

The weekly briefing | 31 March 2014

Political and security risk updates

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Africa

Somali government and African Union recapture town from al-Shabaab in renewed military offensive

In the latest advance against al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab, the Somali government and African Union forces have seized the town of El Bur in the central Somali Galgaduud region, a key outpost of the militant group. On 26 March, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) announced that, following a three-day operation, its forces regained control of the town 350 kilometres northeast of the capital, Mogadishu. Ethiopian and Somali troops were ambushed by militant fighters as they entered the town, and residents began to flee the area.

In contrast to earlier offensives, where al-Shabaab was subsequently able to reoccupy the town, the militant group is now considered to have been notably weakened by the recent operation. Four years ago, al-Shabaab controlled large areas in the centre and south of the country, including the majority of the capital, Mogadishu; however, since the beginning of the renewed AMISOM and government offensive in February, the group has been driven from 10 major towns. However they remain in control of a number of southern towns.



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Despite the renewed effort to combat the militants and the deployment of over 22,000 African Union troops and police personnel in Somalia, sporadic al-Shabaab attacks continue. Most recently, the presidential palace in Mogadishu was attacked in February. Political tensions within the country are adding another dimension to the fight against the group: on 24 March, the president of Somalia's northeastern Puntland State alleged that the separatist administration of Somaliland, which unilaterally declared its independence in 1991 (recognised internationally as an autonomous region), was financing al-Shabaab. Fighters fleeing from the AMISOM onslaught in southern and central Somalia are frequently passing through Somaliland and crossing into Puntland.

Other developments

The continuing Boko Haram insurgency has killed more than a thousand people in Nigeria since January, affecting at least three million people in total, according to the Nigerian Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). At least a quarter of a million civilians have been displaced in the predominantly Muslim northeast of the country, with the states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe being the worst affected. NEMA's assessment is one of the first official accounts of the devastating impact that the intensifying violence has had on Africa's leading oil-exporting country.

Kenya has ordered refugees living in urban areas to return to their camps in a security measure aimed at quelling retaliatory attacks by armed groups in response to Kenya's intervention in neighbouring Somalia. In his State of the Nation Address on 27 March, President Uhuru Kenyatta warned that the Jubilee government would not tolerate terrorist activities and announced a range of countermeasures, including increasing the police force and installing CCTV cameras across major cities. The resettlement of internally displaced civilians is ongoing, and Kenyans have been asked to report any refugees or illegal immigrants living outside the overcrowded camps of Dadaab and Kakuma. Neighbourhoods and refugee camps with large Somali populations have increasingly been used as bases to prepare retaliation attacks by al-Shabaab sympathisers.

A former Ivory Coast minister has been charged with committing crimes against humanity during the clashes following the 2010 elections. Charles Ble Goude, who led the Young Patriots militia, is a close ally of former President Laurent Gbagbo, who is also awaiting trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague. Ble Goude, whose extradition last week caused protest among Gbagbo supporters, is accused of being an 'indirect perpetrator' of crimes, including rape, murder and persecution. In the post-election violence between December 2010 and April 2011, an estimated 3,000 people were killed when Gbagbo refused to admit defeat against his rival Alassane Ouattara.

On the radar

- **The EU is urging African governments to attend the EU-Africa summit** commencing on 2 April, following an alleged boycott directive by the African Union.
- **Increased security expected in across Nigeria's capital, Abuja**, following recent gunfire.
- **Activist group Barakat! (Enough!) is planning to protest outside the provincial government headquarters in Béjaïa, Algeria**, on 2 April.
- **The UN Security Council is calling for continued international support for Sierra Leone following the closure of the UN mission** as the country enters a more development-focused stage.

Americas

President Maduro averts 'military coup' amid political crisis in Venezuela

On 25 March, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro announced the detention of three air force generals involved in an alleged anti-government conspiracy. It was said that the generals had fostered links with the opposition and had been denounced by fellow officers of the National Armed Forces of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (FANB). The affair was revealed at a meeting with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) commission, a regional delegation set up to broker a peaceful solution to the current crisis. Since the beginning of February, violent clashes between radical opposition groups and pro-government militia have erupted throughout the country. Both sides claim to represent the will of the people in a crisis that has turned into psychological warfare. On one hand, the opposition accuses the government of operating a terror campaign; on the other, the government denounces the opposition for nurturing an insurrection. In that sense, Maduro's recent public statement is part of a broader communication campaign to strengthen his legitimacy at home and also in the eyes of foreign observers.

Since the establishment of the Bolivarian Revolution under the now deceased former president, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez, a nexus of the civilian and the military sectors has governed the country. Even now, most of the cabinet members of the Maduro administration are military reservists, and the president of the national assembly and figurehead of the Bolivarian movement, Diosdado Cabello, a former soldier, was designated commander of the FANB last December. Historically, the Venezuelan military has played a prominent role in times of crisis by either supporting or undermining government rule. The memory of the 11 April 2002 coup attempt, which was supported by a fringe of the military and imprisoned Chávez for 48 hours, is still very much present, and Maduro has been working hard to retain the allegiance of the FANB during the current political crisis.

Regardless of the truth or not of the alleged plot involving three air force officers, recent events have demonstrated the ambiguous nature of Venezuela's military. Wary of this complexity, Maduro has attempted to consolidate the civilian-military bond by appointing notable members of his United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to prominent roles within the FANB. Moreover, most of the military officers that took part in the 2002 anti-Chavez coup were removed in subsequent purges. Hence, it is unlikely that a similar coup mounted by the opposition will take place in the current context. A more plausible scenario would be a 'soft coup' in which the military would refuse to follow government orders to repress activists. Nonetheless, the army has until now proved its allegiance to the Bolivarian Revolution in general and to Maduro's administration in particular.

Other developments

Bolivia has announced the creation of an anti-drug division in response to the rise of drug trafficking in the Santa Cruz department. Last week, the minister of the presidency, Carlos Romero, confirmed the creation of a military anti-drug division in the city of Yapacaní. The project is an initiative of President Evo Morales, and is funded by the European Union, in order to fight drug trafficking in the region. But local leaders have protested against the initiative, as they fear an escalation of violence. In the past two years, national authorities have seized 15 tons of cocaine and destroyed 6,000 drug laboratories in the area.

On 26 March, Paraguay endured its first national strike in 20 years. The strike was called by agricultural organisations and various labour unions that demanded better wages, a fairer agrarian reform and lower costs of public transport. According to the organisers, 80% of union members took part in the national strike, during which marches caused congestion in the country's capital, Asunción. President Horacio Cartes convened a roundtable and addressed some of the most salient issues. In recent years, the country has benefited from dramatic economic growth at the cost of rising inequality.

Last week, the Ministerial Police of the State of Michoacán, Mexico, arrested 11 false militiamen. At the start of the year, President Enrique Peña Nieto incorporated civilian vigilantes into a national coalition against drug cartels. But it has been revealed that some drug cartels, such as the Knights Templar, have in turn infiltrated the militias. Following similar arrests at the start of the month, the local authorities have stated that such abuses will not be tolerated. However, the recurrence of infiltration cases by criminal organisations seriously undermines the viability of the military-civil coalition.

On the radar

- **A special police operation is scheduled in the Río de Janeiro favela of Nova Holanda, Brazil,** in order to 'pacify' the area ahead of the FIFA World Cup in June.
- **Protests to continue in Venezuela's main cities amid the ongoing political crisis.**
- **2 April marks Malvinas Day in Argentina,** the 30th anniversary of the 1982 Falklands War.
- **11 April marks the anniversary of the failed coup attempt on former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2002.**

Asia and Pacific

North Korea launches two missiles into the Sea of Japan prior to high-level talks

North Korea launched two missiles at 02:35 local time on 26 March. They were medium-range Rodong ballistic missiles, which travelled approximately 400 miles before landing in the Sea of Japan. These most recent tests follow a number of short-range SCUD missile tests earlier this year, though this is the first time in nearly four years that North Korea has launched missiles of this range. The launch came several days before meetings between Japanese and North Korean officials began in Beijing on 30 March, attended by the Japanese foreign ministry's Asian and Oceanic Affairs Bureau chief, Junichi Ihara, and North Korean Ambassador Song Il Ho. This is the first official diplomatic meeting of Japanese and North Korean officials in over a year.

Despite the recent launches, the Japanese delegation seeks to negotiate with the North Koreans on the issue of international abduction. The North Korean government is allegedly responsible for ordering the abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s for the purpose of teaching North Korean spies about Japanese culture and society. In 2002, the North Korean authorities admitted to 13 kidnappings. Since then, North Korea has reported that eight of the abducted Japanese have died and the remaining five have returned home. Nevertheless, Tokyo has indicated that if progress can be made on this issue, they are willing to reduce sanctions on North Korea. Japan imposed unilateral sanctions on North Korea following a nuclear test and several missile launches in 2006. The sanctions prohibit the import of all North Korean goods, the export of luxury goods to North Korea, and port calls by North Korean ships.

The North Korean envoy has noted that no specific agenda has been set for the meeting. Song has, however, reportedly indicated that he is not precluding the possibility of reopening abduction investigations. Nevertheless, the North Korean government did agree to further investigate the issue in 2008 but failed to fulfil Japanese expectations. Japan and North Korea do not have formal diplomatic ties and it is unlikely that these talks will result in tangible progress towards establishing such ties, but may work to improve bilateral relations and reduce tensions surrounding the abduction issue.

Other developments

Large-scale demonstrations resumed in Bangkok, Thailand, on 29 March ahead of senate elections on 30 March. Protesters have called for the resignation of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who currently faces negligence charges surrounding a rice subsidy programme. Protests began in late 2013 and climaxed violently during January and February of 2014. In early March, protesters scaled back their demonstrations to public parks in Bangkok. Last week's demonstrations were not reported to be violent and were not expected to interfere with the elections. After the demonstrations, participants were reported to have returned to their positions in the public park area. Just over 30,000 people participated in the protests. After failed elections in February for Thailand's lower house of parliament, major political factions are struggling for control over the upper house of parliament.

On 29 March, Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou announced that protests by student groups in Taipei will not prevent a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Ma's government. On Monday 24 March, police violently removed hundreds of Taiwanese students from the Taiwanese government headquarters, which they had been occupying. Police employed water cannons and batons, leaving nearly 140 injured. Approximately 60 demonstrators were arrested. The students oppose a new Trade in Services Agreement with the Chinese mainland that, if approved, will promote cross-straits investment. The violence has stirred memories from 1947 when nationalist Guomindang forces killed more than 10,000 anti-government protesters in Taipei. Nevertheless, Ma's government believes that improving trade relations with the mainland will assist Taiwan in joining the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), spearheaded by the United States, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), consisting of 10 member states. Looking forward, tensions are likely to persist with protesting student groups, but further violence is unlikely.

Buddhist mobs in Rakhine State, Myanmar, attacked the residences and workplaces of foreign aid workers. Rakhine has often been the site of violent conflict between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Information from Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine, indicates that a foreign aid worker from the German organisation Malteser International reportedly disrespected a Buddhist flag. The worker is said to have removed the flag from the outside of organisation's building in Sittwe. Buddhist flags are being displayed on many buildings in their area to signal disapproval of Rohingya Muslims who are seen as unwelcome intruders from Bangladesh. The violence comes one month after the aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was expelled from the region. Meanwhile, Myanmar's first census has begun and is expected to be completed by 10 April. The census has provoked widespread international concern since the Rohingya are not officially recognised as an ethnic group. The census is likely to further agitate ethnic tensions in the region and the risk of ethnic conflict remains elevated.

On the radar

- **Increased security is expected in Karachi and Lahore, Pakistan**, following reports of terrorist threats at well-known historical sites.
- **Around 200 protesters are expected to gather at the information ministry building in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, on 31 March**, in an unauthorised protest organised by opposition activist and owner of Phnom Penh's Beehive radio station, Mam Sonando.
- **The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) has called for a rally on 5 April in Thailand**. The time and location have not yet been disclosed.
- **Increased security to be expected in India and Sri Lanka surrounding Puthandu (Tamil New Year) on 14 April**.
- **Heightened security expected during the final stage of sub-district elections in Bangladesh**.

Europe

The West coordinates further sanctions on Russia and expresses concern over the deployment of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border

At the EU-US summit in Brussels, the European Union and the United States confirmed their support for Ukraine and their unity in sanctions against Russia. The G7 met in Brussels on 24 March, the first time the leading industrialised countries have met without Russian involvement since 1998. The countries agreed to hold their own summit this June instead of attending the planned G8 Summit in Sochi, Russia. The G7 has agreed to suspend participation in the G8 unless Russia changed its stance on neighbouring Ukraine, and has warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that further destabilising activities in Ukraine will result in damaging economic sanctions for certain sectors of the Russian economy. It was also announced that the G7 countries' energy ministers are working to reduce their dependence on Russian oil and gas. On 28 March, the UN General Assembly approved a symbolic resolution designed to reaffirm the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and declared the Crimean referendum illegal (100 for, 11 against and 58 abstaining). A higher number of countries voted than anticipated, signifying that there is widespread international opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea. Before the vote, Vitaly Churkin, Russian ambassador to the United Nations, had tried to dissuade his counterparts, calling the resolution confrontational and arguing that it was counterproductive to challenging the referendum.

On 25 March, Oleksandr Turchynov, Ukraine's acting president, ordered Ukrainian troops to withdraw from the peninsula and the acting defence minister, Ihor Tenyukh, was later sacked after it emerged that only a quarter of troops stationed in Crimea were pledging allegiance to Ukraine. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, denied Russia had intentions to invade mainland Ukraine, despite a build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border. However, the head of NATO forces warned that the troops gathered for military exercises also posed a threat to other former Soviet Union countries. During the recent EU-US summit, the president of the European Council, Henry Van Rompuy, welcomed Russia's willingness to allow observers into Crimea and for meeting with the Ukrainian foreign minister. On 28 March, US President Barack Obama made contact with Vladimir Putin to urge the Russian president to remove Russian troops from the border and respond to diplomatic solutions put forward by the United States earlier in the week. The United States has estimated that 40,000 Russian troops are currently on the peninsula.

Ukraine took steps to move forward last week. On 28 March, Yulia Tymoshenko, the former Ukrainian prime minister, announced her intention to run for presidency in elections due to be held on 25 May after being released from jail last month after serving two years of a seven-year term issued in 2011. Tymoshenko has previously served twice as prime minister but narrowly lost to ousted President Viktor Yanukovich in the presidential elections in 2010. However, Tymoshenko has already been at the centre of a Russian smear campaign, when she was forced to deny the authenticity of a recording that urged the 'wiping out' of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. The recording was extensively broadcast on Russian television on 24 March. On 28 March, the IMF announced a pledge to provide the Ukrainian government with loans of up to \$18 billion in order to support the country's economy. Last week, the interim prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, also presented plans to put Ukraine back on track, including raising taxes, freezing the minimum wage, and increasing energy prices, and also warned that the country was facing bankruptcy. These reforms are likely to impact the vast majority of Ukrainians and could cost the current government power. On 28 March, the US Congress approved an Obama-backed aid package to Ukraine, which would provide the country with a \$1 billion loan; however, the House of Representatives is expected to vote again on 3 March to address oppositions to the bill before it is sent to the White House.

Other developments

The Turkish government has increased efforts control social media, with a new ban last week on YouTube after the website was used to spread an audio recording of a security meeting between government, military and spy officials discussing potential military action in Syria. Meanwhile, an administrative court in Ankara challenged the government on 26 March, overruling the ban on Twitter. The court ordered that the telecommunications regulator TIB reinstate access to the social media website within 30 days. Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc said that the company would obey the court order, though the decision could be appealed. On 25 March, the United Nations called for the Turkish government to cease the blocking of Twitter, claiming that Turkey could breach its international rights obligations.

Independent candidate Andrej Kiska has been elected as Slovak president. The 51-year-old millionaire entrepreneur, who does not have a communist past, co-founded a number of consumer loan companies before selling them to create Good Angel, a charity foundation that supports families and children suffering from serious illness and facing financial difficulty. He scored 59.4% of the vote, compared to current Prime Minister Robert Fico's 40.6%, during the presidential run-off on 29 March. Kiska has vowed to "re-establish the people's trust in the office of president" and make politics 'more human'. Kiska will be sworn in to office on 15 June.

On 27 March, the Kazakh Defence Ministry announced that Kazakhstan was immediately suspending all Russian rocket and missile tests on Kazakh territory. The decision came after a Russian meteorological rocket, launched from the Kapustin Yar testing site, crashed close to the village Shungai in West Kazakhstan. The Kazakh authorities stated that there had been no casualties or serious damage, but that further tests would not be carried out until the causes of the crash are known. Kapustin Yar testing site is a large facility reaching from the Russian southern Astrakhan Region to West Kazakhstan, which is rented from the Kazakh government. The Russian defence ministry claimed that the rocket had crashed due to a failure of the rocket's engine system. Despite close political and economic ties between the two countries, tensions have risen in recent years over unsuccessful rocket launches.

On the radar

- **EU-Africa Summit to be held in Brussels** on 2-3 April.
- **Public sector strike planned for 9 April in Greece**, in protest against the government's austerity measures.
- **US Secretary of State John Kerry is scheduled to meet the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov**, on 1 April.
- **Meeting of NATO ministers to be held** on 1 April in Brussels.
- **EU-US Energy Council to be held** on 2 April in Brussels.

Middle East

Egyptian court sentences 529 members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death

A court in the Egyptian city of Minya took just two sessions to sentence 529 members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death on 24 March. The defendants were charged with offences including the murder of a police officer, the attempted murder of two police officers, storming a police station and attacks on citizens and property. Sixteen people were acquitted because lawyers argued that they were unable to mount a defence before the judgement was made. Many of the defendants were arrested in the southern province of Minya following the forced dispersal of two pro-Morsi demonstrations in Cairo in August 2013. Over 900 people were killed in the subsequent unrest. Defence lawyers claim that the verdict is the largest mass death sentence handed out in Egypt's recent history.

This is the latest and most prominent action taken by the military-backed establishment in driving the Muslim Brotherhood underground. Egypt has been in turmoil since the military removed the democratically-elected Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, in July 2013. Pro-Brotherhood supporters have staged regular rallies and protests in defiance of the current government. Some 16,000 political dissidents have since been arrested, though the real figure may be as high as 23,000. The same court adjourned a second mass trial of 683 defendants and pro-Morsi supporters on 25 March for charges relating to murder, inciting violence and sabotage. Sentencing is now due to take place at a hearing on 28 April. The mass sentencing has brought the integrity of the Egyptian legal system into question and Brotherhood supporters accuse the court of acting on behalf of the military. In contrast, a police captain found guilty of gassing to death 37 prisoners in August 2013 received a more lenient 10-year jail sentence.

The draconian sentences issued by the court have attracted widespread condemnation, both domestically and abroad, and the United Nations has expressed concerns over the fairness of the trial that took place over the duration of two days. In Egypt, students and demonstrators have clashed with police in Minya and Alexandria. However, the interim government has defended the court's decision. It is unlikely that the sentencing will be carried out, given the widespread condemnation and the adjournment of a similar trial on the following day; a retrial is likely to be filed. The government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood will continue and further trials can be expected.

Other developments

Two employees of the United Nations, an Italian diplomat and his Yemeni driver, were kidnapped and freed unharmed in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa on 25 March. Their vehicle was seized by gunmen in the Hada district of the city before being freed by Yemeni security forces hours later. Police officers tracked the kidnappers to a house and following an initial exchange of gunfire, negotiated the release of the hostages. Kidnapping is common in Yemen and the country's security situation remains volatile. Those involved in kidnapping vary from opportunists, tribesmen seeking to resolve disputes with the government and militia intent on terrorising foreign visitors to the country.

The Taliban has stepped up its campaign of violence in the run up to Afghanistan's presidential election next month. Insurgents attacked an electoral commission office in Kabul on 25 March, killing five people. Suicide bombers also attacked a bank in Kunar province and a sporting event in Kunduz, killing at least 10 people. On 28 March, Taliban insurgents also attacked a Kabul guesthouse used by a US-based aid group. Afghan security forces killed five attackers and safely evacuated several foreigners working for Roots of Peace. Further incidents of violence are highly likely in the run up to the poll.

Field Marshall Abdul Fattah al-Sisi stepped down from his role as Egypt's military chief and announced his presidential bid on 26 March. The announcement has long been speculated and al-Sisi is expected to become Egypt's next president given the lack of legitimate opponents and the current crackdown on those that criticise the military-backed government. Al-Sisi was responsible for the overthrow of Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, the suspension of the constitution and the introduction of a technocratic interim government. The widespread crackdown on supporters of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood has subsequently divided the country and al-Sisi remains a controversial figure. Elections have yet to be confirmed but are expected to take place in July.

On the radar

- **Afghanistan's presidential election is scheduled to take place on 5 April.**
- **A report from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) says that Syria has pledged to remove all chemical weapons by 13 April.**
- **Unofficial campaigning will begin in Iraq as parliamentary candidates seek to gain a foothold ahead of elections on 30 April.**
- **15 April marks the anniversary of the rioting in Ahwas, Iran, in 2005,** which resulted in the deaths of approximately 100 people.
- **Lebanon's first offshore gas bidding round is due to open on 10 April.** Investment in Lebanon's natural gas deposits will be welcomed, as the country is battling with the overspill from Syria's conflict.

Polar regions

Russian President Vladimir Putin orders Arctic army development

Russian President Vladimir Putin has called for officers and bureaucrats of the armed forces and defence ministry to implement the development of an increasingly sophisticated Russian military presence in the Arctic. The Russian president charged the heads of the relevant institutions with the task during a speech given in the Kremlin to formalise the promotions of various high-ranking officers on 28 March. According to the Kremlin's website, Putin also placed a special emphasis on Arctic military development during a briefing with the Security Council later on the same day. The Security Council is a government body that unites representatives of the executive with various heads of ministries to discuss foreign policy and security concerns.

Russia has already strengthened its military presence in the Arctic in the last few years. Particular focus has been on the western part of the Arctic and the Barents Sea; the area is not only the most developed part of the Russian Arctic and the most crucial for Russia's economic strategy but, as Putin warned in a speech last year, also presents a possible avenue of attack for US submarines carrying nuclear warheads. Russia's Northern Fleet based out of the Murmansk region is to receive new submarines to counter this potential threat. Russia's military build-up in the Arctic has notably accelerated over the last year with: the reopening of formerly abandoned Soviet-era bases (first in the New Siberian Islands and more recently in the Kola Peninsula); the Northern Fleet exercises conducted along the Northern Sea Route last autumn; and exercises conducted by other divisions of the armed forces, most notably an airdrop operation in the New Siberian Islands, of a scale and technical sophistication unprecedented in the Arctic.

While Putin's military interest in the Arctic is not a new phenomenon, the international environment in which this development is taking place has changed dramatically over the last few weeks in reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea. The Arctic NATO states of the United States, Canada and Norway have all cancelled joint military exercises with Russia, and on 18 March former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called on Canada and the United States to present a united front against what she portrayed as 'heightened aggression' by Russia in the Arctic. With rhetoric heating up in both Eastern and Western foreign policy announcements, and the withdrawal of information sharing as a result of cancelled joint exercises, the situation in the Arctic, particularly in the Barents Sea, has become increasingly unpredictable. Nevertheless, while such unpredictability is unwelcome, the existence of immediate threats in the Arctic should not be exaggerated: the meeting of Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council went ahead with Russian participation this week, providing a reassuring sign that despite posturing, the long history of close cooperation between Arctic states continues to prove more valuable than short-term political goals.

Other developments

Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) met at Yellowknife, Canada, on 25-27 March, in the second meeting of SAOs to take place under Canada's current chairmanship of the Arctic Council. The SAOs approved a number of proposed and ongoing projects at the meeting. These included the creation of an Arctic Economic Council and a report into a set of guidelines into systems safety management for Arctic offshore oil and gas developments. Chair of the Senior Arctic Officials, Patrick Borbey, was quoted as being 'pleased with the meeting outcomes', remarking that the officials and working groups are 'making good progress on the Council's priority initiatives'.

Russia's Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) has opened a new analytical centre, in the northern city of Arkhangelsk, tasked with focusing on Russian security policy in the Arctic. The analytical centre is based at the Northern Arctic Federal University (NArFU), one of Russia's specially funded research centres and also an active participant in the international coalition of northern research centres known as the University of the Arctic. While the director of the RISS, Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov, used his speech at the 27 March opening ceremony to criticise US and EU foreign policy over Ukraine, he also pledged that the centre is open for cooperation with other international research institutions.

Russian aerial military exercises conducted close to the Finnish border on the evening of 26 March caused some concern for the residents of a number of Finnish towns, who contacted local rescue services to report sightings of what they believed to be emergency flares. The reports came in from the eastern Finnish towns of Imatra, Joensuu, Kuopio, Iloantsi, Rantasalmi and Puumala. Finland's defence ministry declined to comment on the matter.

On the radar

- **Economists and business owners in Finland are closely watching the exchange rate of the Russian rouble.** Already hit by foreign investor panic in the wake of the Crimea crisis, a further dip as a result of a possible expansion of economic sanctions could drive many Finnish businesses dependent on the Russian export market to bankruptcy.
- **Lufthansa pilots have called a three-day strike to begin on 1 April.** The strike is likely to cause the cancellation of hundreds of flights, including many to Nordic countries and Russia.
- **An Arctic Shipping Forum will be held on 8-10 April in Helsinki, Finland.** Ship design for ice-going vessels will be discussed in light of the International Marine Organisation's recommendations under the new Polar Code.

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