

The weekly briefing | 21 July 2014

Political and security risk updates

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Africa

Mali peace talks begin in Algiers as French military operation in Sahel region expands

Mali's foreign minister, Abdoulaye Diop, has declared his government's willingness to compromise with Tuareg rebels as peace talks opened in the Algerian capital, Algiers, last week. Despite being inclined to negotiate, Diop has also stipulated that Mali's territorial unity is a condition that cannot be compromised on. Only days before the talks began, more than 30 people died in clashes in the northern desert area, which the army blamed on infighting between rebel organisations.

The political situation in Mali remains unstable, as three quarters of Malian territory remains under rebel control following a major Tuareg offensive in the north of the country in May. However, France announced the end of Operation Serval on 14 July. Whilst the operation was largely successful in repelling the Islamist militant offensive headed for the capital, Bamako, and an encouraging level of operational coordination was achieved between various contributing West African countries, the operation has also highlighted a number of areas of concern for future operations to combat the threat from rebel organisations. France is now set to coordinate an expanded long-term intervention, Operation Barkhane, together with Mali and four other former French colonies that span the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. The French component of the operation will consist of approximately 3,000 armed forces personnel supported by six fighter jets, 20 helicopters and three surveillance drones.



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Although Mali continues to dominate French security policy in the region, the country was notably omitted from French President François Hollande's West Africa visit last week. It appears that Hollande is placing a particular emphasis on increasing cooperation with Ivory Coast, Niger and Chad as a prelude to Operation Barkhane. It is clear that the French regard the current political situation in Mali as characteristic of a wider regional instability that cannot be combatted in a unilateral fashion. The long-term success of these operations, therefore, will depend on the ability of these countries to successfully cooperate both politically and militarily. Despite calling for 'African solutions to African problems', France has been increasingly drawn into military operations in the region over recent months, creating a paradigm that is unlikely to change in the near future.

Other developments

Clashes between rival forces in South Sudan killed more than 60 people in northern Bahr el Ghazal last week. South Sudan's defence minister blamed the campaign of looting and violence against civilians on government soldiers deserting from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to rebel groups in the area. International observers warn that the conflict, which began in December last year, is at the point of escalation and may draw in South Sudan's southern equatorial states, who insist on federalism to break the perceived monopoly of the Dinka-dominated central government.

A UN panel has called for militia fighters to be expelled from the armed forces of the Central African Republic (CAR). In an interim report on the violence between Séléka rebels and anti-balaka militias, the UN experts warned that CAR's armed forces are a major source of weapons, fuelling a conflict that has killed thousands and caused the displacement of approximately half of the country's population. In contrast, humanitarian observers in the country are warning of the unrealistic nature of the recommendations, suggesting that rebel fighters will need to be integrated into the armed forces in order to achieve a long-term solution.

Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama announced a surprise cabinet reshuffle on 16 July as the country continues to battle a deep economic crisis. Since the beginning of this year, commodity prices in the country have skyrocketed as a result of the Ghanaian cedi's drastic decline against foreign currencies. As previous government measures have only exacerbated the situation for the population, the reshuffle represents an attempted turnaround. However, while the minister of the interior and the minister of agriculture lost their positions, several key ministers, including the finance minister, were able to retain their seats. The new cabinet is now facing the challenge of responding to public expectations to address the growing economic difficulties.

On the radar

- **Final results of the election of the Libyan Council of Representatives are to be released** during increasing tensions in Tripoli.
- **South African metal workers set to intensify their current strike activities**, calling for solidarity from other sectors following the rejection of a 10% pay rise offer.
- **Reports on the UN missions in Darfur (UNAMID) and South Sudan (UNMISS) are due on 23 July and 25 July respectively**
- **Increased security expected in Juba and other major cities across South Sudan on Martyrs' Day** on 30 July.

Americas

Argentina and China strengthen strategic partnership during Chinese presidential visit to Buenos Aires

On 18 June, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with his Argentine counterpart, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, during a three-day visit in Buenos Aires. The meeting was part of Xi's week-long tour in the region, which also included stops in Cuba, Venezuela and Brazil. The visit was China's first presidential visit to Latin America's third-largest economy since the Sino-Argentine Strategic Partnership was proclaimed in 2004. The two governments signed a total of 20 agreements, including an \$11 billion swap operation between the central banks of Argentina and China that will allow the purchase of Chinese imports with yuans, and \$7.5 billion worth of Chinese loans for the construction of power and rail infrastructure. Fernández lauded the new agreements as a catalyst for the establishment of a more comprehensive bilateral relationship. In a speech, the Argentine president went so far as to compare Mao Zedong, the figurehead of the Communist Party of China (CPP), to Juan Perón, the founder of the ruling Peronist movement.

Over the past decade, China has become a prominent commercial and financial partner for the region. Latin America represents a vital source of commodities to meet China's growing needs, as well as providing new export markets for its manufactured goods. China's demand for Argentine farm products, such as soybean and soybean meal, has cemented its place as the country's second largest trading partner, marginally behind Brazil. However, the bilateral trade has begun to heavily weigh in China's favour, as the Argentine trade deficit with China widened by 9% in 2013 alone. In light of this, many have come to criticise China for replicating the historical pattern of 'exploitation' of the region by global powers. Wary of such anxieties, the Chinese government has sought to present itself as a partner for the region. To that end, it has made over \$100 billion in loan commitments since 2005. In addition, the Chinese loans represent an exclusive source of finance for the Argentine government, as it has been virtually shut out of global credit markets since its 2002 sovereign default. In that regard, during Xi's visit, China agreed to finance the construction of two hydroelectric dams in Patagonia, and a railway project that would make it more efficient to transport grains from Argentina's agricultural plains to its ports.

China's influence in Latin America is likely to expand in the near future at the expense of the Western powers. In particular, China is poised to deepen its relation with Argentina, as its shift from export-led to consumption-led growth will dramatically increase its demand for farm products. Thus far, China has been reluctant to strengthen its economic relationships with ideological content. Therefore, the Sino-Argentine Strategic Partnership remains mostly subservient to China's economic interests and has yet proven to represent a coherent alternative to Argentina's historic ties with the West.

Other developments

Bolivian President Evo Morales officially declared his candidacy to run for a third consecutive term.

Morales, the country's first indigenous president, took office in 2006, winning 54% of the vote. In 2009, he won a second term with 64%, following the ratification of a new constitution. The Bolivian constitution states that the president can only be re-elected once; however, the country's highest court ruled earlier this year that Morales' first term didn't count as it took place before the new constitution took effect in 2009. He will run against four other candidates in October, and currently enjoys high approval ratings.

Cuba has drawn criticism from the United States after it arrested around 100 members of the Ladies in White movement. The Ladies in White is a Cuban opposition movement that consists of wives and other female relatives of jailed dissidents. Every Sunday, the women protest the imprisonments by marching in the capital, Havana, dressed in white clothes. Formed in 2003, the opposition movement has been uniquely granted the right to organise protests on the island. On 14 July, the United States publicly condemned the Cuban government for its repeated breaches of human rights and its adoption of ‘intimidation tactics’.

On 17 July, Mexico and Peru signed a string of agreements designed to foster cooperation in matters of regional security. Both countries have sought to broaden and deepen their areas of collaboration, particularly since the formation in 2011 of the Pacific Alliance – a regional trade bloc that includes Colombia, Peru, Chile and Mexico. The agreements aim to facilitate cooperation against transnational organised crime. To that end, the new arrangements will strengthen the quality of information sharing between the countries, and pave the way for the establishment of a security mechanism to combat transnational organised crime.

On the radar

- **Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos to meet with his Venezuelan counterpart, Nicolás Maduro,** on 1 August to discuss bilateral issues.
- **Third national congress of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) will take place** from 26 to 29 July.
- **Demonstrators plan to take to the streets in Sao Paulo, Brazil, at approximately 17:00 local time on 21 July** to demand the release of a number of protesters who were detained during the World Cup clashes.
- **El Barzón activist group plans to protest in Mexico’s capital, Mexico City, on 23 July,** against the government’s energy reforms.
- **Travellers flying to the United States should expect increased security measures to continue** following the US government’s warning of a credible terrorist threat to aviation.

Asia and Pacific

China announces conclusion of exploratory drilling operations in disputed waters off coast of Vietnam

On 17 July, the Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) announced that it had concluded its exploratory drilling operation in waters disputed with Vietnam and would be analysing the data collected over the past few months. The state-owned oil company provided little detail about the operation or the oil rig’s departure, but noted that signs of oil and gas were detected and that CNPC would be deciding on next steps in the coming months. The oil rig was placed near the Paracel Islands in May 2014. Sources in Vietnam have confirmed that the oil rig began to move on 15 July. Information from Chinese sources indicates that Vietnamese ships and coast guard vessels had ‘harassed’ the Chinese rig on more than 1,500 occasions.

Following the oil rig's initial installation in May, Vietnam experienced three days of anti-Chinese rioting and violence. The protesters targeted Chinese-owned factories and businesses and Chinese residents. At least two people were confirmed dead in the violence, though unconfirmed reports from local doctors indicated that more than 20 may have been killed. The area in which the oil rig was placed is claimed by China as a part of its traditional territory in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea stipulates that the territory lies within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone. The Paracel Islands, near the site of CNPC's exploration, was the location of a violent military engagement between South Vietnam and China in January 1974. More than 70 people were killed in this one-day battle. The incident resulted in China's permanent control over the islands.

Following this week's removal of the rig, Chinese foreign minister Hong Lei indicated that exploration and drilling fall indisputably within China's territorial jurisdiction. China was admonished by the United States, and the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries with which China is engaged in territorial disputes have deemed its actions provocative. China has resisted international arbitration, refusing to attend proceedings brought by the Philippines at a UN tribunal in 2013. The Philippines have also recently called for a meeting of leaders in four Southeast Asian countries to unify their position and approach to dealing with Chinese maritime expansion. Despite the slight release in tensions following the movement of the rig, it is unlikely that China will stop natural resource exploration and development in the disputed regions of the South China Sea. The entrenched positions of Beijing and its maritime neighbours make it likely that territorial tensions will endure.

Other developments

The official results of Indonesia's election will be released on 22 July amid allegations of fraud. In a continuation of the previous week's events, various private organisations and news media outlets last week reported various results of the presidential election between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto. Nevertheless, the majority of private polling organisations indicate that Widodo has received about 53% of the vote with about 80% of the estimated 187 million ballots having been tabulated. Indonesian citizens have been extremely involved in the monitoring of the counting process, comparing the tabulation at local polling stations to the filing of tally documents online and with various local general elections commissions. Reports from Indonesian authorities have revealed irregularities in East Java, West Java and from overseas in Malaysia. The Indonesian Election Monitoring Body and local police forces have begun investigating cases of fraud. Ten election committee members have been dismissed from their posts and 40 have received warnings for suspected or verified vote tampering.

More than 800 workers protested outside of South Korea's embassy in Yangon, Myanmar, on 17 July. The workers were seeking assistance from South Korean officials to obtain compensation from the operators of a South Korean factory that closed and failed to pay the remainder of the worker's earned wages. The Master Sports Footwear Factory closed in May without notice, and the owner has allegedly left the country. Foreign investment in Myanmar has increased significantly since the elected government took power in 2011. At the same time, labour strikes and protests have dramatically risen in number. Following this recent protest, on 18 July the Myanmar labour ministry reportedly filed a lawsuit against the owner of the factory, which was based in the Hlaingthaya Industrial Zone, near Yangon.

South Korea announced on 15 July that President Park Geun-hye has formed a panel on Korean unification. The panel will be comprised of 50 members, including 30 civilians and various government officials. Former Prime Minister Koh Kun, former foreign minister Han Seung-joo, and a former North Korean diplomat, Koh Young-hwan (who defected to South Korea in 1991), are some of the high-profile members of the new panel. Park will chair the committee. The panel is designed to bolster Park's earlier unification initiatives. However, critics are concerned that the panel will erode the official unification ministry, whose sole purpose is to plan future reunification with the North. Part of Park's vision for unification includes the South's development of infrastructure in North Korea and healthcare aid in exchange for natural resource rights in the North. Nevertheless, tensions remain high between the two countries, with North Korean missile launches increasing in frequency. Park's panel will convene for the first time in August.

On the radar

- **An official investigation will continue this week into an explosion in the parking lot of an airport in Qinghai Province, China,** that occurred on 15 July.
- **The Japanese government is expected to give final approval next month to reopen the Sendai nuclear power plant** on Kyushu Island.
- **Initial plans indicate that the new BRICS bank will be located in Shanghai, China,** following the BRICS summit in Brazil.
- **This year's ASEAN Regional Forum will begin next month** in Myanmar.
- **Former Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra will travel to several countries in Europe** before returning to Thailand on 10 August.

Europe

Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 shot down over eastern Ukraine

On 17 July, Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down in between Krasni Luch, Lugansk region, and Shakhtarsk, Donetsk region, in eastern Ukraine. The crash site is located near the village of Grabovo in a rebel-held territory close to the border with Russia. All 298 people aboard the plane were killed. Flight MH17 was flying from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and had been due to enter Russian airspace when contact was lost. It is still to be determined who is responsible for shooting down the airliner, but both the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists have blamed each other for the incident. The United States and the United Kingdom have publicly accused pro-Russian rebels of shooting the plane with a surface-to-air missile. However, Moscow holds Kiev responsible, and claims that Ukraine's continued military operation in the east of the country is to blame. On 19 July, Ukraine accused pro-Russian rebels of attempting to destroy evidence at the crash site. Separatists are also accused of preventing the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and international experts from accessing the site.

In the days leading up to the crash, there had been growing concern among Western governments that Russia was stepping up its military support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine. NATO has insisted that rebels have transported an increasing amount of heavy military equipment from Russian bases across the border into eastern Ukraine. MH17 was flying at an altitude of 33,000 feet (10,000 metres), 1,000 feet (300 metres) above the designated no-fly zone, and only advanced surface-to-air missile systems are capable of striking a target at this altitude. It is thought that rebels believed that the target was a Ukrainian military aircraft, not a commercial airliner. This conclusion is supported by clips of a phone conversation released by Ukrainian authorities, in which Russian-speaking separatists and suspected Russian military officers allegedly confirmed that a rebel group shot down what they thought was a Ukrainian military transport aircraft. In previous weeks, rebels have shot down a number of Ukrainian military helicopters and low-flying jets. On 17 July, before the crash, Ukrainian officials had also accused the Russian Air Force of downing a Ukrainian fighter jet on the previous evening, as well as a transport plane on 13 July.

The UN Security Council has called for a full and independent international investigation into the downing of MH17. If pro-Russian separatist are found to be responsible, it is highly likely that Russia will be considered complicit in the incident. Should Russia accept partial responsibility for the accident and cease suspected support for the separatists, this incident could prove to be a catalyst towards a genuine ceasefire between the rebels and Ukrainian forces. It appears evident that Russia's control and influence in Ukraine is becoming increasing extensive. It is likely that a failure to facilitate a robust investigation into the particulars of the downed Malaysian Airlines flight will exacerbate the current dichotomy between Russia and the West, resulting in a corresponding hardening of policy.

Other developments

On 16 July, the European Union and the United States announced further sanctions on Russia over its support of pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. The US treasury announced further sanctions targeting two major banks (including Gazprombank), eight weapons and defence firms (including Kalashnikov Concern), two energy companies (including Rosneft) and four individuals. The United States also targeted the two self-proclaimed republics of eastern Ukraine: the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic. US President Barack Obama stated that the sanctions were imposed because Russia had not fulfilled its promises to de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine. The sanctions are designed to have the maximum impact on Russia while limiting the economic impact upon US companies and those of her allies. The European Union also agreed to impose further sanctions on Russia and a list of targeted entities and persons will be announced at the end of July, while lending by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will be curtailed. In reaction to the sanctions, Russian stock exchange MICEX fell by 2.6% on 17 July and Rosneft stock fell by nearly 5%. The Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev has warned that Russia will bolster spending on defence and security in response.

On 15 July, Jean-Claude Juncker was elected as president of the European Commission during the second plenary of the new term. The former prime minister of Luxembourg won the position with 422 votes out of a total of 729 during a secret ballot vote. Juncker will commence his five-year term on 1 November. In his opening speech to MEPs in Brussels, Juncker announced that the European Union would not be accepting any new members until 2019 and that there would be consolidation of the European Union's current 28 members. Addressing reporters, Juncker stated that the issue of repatriating some powers from Brussels to member states would be discussed during his term; however, the EU rules on free movement of workers would not be changed. The new president also announced that he planned to present a jobs, growth and investment package within the first three months of his term to generate an extra €300 billion in investment over the next three years.

On 18 July, the Georgian parliament ratified an association agreement with the European Union, which was signed on 27 June, with the aim of deepening political and economic ties between Georgia and members of the union. During a parliamentary session held in Kutaisi, parliamentarians from the opposition, UNM, and ruling party, Georgian Dream, voted in favour of the motion and all 123 lawmakers present approved the agreement. Addressing the parliament, Štefan Füle, the EU commissioner for enlargement and European neighbourhood policy, asserted that although Georgia had not signed the accession agreement, this association agreement was a significant step towards future developments between Georgia and the European Union.

On the radar

- **EU-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting will be held in Brussels** on 23 July.
- **EU high representative Catherine Ashton will chair the Foreign Affairs Council** in Brussels on 22 July.
- **The Eastern Partnership foreign ministers meeting will be held** in Brussels on 22 July.
- **On 22-23 July, Italian ministers will discuss the various aspects of the current presidency programme with MEPs** in the relevant committees.
- **Pro-Palestinian rallies expected to continue across Europe** in protest against Israel's military offensive in Gaza.

Middle East

Iranian Nuclear talks extended after failure to reach consensus by deadline

Iran and the United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, France and Germany (the P5+1) have agreed to extend talks by a further four months, to 24 November, in a continued effort to reach a deal over Iran's nuclear enrichment programme after the parties failed to reach an accord by the 20 July deadline. Despite reaching consensus over a number of issues, the primary area of disagreement is over the acceptable number of centrifuges capable of enriching uranium to be retained by Iran. The new interim deal involves sanction relief from the United States providing Iran with access \$2.8 billion in previously frozen assets. In return, Tehran has agreed to curtail and dilute its current uranium enrichment to natural uranium – from gas to oxide solid – lengthening the time required to create a nuclear weapon.

Iran has consistently denied any intention to create nuclear warheads, insisting its nuclear activity is intended to create energy security for the oil-dependent state. Over the next four months, negotiations will attempt to address the deadlock of centrifuges, though neither party appears willing to make what are deemed to be acceptable concessions. Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated in talks that Tehran would be willing to delay enrichment programmes for up to seven years while not dismantling its current number of centrifuges; a position rejected by Washington with US Secretary of State John Kerry stating the issue is 'an absolutely critical component of any potential comprehensive agreement'.

Delays in the talks are likely to cause greater divisions in Washington, with many senior members of congress criticising the Obama administration's failure to secure any permanent steps in controlling Iran's nuclear capacity. Moreover, many believe that relief in sanctions is enabling the Iranian economy to rebuild, undermining their ability to provide a credible economic deterrent. The administration has argued that the house will veto greater sanctions should congress push for them during negotiations. While difficulty remains in finding convergence, the fact that the talks have been extended indicates potential progress in the strengthening of diplomatic relations.

Other developments

Israeli forces launched a ground offensive in the Gaza strip, Palestine, on 17 July. The attacks were aimed at destroying a number of tunnel networks believed to be used by Hamas to enter Israel. Israeli defence forces have stated the offensive successfully destroyed a number of these tunnels. Over 500 Palestinians have been killed since Israel launched Operation Protective Edge on 8 July ostensibly to end rockets attacks on Israel from Gaza. Last week, Israel accepted a ceasefire agreement brokered by Egypt and supported by the Arab League, but this was apparently rejected by Hamas, who claimed they had not been party to the negotiations or received an official draft of the ceasefire proposal. Egyptian-led efforts continue, though Egypt has lost much of its influence with Hamas following the ousting of Islamist president Mohammed Morsi and the banning of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

A US drone strike killed 11 militants in northwest Pakistan on 19 July. The attack took place along the border region and Taliban stronghold of North Waziristan. US officials stated that Punjabi Taliban fighters were among the dead, and that the civilian population were evacuated before the strikes. Days before, the Pakistan military announced the killing of 35 suspected militants in the country's Shalwal valley. Drone strikes resumed in the country in June, following the breakdown of peace talks between the Pakistani government and the Taliban. Aerial strikes are likely to continue in the northern provinces as both US and Pakistani militaries attempt to secure the region ahead of the US withdrawal in neighbouring Afghanistan.

A car bomb killed at least 89 people in Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province on 15 July. A suicide bomber detonated a car full of explosives in a busy marketplace, causing the largest number civilian casualties seen in a terror attack in Afghanistan in over seven years. A recent publication by the United Nations now reports 2014 as the deadliest year for civilian casualties in Afghanistan since records began in 2009. The attack follows turbulence within the country following the audit of ballots cast in the recently disputed presidential elections. While the Taliban have openly stated their intent to disrupt recounts, they have distanced themselves from the attack, stating emphatically that the mujahedeen do not target civilian populations. Despite this, the Taliban continues to attack Afghan forces, with reports highlighting an increase of insurgent activity in the troubled Helmand province.

On the radar

- **Ninth round of presidential election due in Lebanon** on 23 July.
- **Oman will celebrate the 44th Renaissance Day** on 23 July.
- **Tehran to host troika meeting of the Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States** on 22 July to discuss events occurring within Palestine.
- **Further protests expected in Turkey, Jordan and Egypt** to denounce Israel's offensive in Gaza, Palestine.

Polar regions

Asian icebreakers move into the Arctic

Scientists on board the icebreaker Xuelong (Snow Dragon) have begun China's sixth Arctic expedition, having arrived at the first scheduled research site in the Bering Sea on 18 July. The expedition is tasked with analysing water samples and ice cores. As well as the Bering Sea, the expedition will study sites in the Chukchi Sea and, at its most northerly altitudes, areas of the Canada Basin within close proximity to the North Pole. Two more Asian Arctic expeditions are set to take place this summer, with the Korean ship Aaron (All Sea) and the Japanese vessel Mirai (Future), which begin their expeditions on 31 July and 31 August respectively.

Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), states may conduct marine scientific research on the high sea, as long as the research is 'exclusively for peaceful purposes and for the benefit of mankind as a whole'. The data gathered by the expeditions will almost certainly be applied in the kind of international oceanographic and climate studies that clearly fit the UNCLOS remit. However, at the same time there can be little doubt that national interest is driving the funding of these expensive missions. The US Geological Survey (USGS) estimates that the Arctic contains 13% of the world's oil reserves and 30% of the gas reserves. South Korea, Japan and China are all energy-hungry countries, with the latter in particular facing a growing demand for fossil fuels. While neither Japan's National Institute of Polar Research nor South Korea's Polar Research Institute have published detailed information about their respective icebreaker expeditions this summer, it is safe to assume that the kind of figures published by the USGS inform much of the Arctic policy of these Asian economic giants.

Thus even if the current expeditions are not planning to conduct the kind of geological surveys that are needed to detect oil and gas fields, China, South Korea and Japan will all gain invaluable experience from testing their icebreakers and crews during the summer research season. Furthermore, there are further benefits to be accrued over time from conducting regular missions such as these. While none of these Asian countries is an Arctic state, and none are making, or ever likely to make, territorial claims on the Arctic, they have all been observers in the Arctic Council since May 2013. By participating in Arctic research, and demonstrating they have the resources and will to engage actively in the region, they are claiming a symbolic yet significant stake in the Arctic's future, a process Arctic analyst Mia Bennet terms 'building their Arctic identities'. In the short term, there is much to celebrate in the Asian states' contribution to environmental and oceanographic research. In the long term, if advances in technology make possible the oil and gas 'Arctic bonanza' regularly predicted by journalists and politicians, these states will doubtless seek to cash in on the Arctic identities nurtured by their research programmes.

Other developments

The Obama administration has named former US Coast Guard commandant Admiral Robert Papp as the new special representative for the Arctic, while former Alaska lieutenant governor Fran Ulmer will serve as a special adviser on Arctic issues. Secretary of State John Kerry announced the appointments at a press conference on 16 July. Alaska's US senators have expressed satisfaction with the decisions, an acquiescence which is particularly crucial from the senior senator Lisa Murkowski, who has often proved a fierce critic of past US Arctic policy. Murkowski has expressed hopes that the appointment of a high-ranking individual with 'credibility and experience' in the region, as opposed to a 'Beltway bureaucrat dropped in for "on the job training"', will energise a previously sluggish commitment to Arctic policy.

The first US oil-spill response drill was concluded in the Bering Strait on 17 July, and included participation from both the private and public sectors. The drill was the result of over two years of planning, and involved the participation of representative from the Department of Environmental Conservation, the US Coast Guard and private company Alaska Chadux. During a debriefing on 17 July, participants agreed that the drill had been useful in indicating a number of areas which need to be improved in coordination between the public and private sectors and local residents. Furthermore, while in general it has been known for a long time that one of the greatest difficulties faced during a clean-up operation is the lack of transport infrastructure in the region, the drill helped identify where new roads need to be built and old roads improved.

The wildfire season in Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT) continues to worsen. The Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC) reported on 17 July that there had been 31 new fires across Canada in the proceeding 24 hours, in addition to the over 2,500 that had been reported so far this year. In recent years, an average of two million hectares of forest has burnt down each year, a figure double that of the average in the 1970s. Mike Flannigan, professor of Wildland Fire in the University of Alberta's renewable resources department, has called the continuing increase in these figures 'an indicator of what to expect with climate change'. Climatologist Dave Phillips warned that the kind of weather seen so far this year matches the levels that global warming models had predicted for 40 years from now.

On the radar

- **A modified U-2 jet will be making repeat flights to the North Pole and back over the next couple of weeks** gathering data for on ice and water conditions for NASA.

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