

The weekly briefing | 12 May 2014

Political and security risk updates

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Africa

Boko Haram attack kills hundreds in Chibok as information reveals Nigerian military ignored advance warnings of abduction of schoolgirls

On 5 May, Boko Haram rebels killed approximately 300 people in Gamboru Ngala, Chibok, in the same area where more than 200 schoolgirls were abducted from a boarding school on 14 April. The town had been left unguarded as soldiers attempted to rescue the pupils, whom Boko Haram have threatened to sell as slaves in a video released by the group's leader, Abubakar Shekau. The Nigerian government, which is already under heavy criticism for its inept response to Boko Haram, is facing mounting international pressure following reports that the military had been given several hours advance warning of the planned kidnapping.

Local military officers have confirmed that they received intelligence on the planned attack, but were undermanned and unable to action an appropriate response within the given timeframe. The Nigerian government has issued only limited statements given the sensitivity of the situation. President Goodluck Jonathan restated his commitment to win the war against Boko Haram at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, on 9 May. The Nigerian government had initially intended to use the WEF to promote Africa's largest economy as an attractive investment option; however, the international gathering was notably overshadowed by the latest security developments. In conjunction with an attack upon the capital on 14 April that resulted in the deaths of 75 people, and a bombing on 1 May that resulted in 19 fatalities, the impression that the government is losing control over Boko Haram is becoming increasingly salient.



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

Amid speculation that the abducted schoolgirls are being trafficked across the border to Cameroon and with almost two dozen taken in other kidnappings in the Gwoza and Warabe areas of Borno State, the current crisis is a nadir in Nigeria's five year struggle against Boko Haram. The intensifying conflict has resulted in thousands of fatalities since its onset, and recent protests against the government's slow response by the abducted girls' parents, in conjunction with increasing levels of international attention, is resulting in mounting pressure upon the government to effectively confront the militant group. On 9 May, the UN Security Council demonstrated a willingness to intervene by demanding that Boko Haram immediately release the hostages and threatening to take action against the insurgents.

Other developments

Jacob Zuma's African National Congress (ANC) won a resounding victory in the South African elections, continuing the former liberation movement's streak of post-apartheid election triumphs. With more than 90% of ballots counted, the Independent Electoral Commission announced that the ANC led the vote with 63%, while the party's closest rival, the Democratic Alliance, won around 22% of the vote. Significantly, the left-wing Economic Freedom Fighters, led by expelled ANC member Julius Malema, came in third with 6%. Sporadic protests against alleged voting irregularities occurred in the Johannesburg township of Alexandra on 8 May. Despite allegations of ANC corruption and discontent over rising income inequality and unemployment, it appears that opposition parties were unable to capitalise on the failures of the Zuma government. The National Assembly will convene on 21 May to vote the president into office in what will be Zuma's second and final term according to the South African constitution.

South Sudan's President Salva Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar signed a truce on 9 May amid UN reports of crimes against humanity committed by both government and rebel forces. The peace talks in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, are the first since the confrontation began in December last year. Both the United States and the EU have threatened sanctions on individuals blocking peace efforts amid growing frustrations over the lack of progress caused by the violations of previous ceasefire agreements. Whilst the South Sudanese government announced the suspension of military activities and stressed the requirement for a 'month of tranquillity' on 7 May, Machar's rebel organisation has argued that no truce can be maintained without the imposition of an effective interim governing solution.

The United States has secured a renewed 10-year lease for the Camp Lemonnier military base in Djibouti. On 5 May, US President Barack Obama and Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh renewed their pledges to counter groups such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab that threaten the stability of the region. Washington is to pay an annual \$63 million for the lease, nearly doubling the current rate, with the option of extending it for another decade. Although the Obama administration generally favours a low profile in Africa, the US presence in the region has steadily increased throughout the last decade, with Camp Lemonnier serving as an important base for counterterrorism operations, including drone strikes in Yemen and across the Horn of Africa.

On the radar

- **Central African Republic President Catherine Samba-Panza is planning a reshuffle** intended to make the cabinet a more inclusive political entity.
- **Chinese Premier Li Keqiang will finish his first official Africa tour**, promising billions in development aid and technological assistance, and underlining Beijing's growing interest in Africa.
- **France is planning to deploy troops across the Sahel region** in response to the regrouping of militants in northern Mali.
- **The UN Security Council is to consult on the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) on 12 May**, with a report on the Guinea-Bissau sanctions regime due the same day.
- **The African Union (AU) is to overturn its suspension of Egypt**, excluded after the overthrow of Mohammed Morsi last year. Equatorial Guinea announced that it would invite the Egyptian president to the AU summit after the Egyptian elections scheduled for the end of the month.

Americas

Surprise winner in Panama's presidential election heralds new era for the country

On 4 May, Panamanians voted in municipal, legislative and presidential elections. It was anticipated that José Domingo Arias of the right-wing ruling party, Democratic Change (CD), would take the lead in the single ballot presidential election. However, Juan Carlos Varela, head of the centre-right coalition of the Panama Party (PPa) and the People's Party (PP), claimed victory with an eight-point margin over Arias. Nevertheless, the CD party secured the largest share of the National Assembly, winning 30 seats out of 71, against only 12 for Varela's coalition. Five years earlier, Varela supported the current president, Ricardo Martinelli, in his ascendency to power in 2009, and has since served as the country's vice-president in spite of a growing antagonism towards his former ally. Under Martinelli's administration, Panama's national output has grown at a pace of 8% a year at the cost of growing inequalities and rising basic food prices. In his presidential campaign, Varela pledged to clamp down on corruption and to enforce food price controls. The newly elected officials are to take office on 1 July.

Throughout his mandate, Martinelli, the country's supermarket magnate, has strengthened his hold upon Panama's national politics through the appointment of close allies to key positions within the national administration and by altering institutional practices. As such, Martinelli had handpicked Arias as his successor ahead of the presidential election and imposed his wife, Marta Linares, as candidate for the vice-presidency, resulting in notably wider scepticism about the democratic nature of Martinelli's rule. The CD leader has also been entangled in an alleged \$25 million corruption scandal involving corporate contracts in Panama, of which he was acquitted by his attorney general under controversial circumstances. Varela has stated that he will appoint a new attorney general in order to review Martinelli's case and has vowed to alter the constitution in order to strengthen the independence of the Supreme Court, the comptroller general and other state institutions in a bid to clean up the republic's domestic policies. In respect to the matter of rising inequalities, Varela has announced that he will shift the focus of Panama's \$3 billion annual public investments from public construction towards social services, such as public education and medical care.

Varela's surprise victory in the presidential election heralds a new era for the Republic of Panama. In that sense, the newly elected president has emerged as a staunch opponent to Martinelli's litigious practices. Following his electoral triumph, Varela has emphasised his commitment to tackling the country's issue of rampant corruption and rising inequality. However, much of his capacity to enact profound reforms will rely on the formation of a majority in the National Assembly. As such, it is likely that his coalition will attempt to consolidate an alliance with the centre-left Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), which gained 22 seats at the National Assembly during the last legislative election.

Other developments

Chilean students staged a major protest amid uncertainties over higher education reforms. On 8 May, an estimated 80,000 students marched in the country's capital, Santiago, to demand free university enrolment. The issue of the country's discriminatory higher education fees was a prominent theme during President Michelle Bachelet electoral campaign last March. However, the national student unions fear that the government may fail to deliver its promise of free university enrolment. As such, many have criticised the ambiguity of the proposed reforms. Since 2011 and the eruption of the first major nationwide student protest, the student unions have emerged as a major actor in the country's political landscape.

Washington has threatened Venezuela's government with political sanctions. On 9 May, the US Congress Committee of International Relations voted in favour of a draft law to impose visa restrictions upon targeted Venezuelan officials. This recent development comes against the backdrop of increased tensions within the South American republic between Nicolás Maduro's government and the opposition. Since the beginning of April, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) has implemented a schedule of negotiations between both sides. According to US state department officials, more sanctions are to be expected in the event that UNASUR is ineffective in its mediation efforts.

Colombian farmers protested over the government's alleged failure to implement promised reforms. Since 28 April, a collation of the country's small farmer unions has engaged in a series of nationwide strikes in order to demand state financial support. Following violent protests last summer, the government capitulated over the provision of financial compensation for small farmers; however, the unions accuse the government of not fulfilling its promises. After a string of failed talks, the government has agreed to resume negotiations in the course of the coming week, and has also deployed over 10,000 policemen to prevent the strikes from disturbing public order.

On the radar

- **The first round of Colombia's presidential elections is scheduled for 25 May.**
- **Protests to intensify in Venezuela's main cities** amid the ongoing political crisis.
- **Further protests by student groups likely across Chile**, in particular in the capital, Santiago.
- **Isolated attacks by guerrilla fighters are possible in Peru** surrounding the 17 May anniversary of the first act carried out by Peruvian insurgent group Shining Path in 1980.
- **27 May marks the anniversary of the founding of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).**

Asia and Pacific

Tensions in Thailand reach new high as prime minister ousted from office

On 7 May, a Thai court called for the resignation of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and nine other officials. The remaining cabinet members quickly appointed a deputy, Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan, to act as interim prime minister and enable the cabinet to continue as a caretaker government. Following the announcement, both anti-government and pro-government groups demonstrated in the capital, Bangkok. Anti-government protesters surrounded media organisations and local political offices in the hope of forcing local leaders to appoint a non-elected prime minister. Pro-government demonstrators expressed concerns that the installation of a non-elected prime minister could shatter the fragile political situation in Thailand. Earlier last week, police fired tear gas and deployed water cannons against anti-government demonstrators in an attempt to avert the takeover of local political offices. Although no fatalities occurred, five demonstrators were injured as police dispersed the crowds. The police also sought to contain pro-government protesters in an attempt to prevent contact between the two divergent groups.

Thailand has experienced a period of political instability following the ousting of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, brother of Yingluck, in 2006. The current controversy primarily surrounds a rice subsidy scheme implemented by Yingluck, which has largely been considered a failure. Yingluck was found guilty of negligence charges before the country's anti-graft body on 8 May. Anti-government protesters have demanded the removal of the prime minister in conjunction with a variety of political reforms that must be implemented before a new leadership is selected. While the opposition presence in Bangkok has fluctuated greatly over the past six months, approximately 25 people have died to date during the current period of instability.

Members of the Thai government are currently aiming to hold elections in July this year. Despite this, anti-government forces have indicated that they will not participate unless significant reforms are implemented prior to the election. However, the interim prime minister has indicated that elections must come before reforms. The court's decision to demand the resignation of the prime minister is likely to have a polarising effect upon the electorate, as deep political divisions exist between Yingluck's core supporters, a largely agrarian population, and urban working class opposition groups. The country is not unfamiliar to violence and continued infighting within the government is likely to stall negotiations and election proceedings. There is a deeper concern that, given the nullified election in February of this year, another failed election or unsuccessful transfer of power may deal a fatal blow to the legitimacy of Thailand's core democratic political institutions. Continued conflict is likely to persist in Bangkok and may become violent as elections draw closer.

Other developments

South Korea reports that several drones recovered in its northern regions originated from North Korea. The South Korean defence ministry announced on 8 May that the three primitive unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) containing photography equipment were sent from North Korea. The UAVs were intended to gather reconnaissance on key military facilities and equipment in South Korea. Although the drones contained little sophisticated technology, South Korean defence officials have expressed concern that similar UAVs may be used to launch missiles or otherwise inflict damage on South Korean facilities. While the announcement aggravates existing tensions between North and South Korea, the discovery of the drones is unlikely to raise the risk of violent conflict in the region at present.

Counterterrorism police forces in Malaysia have reported the capture of a key member of the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab. Given previous charges in Africa, Interpol has issued a Red Notice on the man arrested in Malaysia on 9 May. Police indicated that they have uncovered a scheme that facilitates the entry into the country of al-Shabaab members posing as students or tourists. Information from Malaysia indicates that the authorities are investigating at least five other members of the militant group known to be in Malaysia. This arrest follows the apprehension of 11 suspected terrorists in Selangor, outside of Kuala Lumpur, on 6 May. Although these individuals are not known members of al-Shabaab, they are suspected of terrorist activities in neighbouring Thailand.

Chinese and Vietnamese ships collided in the contested waters of the South China Sea. On 8 May, Chinese authorities accused Vietnam of displaying aggression near the Paracel Islands, which are claimed by Hanoi but controlled by Beijing. Vietnamese officials have blamed Chinese ships for intimidating Vietnamese vessels in the region. The confrontation began as Vietnamese ships met Chinese vessels that were establishing an offshore oil rig. China reportedly fired water cannons at the Vietnamese ships. Activity at the oil rig site triggered Vietnamese opposition as the rig is located less than 150 nautical miles from the coast of Vietnam. This incident comes at a time of heightened tensions in the South China Sea and took place as Philippine authorities seized a Chinese fishing vessel elsewhere in the region. Such confrontations heighten the risk of limited armed clashes, but are unlikely to lead to large-scale violent conflict.

On the radar

- **Authorities in Afghanistan have announced that a runoff election will be held on 7 June.**
- **The Bharatiya Janata Party has called for shutdown strike on 12 May in Tripura, in the northeast of India.**
- **Further demonstrations are likely in Vietnam's capital, Hanoi,** in protest over China's intention to drill for oil in the contested waters of the South China Sea.
- **19 May marks the anniversary of the 2010 National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) clashes in Thailand,** which claimed the lives of over 80 civilians and soldiers.
- **Increased police security expected in Hangzhou, eastern China,** following clashes between protesters and police on 10 May over the proposed construction of a waste incineration plant.

Europe

Referendums held in Donetsk and Lugansk as Ukrainian anti-terror operations continue

Russia sought to appease growing tensions with the West last week and de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine. On 7 May, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his support for the Ukrainian presidential elections on 25 May, claiming that the elections would move Ukraine in the right political direction, yet warning that the election would not be significant if the rights of all Ukrainians were not protected. Russia has previously asserted that the Kremlin is willing and able to act in protection of ethnic Russians in southern and eastern Ukraine. Putin also sought to appease the West by calling for the postponement of planned referendums in eastern Ukraine. However, despite the Russian policy shift, the referendums in Donetsk and Luhansk were enacted as planned. French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel labelled the referendum as illegal, supporting a European Union statement on 8 May proposing that the referendum would worsen the current situation.

It is possible that this may be an attempt by Putin to demonstrate that Russia is not orchestrating events in eastern Ukraine. Ukraine's interim president, Olexander Turchynov, warned Russia and pro-Russian separatists that the regions that vote in favour of federalism in the referendums could 'self-destruct', though a poll released by the Pew Research Centre indicated that, in fact, a majority of citizens across Ukraine, including in Russian-speaking regions, wanted Ukraine to remain a unified country. On 10 May, at a joint press conference in Germany, Hollande and Merkel threatened Russia with further sanctions should the forthcoming Ukrainian elections fail to go ahead, implying that the economic sanctions drawn up by the European Council on 6 March have the potential to be enforced within the next fortnight. Hollande and Merkel also called for a significant reduction in Russian forces on the border with eastern Ukraine, which NATO estimates at approximately 40,000 personnel. While Putin stated on 7 May that Russian troops were returning to base and withdrawing from the border, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen reported last week that there was no sign that these movements has occurred.

In a contrary development, the decision by the Russian president to visit Crimea last week aggravated tensions between Moscow and the West. Putin visited Sevastopol for the first time on Russia's national holiday, Victory Day, which marks the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany. Putin was welcomed favourably in the city, where the majority of citizens are ethnically Russian. In response, the Ukrainian government called the visit 'a gross violation of Ukraine's sovereignty', while the United States criticised Putin's decision to visit as provocative and unnecessary. Ukraine, NATO, the United Nations, the European Union and the United States continue to state firmly that the annexation of Crimea to Russia in March 2014 is illegal. The Ukrainian government has recently recommenced anti-terror operations in eastern Ukraine in an attempt to dislodge pro-Russian activists and maintain Ukrainian control over the region. Despite efforts to remove them, activists remain in control of many official buildings across southern and eastern Ukraine. On 8 May, Andriy Parubiy, the Ukrainian Security and Defence Council secretary, suggested that Ukraine would continue the anti-terror operation regardless of the referendums' results. As such it is highly likely that political violence and civil unrest will continue to occur frequently throughout eastern Ukraine, with a highest concentration of incidences likely to be experienced in the Donetsk Oblast.

Other developments

MPs voted in favour of dissolving Kosovo's assembly on 7 May. The Kosovar president, Atifete Jahjaga, reported on 8 May that elections for the assembly would be held on 8 June, following consultation with the leaders of the political parties and the head of the Central Election Commission. The dissolution follows a growing decline in support for the leader of the ruling coalition government, Hashim Thaci. Local elections held in Kosovo last year received positive feedback from the European Observing Mission for Fairness and Regularities, though previous elections have been criticised. Jahjaga has pledged to invite the European Union to conduct an official observation mission of the election. The dissolution of the assembly puts on hold plans for electoral reform and to transform Kosovo's security force into an army.

The European Commission granted Georgia additional reform funds to the value of €30 million. The additional funds are expected to help carry out the necessary reforms needed in order to further the country's integration with the European Union. These reforms include the modernisation of public institutions involved in the implementation of the association agreement, increasing the competitiveness of Georgia's rural businesses, and expanding trade opportunities with other members of the European Union. Georgia and Moldova signed an association agreement with the European Union in November 2013, and it is expected that Georgia will complete the association agreement in June.

On 6 May, the presidents of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey met at a summit to discuss further regional cooperation and issues affecting all three countries. The main focus of the summit, held in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, was on joint energy and transportation projects, including the planned Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. In June 2013, all three countries were promoting the railway as a way of securing a share of the business created by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the transit of equipment to Europe and the United States. However, at the summit last week, it was announced that the completion of the railroad had been delayed and it would not be in operation until the end of 2015 – meaning that the countries will lose a substantial portion of the Northern Distribution Network business.

On the radar

- **MEPs will debate with the European Commission on 14 May and vote on 15 May on Russia's pressure on Eastern Partnership countries** and attempts to destabilise eastern Ukraine.
- **EU Foreign Affairs Council to be hosted by Catherine Ashton on 12 May**, discussing Ukraine, the EU Neighbourhood Policy and the Middle East Peace Process.
- **On 12 May, the European Council President, Henry Van Rompuy, will visit Kiev to meet the Ukrainian Prime Minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk**, to discuss the upcoming elections and the latest efforts to calm tensions.
- **On 13 May, the interim Ukrainian government will come to Brussels** for a joint meeting with the European Commission.

Middle East

Syrian opposition fighters evacuate strategic city of Homs

Following a deal with Syrian forces negotiated on 2 May that will leave all but one part of the city in the hands of the regime, opposition fighters and their families began to leave the city of Homs on 7 May. The deal included the release of a number of hostages being held by rebels in the provinces of Aleppo and Latakia. Fighters in Aleppo province will also allow humanitarian aid into the Shia towns of Nubul and Al-Zahraa, loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, after their besiegement. An estimated 1,800 fighters are expected to leave the city under the supervision of the United Nations following sustained artillery and air assaults over the past year.

Homs was at the centre of the Syrian opposition movement since the uprising began in 2011 and is often referred to as the capital of the revolution. However, the ceasefire brings an end to the insurrection of Syria's third largest city and marks the success of a year-long campaign launched by the Syrian government in the west of the country. More than 2,500 rebels have been killed in Homs and many thousands more injured as government forces (supported by Hezbollah) disrupted weapon, medical and food supplies. The Sunni fighters were allowed to leave with light weapons, and were also assured that they would not be detained at government checkpoints as they headed north.

The Homs ceasefire and evacuation marks a significant shift in the Syrian civil war, which has raged since 2011. Assad's forces now control the strategic strip in the west from Tartus to Damascus, and the mountain range that links Damascus to Homs. From here, the regime will be able to launch effective military operations into the north of the country. The Syrian government, and its backers, have become more organised and made significant gains in the last year. However, the government does not control vast amounts of territory in the north and the east. Presidential elections have been announced for 3 June but will have very little legitimate representation.

Other developments

On 6 May, Yemeni soldiers captured an al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) stronghold in the mountainous al-Mahfad area of the Abyan governorate in the south of the country. The Yemeni defence ministry claim that soldiers and tribal militias had taken control of al-Mahfad town and driven members of the AQAP into the mountains. AQAP militants had been present in the area since 2012. AQAP is one of al-Qaeda's most active affiliates, and has been responsible for a number of attacks on security forces, oil and gas facilities and foreigners. There is a risk of suicide bombings, sabotage and assassination attempts in retaliation for the military offensive in the coming weeks.

Raif Badawi, a liberal activist arrested in 2012, was sentenced by a court in Saudi Arabia to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a £160,000 fine. The sentence, passed on 7 May, was an increase to that which was passed in July last year. Badawi co-founded the Free Saudi Liberals website, a network of articles that criticised religious figures and called for an end to religious dominance in Saudi life. This illustrates Riyadh's draconian crackdown on dissent within the Kingdom following uprisings throughout the region.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani spoke publicly on 7 May about his struggle with political hardliners in Iran's parliament and vowed to succeed in reaching a permanent agreement with the international community. Opponents to Rouhani's moderate stance recently gathered on the site of the former US embassy in Tehran as 'concerned patriots'. Hardliners have also called for a crackdown on Iranians that fail to wear strict Islamic dress. The conservative body remain a powerful force in Iranian politics and continue to express their opposition to the president's policies.

On the radar

- **Afghanistan's presidential election results are to be finalised on 14 May.**
- **Nuclear talks between the P5+1 and Iran are set to resume on 13 May in Vienna, Austria.**
- **Egypt's presidential elections are scheduled for 26-27 May.**
- **A joint Fatah-Hamas unity government is to be formed in the next three weeks**, following the agreement reached between the two Palestinian factions.
- **Following recent attacks against Western interests in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, the US embassy have stated that its services will be suspended until 15 May.**

Polar regions

Finland strengthens relationship with Sweden and NATO amid increasing fears of Russian expansionism in region

Finland and Sweden entered into talks on 6 May in order to lay out plans for closer military cooperation between the two countries. The two Nordic states agreed to commence a study over the coming months into the most effective ways of combining their military capabilities in order to facilitate the effective joint deployment of troops in regional and international conflict and crisis management operations. The results of the study, which will be published in October, will focus on the potential for the creation of a shared air and naval programme and the joint purchase of military equipment. The talks between the two countries follows the landmark move away from Finland's traditional non-alignment policy on the 22 April when the Finnish government agreed to a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with NATO. The proposals suggested as part of the MOU, which are not yet politically binding, would see Finland invest in a new military body which would assist with NATO training operations in the region by supplying equipment and fuel to both naval and air units. Finland's defence minister, Carl Haglund, indicated that the agreement would include a guarantee of NATO support in the event of an attack on Finnish territory.

The sudden increase in Nordic efforts to improve their military strength is undoubtedly a response to the crisis in Ukraine and the increasingly aggressive rhetoric coming out of Moscow. Haglund stated that the Ukraine crisis will motivate many European countries to spend more on defence and raise their level of defence cooperation. The Ukraine crisis has prompted a NATO discussion in Finland and Sweden and increased support for NATO. Although the MOU is not, according to the Finnish government, an indication of Finland's intentions to join NATO, it is undoubtedly a significant step for a country that has such a consistent history of non-alignment. Russia has warned that if Finland and Sweden maintain their current diplomatic trajectory they should expect to see significant repercussions from Moscow, which has not hesitated to declare its willingness to 'wage economic war'. Finland would be particularly vulnerable to economic sanctions given that Russia is its largest trading partner, accounting for 10% of its total exports.

If events in Ukraine continue to deteriorate, concerns regarding the threat posed by Russia to the Nordic states' national security will continue to grow. Popular opposition to joining NATO in Finland and Sweden has centred on the belief that Russia has become increasingly democratic since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The events in Crimea and Ukraine, coupled with the current state of Russian politics, have thus seen a swell in domestic support for NATO membership and a rejection of non-alignment policies. Although the most recent survey in Finland suggests that only one in three Finnish citizens are in favour of joining NATO, this is a significant increase on last year's poll. Given Russia's aversion to its neighbours' participation and integration in NATO, it will be interesting to note how the Kremlin approaches its relationship with its Nordic neighbours in the coming months. However, implementing economic sanctions may be counterproductive: bolstering domestic support for Finnish and Swedish NATO membership while damaging an already weakened Russian economy.

Other developments

The Russian government is to contribute 900 million roubles to Arctic offshore development projects, which will see further research into the concept for a floating oil and gas station in the Arctic and the development of sophisticated oil spill clean-up technology. The investment comes after the announcement by Russian state-controlled energy companies Rosneft and Gazporm that they intend to step up their efforts in Arctic exploration and increase their efforts to take advantage of any Arctic deposits of hydrocarbons.

The Baltiysky Shipyard is to build three multipurpose nuclear-powered ice breakers. The shipyard in St. Petersburg, Russia, and part of the United Shipbuilding Corporation, had their bid accepted to commence Project 22220 with a value of 85 million roubles. It will involve the construction of three icebreakers with the capability of breaking through ice up to three metres in depth. The shipyard has already commenced work on the prototype, Arktika, which will be the world's most powerful icebreaker and is due to be completed by 2017, with the remaining two icebreakers to be constructed by 2019 and 2020.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has aroused Norwegian concerns over Russia's interest in the country's oil and gas capabilities. Benedicte Bjornland, Director of the Norwegian Police Security Service, stated that a number of countries are interested in Norway's petroleum capabilities, though only spoke of Russian intelligence services specifically. Norway's interior security service previously warned about Russia's gathering of intelligence on Norway's focus in the Arctic in 2008.

On the radar

- **The Arctic Patrol and Reconnaissance event 'Co-operation in the high north' will be held on the 19-21 May in Denmark's capital, Copenhagen.** The event will focus on the latest operational challenges in the region.
- **The international Conference of Arctic Social Sciences will be held on the 22-26 May in Prince George in British Columbia, Canada.** The event will examine the potential for economic and environmental sustainability in the Arctic region.

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Analysts: Chris Abbott, Matthew Couillard, Derek Crystal, Tancrede Feuillade, Laura Hartmann, Liam McVeigh, Daniel Taylor and Claudia Wagner.