taxes and freeze pay rises. The government has defended the measures, claiming that the reforms were working and that it had an obligation to the European Union to reduce the public deficit to 5.8% of the GDP in 2014. However, unemployment in Spain remains at 26%.

On 3 April, Albania and Azerbaijan announced a new strategic project between the two countries: the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). The 800 kilometre pipeline will transport 10-20 billion cubic metres of gas annually from the Caspian region, via Greece and Albania and across the Adriatic Sea to southern Italy and the rest of Western Europe. According to Albania's deputy minister of foreign affairs, Alqi Puli, the collaboration would seek to strengthen diplomatic ties between the two countries and encourage future agreements in the energy field, as well as innovation technology and education. At a time of concern for energy security due to the Ukraine crisis and a heavy dependence on Russian gas, it is hoped that this project will enhance security and diversification of gas supplies for the European market.

On the radar

- **French Foreign Affairs and International Development Minister Laurent Fabius will visit Cuba on 12 April** to meet his Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, in a bid to establish a constructive relationship with Cuba.
- **Irish President Michael D. Higgins is set to visit the United Kingdom on 8 April**, the first official visit by an Irish head of state.
- **Opposition protesters plan to gather in Russia's capital, Moscow, on 13 April** to demand media freedom.
- **24 April marks the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide**, carried out by Ottoman Turks in 1915-16 during World War I.
- **Croatian President Ivo Josipovic will visit Bosnia and Herzegovina on 8 April** to attend the 17th International Economic Fair and to meet with senior officials.

Middle East

Triple bomb attack in Egypt kills two people, including senior police officer

Two bombs laden with bolts and washers, planted between trees outside Cairo University on Wednesday 2 April, detonated within minutes of each other, claiming the life of a police brigadier-general and injuring five other security force officers. Shortly after, a third blast was detonated killing another person. The relatively unknown jihadist group Ajnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) claimed responsibility for the blasts via Twitter and Facebook, stating that the attacks were in response to the increase in arrest campaigns specifically targeting 'our women'. The group announced that further attacks can be expected so long as female demonstrators continue to be targeted and remain in captivity.

Cairo University has been at the centre of several anti-government demonstrations as students continually clash with security forces in a show of support for the recently banned Muslim Brotherhood. In December last year, female students were arrested in Cairo during demonstrations at al-Azhar University and still remain in detention; their captors have been accused of sexual abuse and torture. The introduction of a protest law in November 2013 legalises the detention of peaceful protesters and has given the interior ministry discretionary powers to sentence convicted protesters to up to five years in prison. The crackdown on protesters since the military deposed Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013 has seen at least 16,000 people imprisoned.

The attack carried out by Ajnad Misr is the latest in a number of attacks that have targeted the country's security forces, and the group claims to have detonated the devices as specific targets were close to the blast radius. Regular rallies in support of Morsi and those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood can be expected to increase as the country prepares for presidential elections in May. With this, clashes between demonstrators and security forces will likely intensify. Security forces will continue to be targeted by militant groups.

Other developments

Militants in Yemen carried out further attacks on military targets. On 2 April, al-Qaeda affiliated militants stormed the army's Fourth Division headquarters in Aden's al-Tawahi district. At least six soldiers and three militants were killed after a car bomb was detonated outside the main gate. The Fourth Division is responsible for the military in southern Yemen, including the presidential palace. Earlier clashes between the military and militants left two soldiers and two militants dead on 1 April in al-Hudaida province. Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) is one of the most active wings of the Islamist network and has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in Yemen. The interior ministry also announced that some recently captured militants were from Saudi Arabia, reinforcing fears that Saudi citizens have been involved in foreign conflicts.

On 31 March, a rocket was fired from Syria towards the town of Yayladagi, Hatay Province, in Turkey, striking a mosque and injuring one person. Three mortar shells also landed in an open field. The Turkish military responded to this latest incident along the 560-mile border by firing several artillery shells across the border. Turkish involvement in Syria's civil war has increased in recent weeks. Last month, Turkey shot down a Syrian fighter jet, and the Syrian government has accused Ankara of sending foreign fighters across the border to fight Syrian troops in Latakia province. Turkey has supported the predominantly Sunni opposition in their fight against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad since the outbreak of violence three years ago. Similar incidents are likely as rebels and Syrian troops fight for control of the key border village of Kasab.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) announced on 3 April that the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has surpassed one million. Around 2,500 new refugees are registered in Lebanon daily and the country hosts the highest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide. The milestone now means that the number of refugees from Syria number a quarter of Lebanon's resident population. The influx of refugees has placed strains on the Lebanon's infrastructure and labour market, and has also negatively impacted previously strong economic growth rates. However, the Lebanese government has allowed Syrians to access education and health systems and facilitated the UNHCR's coordination and response efforts. The number of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria into Lebanon could reach 1.5 million by the end of 2014.

On the radar

- **On 8 April, US Secretary of State John Kerry will appear before the senate foreign relations committee** to discuss Iranian and Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.
- **Sigrid Kaag, coordinator of the joint Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations mission in Syria, believes that Syria can meet the deadline of 27 April** to remove all chemical agents out of the country.
- **Palestinian protests are likely to continue in the West Bank** after Israel retracted on its pledge to release 26 Palestinians as part of the stalling peace talks.
- **The third round of negotiations on a final comprehensive nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 is to be held in Vienna, Austria, on 8 April.**
- **The US embassy in Baghdad has warned of a potential terror attack in Iraq,** though specific information or a timeframe has not been made publically available.

Polar regions

Cooperation between Russian and Norwegian state energy companies to continue despite Ukraine crisis

The CEOs of Russian and Norwegian state energy companies Rosneft and Statoil, Igor Sechin and Helge Lund, met in Norway on 31 March to discuss the implementation of joint projects in the Arctic and Russian Far East, specifically in Russia's Barents Sea (Perseyevsky License Area) and the Sea of Okhotsk (Magadan-1, Lisyansky and Kashevarovsky License Areas). If the schedule agreed to in 2012 is kept, the first exploration well in the Perseyevsky License Area will be drilled by 2020. Sechin claimed that the new hydrocarbons exploration and development tax incentives adopted in Russia would make the development of offshore fields in Russia almost 2.5 times more efficient.

The meeting between Sechin and Lund was a significant moment in the development of Arctic political and security trends in both the short and long term. The meeting signals Norway's unwillingness or inability to include energy cooperation and trade in the mixture of sanctions that the United States and Europe have imposed on Russian officials and banks as a response to the crisis in Ukraine. Beyond that, Rosneft and Statoil have indicated that they are prepared to go ahead with the sort of controversial projects in far-northern waters that are routinely criticised by environmental groups as disasters waiting to happen; winter ice-floes, underdeveloped infrastructure and Arctic-drilling inexperience all combine to make oil spills not only more likely but also far more difficult to clean up.

Rosneft has very little experience of offshore drilling, and desperately needs Western expertise to exploit fields in the Barents and Okhotsk Seas. Statoil's decision to continue providing expertise takes the sting out of one of the (admittedly highly unlikely) possible sanctions available to Europe and the United States to influence Russian policy. More importantly, the meeting can be interpreted as just one more of a number of recent indications that European states lack the political will to apply sanctions in areas which would really do any significant harm to their own economies; Europe is highly dependent on Russian energy and European energy companies have billions invested in the Russian energy industry. The danger is that with Western leaders eager to appear tough on Russia while avoiding making possibly damaging decisions, there will be a temptation to pick the low-hanging fruit, such as relatively painless cuts to diplomatic and military cooperation. At the same time, the Rosneft-Statoil meeting demonstrates that Russian and international energy companies are continuing to invest in risky Arctic projects, such as those in the Barents Sea and the Yamal Peninsula. It will be the responsibility of relevant ministers in the Arctic states to ensure that the diplomatic and military cooperation needed to minimise these risks, particularly regarding the Arctic Council and joint search and rescue operations, is spared from the current political dispute over Ukraine and Crimea.

Other developments

The joint Russian-Norwegian practice drill Exercise Barents will go ahead as planned. Despite the Norwegian government's decision last week to suspend all bilateral military activities with Russia, the director of the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in northern Norway, Bent-Ove Jamtli, claims to have received no signal that the drill, which has been conducted annually since the 1980s, is to be called off. The drill covers both search and rescue operations and oil spill clean-up preparations. Cooperation between the rescue coordination centres in Bodø, Norway, and Murmansk, Russia, has previously saved lives during real accidents. Norway has on several occasions rescued Russian sailors in distress, even on Russian territory.

A new US Coast Guard report has criticised energy company Royal Dutch Shell. The report criticises the company for failing to conduct an adequate assessment and management of risks before embarking on its disastrous 2012 exploration season in the Beaufort Sea. During that exploration season, a number of legal violations and technical malfunctions on board the Aiviq, a US icebreaking anchor handling tug supply vessel (AHTS) rented by Shell from owner Edison Chouest Offshore, were followed by a dramatic climax in December 2012 when the ship lost control of the Kulluk conical drilling unit, which became grounded on the Alaskan coast on 31 December. The report, released on 3 April, finds both Shell and Edison Chouest responsible for the grounding, and concludes that civil penalties could be levelled against Edison Chouest.

On the radar

- **An Arctic Shipping Forum will be held on 8-10 April** in Helsinki, Finland.
- **North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) Arctic training exercise Spring Forward will continue throughout the week.**

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Analysts: Chris Abbott, Matthew Couillard, Derek Crystal, Tancredè Feuillade, Laura Hartmann, Patrick Sewell, Daniel Taylor and Claudia Wagner.

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