

Main opposition CHP questions Turkey's oil deal with KRG

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.06.2014



Turkey's main opposition party has submitted a motion to launch a parliamentary investigation over the government's decision to commence the shipment of Kurdish oil to world markets.

Ankara and Arbil signed the deal without the consent of the central government in Iraq. The Republican People's Party (CHP) has argued this move risks regional stability and Turkey's relations with Iraq and the international community. A senior Kurdish Regional Government leader announced that the energy deal signed between Ankara and Erbil will be valid for 50 years.

Faruk Logoglu, deputy leader of the CHP, submitted the motion to the parliamentary speaker's office June 5 and underlined that launching a parliamentary investigation has become "vital" for developing a national policy for Iraqi oil. The CHP's move came just after the first shipping of oil extracted by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) late May that chilled ties between Ankara and Baghdad, as the latter issued an international complaint against the Turkish government. The Iraqi central government and KRG have not yet been able to agree how to control the country's rich oil and natural gas reserves and how to share revenues. Turkey says it will comply with the Iraqi Constitution that allocates 17 percent of revenues to the KRG and 83 percent to the central government.

The cargo of Kurdish oil left Turkey on May 22 aboard a United Leadership tanker, but has not left the Mediterranean Sea, as potential buyers of the oil Italy and Germany decided not to receive the shipment due to Iraq's reaction. "The shipment of northern Iraqi oil from Turkey creates tension in three different layers," Logoglu said, explaining Ankara's move will hamper efforts between Arbil and Baghdad from coming to a solution. "This is a negative development with regard to Iraq's internal comfort, territorial integrity and stability," he said. Secondly, this decision would hurt Turkey-Iraq bilateral ties, as well as Turkey's relations with other neighboring countries, he stressed, adding this situation would hurt the country's long-term interests in the region.

For Logoglu, the reaction issued by the international community constitutes the third problem for Turkey, as the shipment and the deal Ankara signed with Arbil were violating not only the Iraqi Constitution, but also international law. Recalling that the United States administration urged Turkey not to undergo this shipment on the grounds that this move was against the stability and development of Iraq, Logoglu warned "this could also ruin Ankara's relations with Washington." "Finally, the deal Turkey signed with the KRG without Baghdad's consent is neither serving for regional peace, nor for our country's relations with neighbors and is ruining our ties with the rest of the world," he added.

Erdogan to seek Turkish presidency

Reuters, 31.05.2014



Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan will be Turkey's next president until 2023 and parliament will change the constitution to bestow more powers on the office, a senior party official said on Saturday.

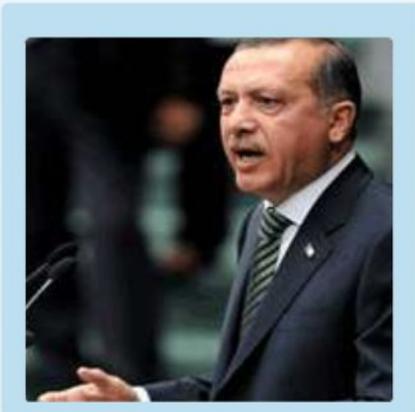
Turkey's most dominant politician in generations, Prime Minister Erdogan has said he will run for office if his party asks him to, but has yet to announce his candidacy for an August election. The three-time prime minister is widely expected to become Turkey's first directly elected president after constitutional changes made in 2007. So far he has no rival for the race.

"Erdogan will continue to serve the people. In fact he will continue as president," said Mehmet Ali Sahin, deputy chairman of the ruling AK Party and a former cabinet minister. Sahin said he expected the AK Party to take more seats in a 2015 general election, enough to change the constitution and allow Erdogan to remain the head of his party, rather than being a supposedly neutral head of state, as is currently required. "That way Erdogan will be president as a member of a political party, and he will continue to serve our people until 2023," Sahin said in comments broadcast by NTV news channel. Erdogan remains Turkey's most popular politician despite a corruption scandal and last year's anti-government protests; the biggest Turkey has since in more than 30 years.

Under current rules, the president must cut ties with political parties and has powers that are largely ceremonial. The office is now held by Erdogan's political ally Abdullah Gul. The party failed to gather enough support from rival parties in parliament to change the constitution in a push in 2011. Even without a change in the charter, Erdogan is expected to stamp his strong personality on the office and give it more authority, exercising its full powers if elected. Opposition parties have not yet come up with their own candidates but warn that a President Erdogan with greater powers, a strong grip on most state institutions and few challengers, would make Turkey a more autocratic place.

Erdogan to grow more powerful as president, Turkey more polarized

Reuters, 04.06.2014



On the first anniversary of nationwide Gezi Park protests that shook Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's rule, barely a thousand anti-government demonstrators marched in Istanbul on Saturday. Outnumbered by riot police, they were soon sent scurrying into side streets by tear gas and water cannon.

Their scant numbers were an illustration of Prime Minister Erdogan's tightening grip on power despite a year punctuated by street protests, international criticism of his response on the protests and much troubling allegations of government corruption.

Erdogan, an aide told Turkish television the same day, would remain in power until 2023, having won a presidential election that will be held in August. Changes to the constitution would bestow greater powers on the presidency, the aide predicted. Interviews with those close to him reveal more detail about the shape of a future Erdogan presidency. A "council of wise men" - made up partly of close allies in his current cabinet - would help oversee top government business, senior officials told Reuters, effectively relegating some ministries to technical and bureaucratic roles. "They will work with Erdogan on important subjects in the presidential palace. You could call them wise men, an advisory council, a shadow cabinet," one senior figure in the ruling AK Party said, with energy policy, the Kurdish peace process and elements of foreign policy likely to be among them. "The presidency's weight will be felt more in decisions."

Erdogan has yet to announce his candidacy in the August vote but has made no secret of his ambition to run. Those around him say the decision is made. The results of municipal polls on March 30, when the AK Party won 43 percent of the national vote, suggest a majority in the first round could be within his reach, especially if he secures the support of the Kurdish minority. "There is no longer a question mark," a senior official from Erdogan's AK Party told Reuters. "Barring an extraordinary situation, Erdogan will announce his candidacy and we expect him to win in the first round." Erdogan may not yet have engineered the full presidential system he wants for Turkey, but he has made clear that the direct nature of August's vote - previous presidents were appointed by parliament - will enable him to exercise stronger powers than incumbent President Abdullah Gul.

Gul's role has been largely ceremonial. Under the current constitution, presidents have the authority to appoint the prime minister, convene and chair cabinet meetings, and head the national security council and the state supervisory council, which audits public bodies. "There are many dormant powers that a President Erdogan could use," said Jonathan Friedman, Turkey analyst at London-based global risk consultancy Control Risks. "Policy in the AK Party has long been made by Erdogan and a small coterie of advisers ... This will continue from (the presidency) - and is why having a pliant successor as prime minister to coordinate MPs and pass laws is key."



Erdogan is barred from standing for a fourth term as prime minister by AK Party rules, which stipulate members of parliament who have served three terms must subsequently be out of office for one. The regulation, which Erdogan has made clear he is opposed to changing, will also exclude 73 MPs from candidacy in the 2015 parliamentary election, pointing to a significant cabinet reshuffle and major overhaul of the AK Party ranks. Senior party officials said Erdogan was keen to select a prime minister and new head of the AK Party who would be unencumbered by the three-term limit and able to hold the post for two terms, with current Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Deputy Prime Minister Emrullah Isler among the favorites. Another long-mooted possibility - that Gul would succeed Erdogan as prime minister - now appears unlikely after Gul in April appeared to rule out such a move, saying it would not be “appropriate” for democracy.

Some senior deputies facing a term outside parliamentary office were likely to be among Erdogan’s “council of wise men”, including Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog, Energy Minister Taner Yildiz and deputy Prime Ministers Bulent Arinc and Besir Atalay. “Ultimately it is Erdogan who will have the final word in all decisions like this,” a senior party official said. Residents in some areas hung out of windows banging pots and pans - a traditional sign of protest - as demonstrators chanting for Erdogan to resign were chased by riot police on Saturday, but much of the energy has gone from a protest movement which, a year ago, sustained week after week of street demonstrations. Erdogan has variously dismissed the protesters as vandals, terrorists and anarchists and his party’s strong showing in the March polls has reinforced the sense that his rise, despite polarizing the country ever further, is unstoppable. His rhetoric plays on a schism in Turkish society between a western-facing, largely secular segment of the population suspicious of his conservative Islamic ideals and a pious, working-class mass who see him as a hero for returning religious values to public life and driving a decade of growth.

It is a strategy, his opponents say, which sees him deliberately appeal to only the half of the population while ignoring the rest. Yet even Erdogan’s critics acknowledge that he has overseen Turkey’s transformation from a financial backwater into one of the world’s most dynamic economies, a record which means that a narrow majority of voters - as well as investors - have kept giving him the benefit of the doubt. “One of the greatest fears is that the government will make populist policies, which will grossly affect growth, but they haven’t done that yet,” said an Ankara-based diplomat, asking not to be identified so as to speak more freely. “Erdogan is a smart man, he can turn the bleakest situations to his advantage. He is only focused on the 50 percent. His only point of reference is to stay in power,” he said. “He’s as pragmatic as you can get.”

Turkey plans tax amnesty ahead of presidential polls

Bloomberg HT, 04.06.2014



Republic of Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's ruling AK Party (Welfare and Development Party) is planning a tax amnesty that could see billions of lira worth of unpaid taxes pardoned in the run-up to an August presidential election he is expected to contest.

A draft bill discussed by parliament's planning and budgetary commission on Wednesday could raise renewed concern about political interference in Turkey's economic management. Prime Minister Erdogan has already faced criticism over his public entreaties to the central bank to cut interest rates.

The bill, which was seen by Reuters and could become law before the AKP-dominated parliament goes into recess at the end of June, would grant an amnesty for some taxes left unpaid by individuals, and resulting fines and accumulated interest prior to April 30. Government officials, who declined to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue, said the draft had been prepared by ruling party lawmakers at Erdogan's bidding without full consultation with the finance ministry.

"Prime Minister Erdogan has personally convinced economy officials on this ... Prior to the presidential polls, Erdogan is taking some steps that will draw support from the people," one of the officials said. A second official said the move was "fulfilling the requirements of the current political environment, not necessarily those of the economy". Erdogan's office had no immediate comment.

Investor concern about Turkey's economic management in the run-up to elections had already been highlighted by Erdogan's hectoring of the central bank over its interest rate policy. The central bank cut interest rates for the first time in a year last month, despite high inflation, after calls for such a move from Erdogan, eager to maintain economic growth as Turks go to the polls. Erdogan later said the cut had not been deep enough. He has yet to announce his candidacy in the presidential election but has made no secret of his ambition to run. An aide at the weekend predicted he would remain in power until 2023 after winning the presidency and that the constitution would be changed to bestow the role with greater powers.

"To shut out the finance authority from a plan that is key to budget finances gives us a picture on how economic policies are run," said Ugur Gurses, a former central banker and newspaper columnist. "It is obvious -- the prime minister has demanded it, and it is done," he told Reuters. Turkey has seen a decade of rising living standards under Erdogan and has built a reputation for fiscal discipline, cutting its public debt to one of the lowest among its peers as a percentage of national output. But memories of heavy and conspicuous spending in the run-up to elections in the pre-Erdogan 1990s, particularly on roads and other infrastructure projects, still fuel worries that a burst of public spending ahead of the polls could fuel inflation.

Turkey's presidential election caught on OSCE radar

Hurriyet Daily News, 05.06.2014



Irregularities and controversies that forced authorities to cancel some of the March 30 local election results in Turkey have moved Europe's security body to announce that a mission will observe Turkey's upcoming first direct presidential election.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe undertook a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) to Turkey between May 7 and 9 upon an official invitation from the Turkish authorities to observe the presidential election which will be held in two rounds in August.

"The majority of OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors expressed a certain level of confidence in the electoral process and referenced the country's long-standing tradition of democratic practices," said a report, drafted after this mission and dated June 3, in its "Conclusions and Recommendations" section. "However, they also raised particular concern with the new legal framework and its possible gaps and shortcomings and noted a recent weakening of general public confidence in the authorities, particularly following the recent local elections," added the report. "Some previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed and most OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors stated that they would welcome an OSCE/ODIHR observation activity for the upcoming election, with some having emphasized the necessity of the OSCE/ODIHR's longer-term presence.

A number of aspects could merit attention by an OSCE/ODIHR election observation activity, including the new legal framework; campaign finance provisions; the conduct of the electoral campaign; and the work of the media," it said. Turkish officials in Ankara played down the significance of the conclusions of the report "This will not be the first time that a team from the OSCE will observe elections in Turkey," a senior Foreign Ministry official, speaking under customary condition of anonymity, told the Hurriyet Daily News yesterday. "Turkey has a democratic tradition which is older than half-century. In the end, the observation of elections will display the maturity of democracy in Turkey, so this is favorable."

The OSCE report was apparently delicately tailored, so as to avoid angering the government of Turkey, which has been a member of the 57-member body since its very inception in 1975, when it was formed as a standing conference. Still, possible issues that could ultimately lead to flaws in regards to election results were delicately noted in the report. "The campaign period commences on the day the candidate list is finalized on July 11. An active and possibly tense campaign is expected, which will likely continue to focus on national issues raised during the recent local elections such as recent anti-government protests and alleged corruption involving state officials.

OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors did not raise concerns as to the ability of candidates to campaign freely, although some noted possible intimidation of voters and the potential misuse of administrative resources by the governing party,” said the report, which is an outcome of the mission aimed at assessing the pre-election environment and preparations for the presidential election. The report, meanwhile, made a point of offering thanks to the Turkish Foreign Ministry “for its assistance and cooperation in organizing the NAM,” as well as to its interlocutors. The stakes are growing with deepening tension and polarization in the country in the run-up to the August vote.

Although not having yet officially declared his candidacy, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is widely expected to run in August, and the results of municipal polls on March 30, when the AKP won 43 percent of the national vote, suggest a majority in the first round could be within his reach. The president of the Republic of Turkey will be elected with an absolute majority of valid votes. If no candidate receives the majority of the votes in the first round scheduled for Aug. 10, a second round of voting will take place on Aug. 24 between the two candidates receiving the most votes in the first round. In partial reruns of the March 30 local polls, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost out in two provinces on June 1, but won in five of 13 district municipalities.

Bitten by sanctions, Iranians support nuclear compromise

Natural Gas Europe, 11.04.2014



After years of tough sanctions over Iran’s nuclear program, many in the country now say they want the government to make compromises that could satisfy world powers and allow a semblance of prosperity to return.

Although many Iranians still believe in their country’s right to all aspects of a civilian nuclear program, they are increasingly tired of the high economic price. That weariness will form the backdrop on June 16 when Iran’s political leaders send negotiators to Geneva for talks with six world powers aimed at hammering out an agreement that swaps concessions on uranium enrichment for sanctions relief.

“I love my country but I love my family more, and for years I have worked hard to cope with the rising prices,” said Ali Mirzai, a father of three in the northern city of Rasht. “I am tired. My only hope now is (President Hassan) Rouhani. He is trying to improve the economy by resolving the nuclear issue. I believe in him and his policies.” Mirzai, like millions of Iranians who bore the brunt of the sanctions, voted last year for pragmatist Rouhani after he promised to improve the flagging economy in part by striking a deal with the outside world. Although there are no reliable opinion polls in Iran, Rouhani’s large margin of victory on a platform of compromise, and anecdotal evidence gleaned from recent telephone interviews across the country suggest strong public appetite for a deal. “Rouhani and his team will solve this issue.



I am sure his moderate and compromising policy will work. We don't need hostility," said Arvin Sadri, 31, who runs his father's furniture factory in the northern holy city of Mashhad. After several rounds of talks last year, a preliminary deal was penned in Geneva in November, including a limited easing of sanctions in exchange for Iran halting some nuclear activities. The agreement took effect on Jan. 20, and was designed to buy time for a final deal within six months. As the deadline fast approaches, the lifting of some sanctions has given Iranians a taste of how things might improve. Maryam Simai, 41, a schoolteacher in the central city of Yazd said she supports the atomic program and believes sanctions are unfair. But she still favors compromise. "I want to live in peace. I don't want to fear for the future of my children. The tension with the international community and sanctions have ruined our economy and has isolated us," she said.

If a lifting of sanctions is important to many Iranians, it is vital for the political hopes of Rouhani, a self-proclaimed moderate who has pledged to boost the economy. "A deal with the world powers will bring political and economic stability to Iran. Rouhani's political future depends on this deal. He will become a lame duck president if he fails to reach a deal," said political analyst Hasan Feghhi. Analysts and economists say he has only partially succeeded in repairing economic damage that Iran suffered during years of confrontation with the West, particularly under his hardline predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The official inflation rate has halved to around 20 percent since Rouhani's election, but unemployment remains around 30 percent and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Meanwhile, Iran's rial has dropped against the U.S. dollar. "I support my country's nuclear achievements but at the same time I don't think it is logical to pay a heavy price for it," said Jinus Dadgostar, 18, who lives in the affluent neighborhood of Zaferaniyeh in northern Tehran. Years of official rhetoric denying that sanctions were hurting and glorifying the country's supposed self-reliance resonated with some Iranians, who said they were happy to suffer to defend a program that came to symbolize national pride.

However, Iran's traditionally cautious clerical rulers, loath to incite any Arab Spring-style domestic unrest or provoke harsher international action, have adopted more emollient language in recent months, diplomats said. "Iran's clerical rulers need this deal to guarantee their power. That is why they have changed their tone," said a Tehran-based western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity. But because a failure of talks would rebound even harder on pragmatist Rouhani and his allies, they can still afford to take a harder position than the president, the diplomat added. "No deal or a bad deal will strengthen hardliners in Iran."

Rouhani's position is made more complicated because although his status as president gives him a big say, it is lower in Iran's political hierarchy than that of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the last word on the nuclear file. Backing away from atomic defiance could be politically tricky for Khamenei, who has supported hardline positions on the nuclear file in the past. But, for now, he appears to fear the economic problems caused by sanctions could weaken his position and he has cautiously backed the talks, calling for "heroic flexibility" but still expressing pessimism about the outcome. "The members of the team work under direct guidance of the leader (Khamenei). Everything is being reported to him and he sets the tone for the Iranian negotiators," said a senior Iranian official, who asked to be unnamed. One sign of Khamenei's current support for some form of compromise can be deciphered in the hardline media, which has started publishing articles that justify a more conciliatory approach, often citing economic hardship.

Oil exports account for around 60 percent of Iran's economy, much of its food and animal feed come from abroad, and many of its factories assemble goods from imported parts. I am tired of this nuclear dispute. For years we feared further economic pressure and possible military action. A nuclear deal is our only chance to live in peace," said interior designer Mastaneh Alavi in the northwestern city of Tabriz. But many Iranians contacted by Reuters still argued for a "balanced" nuclear deal, saying it would be unfair to deny their country a technology possessed by Pakistan, India and Israel. "As our leader said, we will not accept closure of our nuclear facilities," said Asghar Seydani, 38, who is a member of the hardline Basij militia in the western city of Kermanshah.

"No sir, I will not accept it. If necessary, I am ready to sacrifice my blood for continuation of our nuclear activities." From businessmen in Tehran to housewives in Shiraz, many Iranians dread possible consequences of failure of the talks including further sanctions and even military attack. The United States and Iran's arch foe Israel have not ruled out military action if diplomacy fails to resolve Iran's nuclear dispute. However, analysts say such an attack could well consolidate the clerical establishment's power. Khamenei, for his part, said on Wednesday he did not consider a military strike was an option for the United States. "America has now understood that a military attack is not a priority. They know that such attacks are even more dangerous for the attacker than for the country attacked."

Nearly 800 killed in Iraq's bloodiest month this year

World Bulletin, 01.06.2014



Nearly 800 people were killed in violence across Iraq in May, the United Nations said on Sunday, making it the deadliest month so far this year. Of the total 799 people killed, 196 were members of the Iraqi security forces, and the rest were civilians - often victims of attacks by Sunni Islamist insurgents who have been regaining ground and momentum in Iraq over the past year.

The real toll is in fact higher because the UN figures do not include casualties in the western province of Anbar, where the Iraqi army has been fighting tribal and insurgent groups since they overran two cities at the start of the year.

Despite deteriorating security, Iraq's incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki won the largest share of parliamentary seats in national elections last month, dealing a blow to his opponents who blame him for leading the country to ruin. Bloodshed remains below the levels seen in 2006 and 2007 when sectarian Shi'ite-Sunni killings reached their peak, but last year was Iraq's deadliest since violence began to ease in 2008. "I strongly deplore the sustained level of violence and terrorist acts that continues rocking the country," UN envoy to Iraq Nikolay Mladenov said in a statement. "I urge the political leaders to work swiftly for the formation of an inclusive government within the constitutionally mandated timeframe and focus on a substantive solution to the situation in Anbar."

Turkey calls on international community to lend support to new Palestinian government

Hurriyet Daily News, 03.06.2014



Ankara has voiced support for the new unified government between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas and has urged the international community to also support the move. Ankara believes the newly formed government will eventually help build sustainable peace in the Middle East for long lasted confrontation.

“The unity of the Palestinian people is indispensable for the building of a just and viable peace in the region. With this new government eliminating the rift between Palestinians, the first step toward this direction has been taken.

We believe the arrangements within the PLO's structure and elections expected to take place in the upcoming period will strengthen democratic legitimacy in Palestine,” the Foreign Ministry said in a written statement released late June 2 when it welcomed the new government and congratulated all Palestinian people. “We call on the international community to support this development, which aims at uniting the national democratic will of the Palestinian people,” the ministry said. Abbas was sworn into the government on June 2 in a reconciliation deal with Hamas that has led Israel to freeze the U.S.-brokered peace talks. “Turkey will continue supporting a just and permanent peace in the region on the basis of a two-state resolution vision and being in solidarity with the fraternal Palestinian people in their struggle for having an independent and sovereign state,” the ministry statement concluded, reiterating Turkey's well-known position.

U.S. insists Assad must go, but expects he will stay

Reuters, 01.06.2014



Since Syrians rose up more than three years ago against longtime President Bashar al-Assad, U.S. President Barack Obama has had a clear message: Assad must go. Now, even as the United States seeks to increase support to moderate rebels to fight his regime, U.S. officials privately concede Assad isn't going anywhere soon.

The contrast between public rhetoric and private expectations reflects the Obama administration's struggle to address the increasingly complex, messy conflict in Syria, which is pitting world powers against one another - from Moscow to Tehran and Washington.

It also points to a continuation of the administration's policy of supporting Syria's neighbors and providing small-scale armed assistance to moderate rebels to fight the regime, while ruling out large-scale U.S. involvement that officials fear would lead to another Iraq or Afghanistan. Assad's allies portray him as confident and in control ahead of a presidential election on Tuesday that the United States dismisses as a farce with the opposition largely unrepresented and unable to participate. Obama said on May 28 he would work with Congress "to ramp up support for those in the Syrian opposition who offer the best alternative" to Assad and to extremists who could be more dangerous for the United States than Assad himself.

But despite that support, senior U.S. officials acknowledge in interviews the difficulty of removing Assad, who said in April the three-year war had swung decisively in his favor. "I don't think anybody is under the impression that you're going to see a dramatic change in the near term in terms of the situation on the ground in Syria," said a senior U.S. official, who declined to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject. Details of the new U.S. assistance are largely unclear, but a proposed counterterrorism fund may help Syria's neighbors such as Jordan manage the flow of weapons, refugees and extremists out of Syria, a senior U.S. defense official said. The U.S. military may also train moderate rebels outside Syria, the officials said.

"The types of changes and programs that we are talking about are not intended to or likely to produce a dramatic change in immediate weeks," the senior U.S. administration official said. Assad, with support from Russia, Iran and fighters from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, has used tanks and warplanes to attack rebel-held areas. His opponents accuse him of using poison gas to force civilians in rebel areas to submission. Obama's Syria policy has faced intense criticism on multiple fronts, most notably for failing to follow through after declaring Syria's use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line" and be met with force. As the conflict deepens, Syria's neighbors Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon are struggling to contain the effects.

Lebanon is grappling with a refugee population that has increased the tiny country's population by a quarter; Iraq is beating back a surge in militant violence driven at least in part by Syria; and Assad's staying power has left Turkey's leadership frustrated and exposed. "He may be elected to be president of Syria, but he won't control Syria," General Martin Dempsey, the top U.S. military officer, said in a recent interview with Reuters and the Pentagon's news service. The scale of the suffering in Syria today would have been unimaginable in 2011, when the Arab Spring uprising toppled strongmen across the region and many Western officials felt confident Assad would meet the same fate. More than 160,000 people have been killed and much of the country is in ruins. Some 2.7 million people, or more than 10 percent of Syria's population, have fled the country. Millions more are displaced within Syria. The United States has provided more aid than any other country, providing more than \$250 million in "non-lethal support" to opposition groups including communications kits and trucks.

But its steps to strengthen the rebels' military capacity have been less sure-footed. Last year, the administration began a small-scale covert program to train moderate rebel fighters in Jordan, but U.S. officials said they did not expect that alone would give rebel fighters a decisive edge. Under the threat of U.S. airstrikes, Assad agreed with the United States and Russia in September to dispose of Syria's entire chemical weapons arsenal. It still possesses a significant amount of its declared chemical stocks and has not yet destroyed a dozen production and storage facilities. International efforts to bring Syria's warring sides together to agree on a political transition have failed. Like others before him, Syrian mediator Lakhdar Brahimi quit out of frustration, blaming an international deadlock that hampered his ability to broker peace. "The choice for the administration right now is whether to accept this sort of de facto uneasy partition of Syria, or to try to do something to roll it back," said Fred Hof, a former State Department special envoy for Syria who is now a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center.

Bashar al-Assad wins re-election in Syria as uprising against him rages on

The Guardian, 04.06.2014



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been re-elected as the result of the elections in a landslide, officials said on Wednesday, capturing another seven-year term in the middle of a bloody three-year-old uprising against his rule that has devastated the country.

Syria's parliament speaker, Jihad Laham, announced the final results from Tuesday's election, saying Assad garnered 10,319,723 votes, or 88.7%. Laham said Assad's two challengers, Hassan al-Nouri and Maher Hajjar, won 4.3% and 3.2% respectively. The supreme constitutional court put turnout at 73.42%.



After the results were released, Damascus erupted into a thunderous, rolling clap of celebratory gunfire that appeared to include heavy weaponry. On the streets of the capital, men cheered and whistled. Some broke into the familiar pro-Assad chant: “With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Bashar!” Assad’s victory was always a foregone conclusion, despite the presence of other candidates on the ballot for the first time in decades. Voting was held only in government-controlled areas, excluding huge tracks of northern and eastern Syria that are in rebel hands. The opposition and its western allies, including the United States, have denounced the election as a farce. The win boosts Assad’s support base, and provides further evidence that he has no intention of relinquishing power.

For the first time in decades, there were multiple candidates on the ballot. In previous presidential elections, Assad and before him his father, Hafez Assad, were elected in single candidate referendums in which voters cast yes-no ballots. The government has sought to present this vote as a democratic solution to Syria’s three-year conflict, although a win for Assad is certain to prolong the war. Much of northern and eastern Syria is in rebel hands, and those in the armed opposition show no signs of relenting in their fight to oust Assad. The war, which activists say has killed more than 160,000 people, has left the international community deeply divided, with the US and its allies backing the revolt against Assad, who enjoys the support of Russia and Iran.

That division persisted in perceptions of Tuesday’s vote. In Beirut, US secretary of state John Kerry sharply criticized the Syrian election, calling it “a great big zero.” He said it can’t be considered fair “because you can’t have an election where millions of your people don’t even have an ability to vote.” “Nothing has changed from the day before the election and the day after. Nothing,” Kerry said during a one-day visit to the Lebanese capital. “The conflict is the same, the terror is the same, the killing is the same.” The European Union joined the US in condemning the election, saying in a statement that “it cannot be considered as a genuinely democratic vote.”

In Damascus, meanwhile, a delegation led by the government’s chief international supporters said Syria’s first multi-candidate presidential election in over four decades was transparent and free, and would pave the way for “stability and national agreement.” The delegation of officials from more than 30 countries, including legislators and dignitaries from Iran, Russia and Venezuela, toured polling stations on Tuesday. In a final statement read Wednesday by Alaeddin Boroujerdi, the head of the Iranian parliament’s committee on national security, the delegation blamed the US and its allies for “crimes committed against the Syrian people.”

Al-Sisi wins election by landslide

Time, 30.05.2014



The campaign of retired field marshal Abdul Fattah al-Sisi said he won 23.38 million votes, with left-wing politician Sabahi taking 735,285. Invalid votes were 1.07 million, or nearly 350,000 more than the number of votes for Sabahi.

Al-Sisi's win was never in doubt, but the career infantry officer, had hoped for a strong turnout to bestow legitimacy on his ouster last July of Egypt's first freely elected president, the Islamist Mohammed Morsi. However, al-Sisi's campaign said turnout nationwide was around 44 percent, even after voting was extended for a third day Wednesday — well below the nearly 52% won by Morsi in June 2012.

In his final campaign TV interview last week, al-Sisi set the bar even higher, saying he wanted more than 40 million voters — there are nearly 54 million registered voters — to cast ballots to “show the world” the extent of his popular backing. Al-Sisi supporters held all-night celebrations in Cairo, with several thousands gathered at the central Tahrir square, birthplace of the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak. They waved Egyptian flags, al-Sisi posters and danced. There were similar celebrations in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria and a string of other cities north of the capital and in the Oasis province of Fayoum southwest of Cairo. Critics said the lack of enthusiasm at the polls was in part due to apathy among even al-Sisi supporters, knowing that his victory was a foregone conclusion.

Others said it showed discontent with al-Sisi, not just among his Islamist foes but also among a broader section of the public that believes he has no concrete plans for Egypt's woes and fears he will return Egypt to the autocratic ways of Hosni Mubarak. The tepid turnout was particularly embarrassing because the government and media had been whipping up adulation for al-Sisi over the past 10 months, depicting him as a warrior against terrorism and the only person able to tackle Egypt's economic problems, high unemployment, inflation and instability. Al-Sisi's supporters in the Egyptian media have been in a panic the past two days. Political talk show hosts and newscasters urged people to vote, warning that otherwise the Brotherhood will be encouraged to step up its challenge to the new government.

Prominent TV talk show host Amr Adeeb angrily said that by not voting, Egyptians might as well “go directly to the prison and return Mohammed Morsi to power.” “Tell him, ‘Your excellency, President Mohammed Morsi, please come out and rule us,’” he said. The abrupt decision by the election commission to add another day of voting Wednesday raised complaints that authorities were tipping the playing field in al-Sisi's favor. U.S.-based Democracy International, which had been observing the vote, said the extension “raises more questions about the independence of the election commission, the impartiality of the government, and the integrity of Egypt's electoral process.” It said its observer teams outside of Cairo had ended their mission as scheduled on Tuesday. Some other international monitoring teams also left the country, since they had only planned for two days of voting, though EU monitors stayed on.

Sabahi, al-Sisi's only opponent in the race, protested the extension, saying it aimed to "distort" the will of the people. His campaign pulled its representatives from polling stations Wednesday in protest against what it called a campaign of intimidation and arrests of its campaign workers. He, however, refused to bow to pressure from his camp to withdraw in protest, arguing that staying in the race qualifies him to "fight future battles." Sabahi's spokesman, Hossam Moenis, told ONTV network that a member of the campaign has been referred to a military tribunal. "We are digging a channel for democracy ... in the face of an undemocratic project," he said. "The same mentality that we thought we managed to topple on Jan. 25, is back and ruling" — a reference to the start of the 18-day, anti-Mubarak uprising in 2011.

Only a handful of voters, or none at all, were at polling centers in multiple districts toured by The Associated Press reporters Wednesday. At some, music played and kids painted Egyptian flags or al-Sisi's name on their faces as the occasional voter drifted in. TV images beamed from more than a dozen locations across Egypt showed similar scenes. "People are lazy, depressed or frustrated. They knew what the result will be even before the vote," said Amani Fikry, a manager in a privately-owned company. "They are exhausted from three years of constant troubles." In Cairo's Sayeda Zeinab district, loudspeakers played patriotic songs at an empty polling center. Two al-Sisi backers scribbled words of support on posters of the candidate that had been defaced with insulting graffiti.

Israeli leaders congratulate Egypt's Sisi for his victory

Reuters, 06.06.2014



The prime minister and president of Israel both spoke with Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Friday to congratulate him on his victory in Egyptian presidential elections and to stress the importance of bilateral ties.

The separate phone calls came two days before Sisi was due to be installed in office following his comprehensive ballot-box win last month. Neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor President Shimon Peres spoke with the previous Egyptian head of state, the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Mursi, who was toppled from power last year by Sisi following street protests.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu noted to the Egyptian president-elect the strategic importance of ties between the countries and in sustaining the peace accords between them," the Israeli leader's office said in a statement. Peres's office said that at the end of their conversation: "President Sisi thanked President Peres for his warm words." Egypt and Israel signed a historic peace treaty in 1979, an accord seen by the West as a cornerstone of regional stability in the Middle East.

Libya's new premier Maiteeq takes office amid strife

Reuters, 02.06.2014



Libya's new prime minister Ahmed Maiteeq on Monday held his first cabinet meeting at the premier's office after police forces helped him take over the building.

The North African country is struggling with turmoil and a political crisis as outgoing premier Abdullah al-Thinni has refused to hand over power to Maiteeq who was elected by parliament in a chaotic vote last month. Thinni had resigned in April but has said he received conflicting orders from Libya's divided parliament over the legitimacy of Maiteeq's election and would continue in his post until the General National Congress (GNC) assembly resolved the dispute.

Maiteeq arrived at the prime minister's office late in the evening escorted by police cars, witnesses said. Thinni had moved earlier to another government building, his spokesman said. In a brief statement after a cabinet meeting, Maiteeq denounced clashes between militant Islamists and army forces that had erupted in eastern Benghazi, killing around 20 people. Standing behind his cabinet, the businessman vowed to make improving security and fighting terrorism a top priority. There was no immediate comment from Thinni after Maiteeq's statement was read live on television. The cabinet's tenure might be short-lived as Libya is preparing for elections later this month. First Deputy Parliamentary Speaker Ezzedin al-Awam told Reuters on Monday that Thinni had told him he had not handed over officially the prime minister's office to Maiteeq.

Parliament is at the heart of a growing confrontation among rival political parties and brigades of former rebels who refuse to disarm and have allied themselves loosely on competing sides of a split congress. Four decades of authoritarian rule by Muammar Gaddafi and three years of unrest since his ousting have left Libya with few institutions and no real army to impose state authority on former fighters and Islamist militants who often use their military muscle to make demands. Those rivalries have come closer to open confrontation since last month after Khalifa Haftar, a renegade former general, began a self-declared campaign with renegade forces to purge Islamist militants he says the government has failed to challenge. Maiteeq, a businessman backed by independents and Islamist lawmakers, was appointed by GNC members after a chaotic vote contested by rival factions as illegitimate.

Kuwait's ruler makes rare visit to Iran to build ties

Oman Tribune, 01.06.2014



Kuwait's emir began a visit to Iran on Sunday, the first by a ruler of the US-allied Gulf Arab state since the 1979 Islamic revolution, underscoring improving ties between Teheran and its Arab neighbours.

Regional television stations showed Iranian President Hassan Rowhani escorting Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah to review an Iranian guard of honour upon the emir's arrival in Teheran. Sabah, on his first visit to Teheran as head of state, flew in at the head of a high-level delegation including the foreign minister, oil minister, finance minister, commerce minister and industry minister.

"Our ties with Kuwait are very important to us and we hope this trip would be a new chapter to boost cooperation," said Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, quoted by Irna. Teheran says the visit would "open a new page" in ties between the neighbours across the Gulf. Kuwait's ambassador to Teheran, Majdi Al Dhafiri, told Kuna that Sheikh Sabah and Rowhani will discuss a number of strategic projects useful for the whole region. Last month, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal invited Zarif to visit Riyadh. He accepted but no date has yet been set. Saudi Arabia has also invited Iran to attend a two-day meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that opens on June 18 in Jeddah.

But Zarif said on Sunday that he could not take up an invitation to visit Saudi Arabia to attend the OIC meeting later this month because the proposed dates clashed with planned nuclear negotiations with world powers. Sabah's visit will also focus on regional issues, including Iran's military involvement in Syria, the situation in Iraq and Egypt, and the Middle East peace process, Kuwaiti officials said. The emir's visit comes at "a critical time and amid complicated changes in the region," said Ali Anayati, Iran's ambassador to Kuwait, Kuna reported. He said the visit would start a new chapter of bilateral cooperation. Both leaders want to "create a safe and stable regional system based on non-interference in other countries' internal affairs." The visit follows Zarif's tour of the Middle East in December after Teheran signed an interim nuclear deal with world powers. Kuwait said it hoped the deal would help regional stability and security.

Attacks in Afghanistan kill 3 Turks, 3 Afghans

ABC News, 02.06.2014



A motorcycle bomb targeted a minibus with workers from a Turkish construction company in eastern Afghanistan on Monday, killing three Turkish engineers and wounding a fourth, officials said. The Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the attack and called on Afghan authorities to bring the assailants to justice while reiterating Ankara's commitment to helping Afghanistan.

Also on Monday, a group of Taliban suicide bombers attacked a government compound in southern Helmand province, killing three Afghans — two police officers and a civilian.

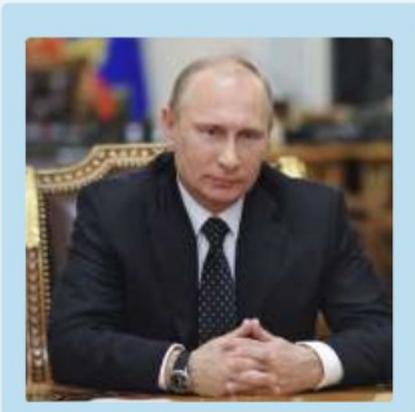
The attacks came as the Taliban intensify their spring offensive in a bid to undermine the Western-backed government as foreign combat troops prepare to withdraw from the country by the end of the year. The attack on the Turkish workers took place in eastern Nangharhar province's district of Behsud, said Ahmad Zia Abdulzai, a spokesman for the provincial governor. The Turks were working on a construction project in Behsud and were on their way to work when the bombing took place early Monday morning, he said. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. The Afghan Interior Ministry said the explosives were strapped to a motorcycle, which was remotely detonated as the minibus drove by.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry confirmed the casualties and said the Turks were employees of the EMTA construction company. "We condemn this despicable attack whose perpetrators are unknown," the ministry said in a statement. "We expect that the Afghan authorities urgently catch the perpetrators of this terror act and bring them to justice." Turkish contracting companies have undertaken hundreds of construction projects in Afghanistan and at least four Turkish road engineers have been killed in attacks since 2004, not including Monday's deaths. Last year, eight Turks were kidnapped, along with their Afghan translator and pilots from Russia and Kyrgyzstan, after their helicopter made an emergency landing in bad weather in Afghanistan's eastern province of Logar. They were released a month later. Another Turkish engineer was kidnapped and released in 2011.

Turkey, which shares religious, historic and cultural ties with Afghanistan, is involved in NATO operations there but has refused to take on any combat missions in the country, fearing a Muslim backlash. Its troops are instead involved in providing security, in reconstruction and training in Afghanistan. Turkey has also been hosting talks between the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2007. In the Helmand attack, an Afghan official said four Taliban bombers targeted the district governor's compound, killing two police officers and a government employee. One bomber blew himself up at the gates of the compound while the other three attackers stormed inside, only to be shot and killed by other policemen.

West has little chance of curbing Putin Ukraine intervention

Reuters, 30.05.2014



The West has little power to bring an end to the Russian-sponsored intervention in Ukraine, Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek told, saying a change in Russia's stance was only likely to come about in the long term.

Speaking during a visit to London to meet British Foreign Secretary William Hague, Zaoralek said that Russia was clearly behind violent unrest in eastern Ukraine, but that there were no immediately effective steps the West could take to stop it. After Russia annexed the Black Sea region of Crimea earlier this year, fighting has erupted across eastern Ukraine between government forces and pro-Russian separatists.

Russia has been accused by the West of fuelling the crisis by flexing its military muscle along the Ukrainian border and sending unofficial troops into eastern Ukraine. "I have no doubts that Russia is responsible for the situation in Donetsk and Slaviansk," Zaoralek said in an interview over breakfast at a west London hotel. "There is no chance for us to solve this situation by power, there is no possibility to solve it in the short term." The Czech Republic, which does not share a border with Ukraine, is a member of the NATO military alliance and was part of the first wave of eastern European states to join the European Union in 2004. Kiev has stepped up its efforts to crush the rebellion after Ukraine elected Petro Poroshenko as president on May 25 in the country's first elections since it toppled the Moscow-backed Viktor Yanukovich in February.

Yanukovich had sparked mass unrest in Ukraine by abandoning a proposed trade pact with Europe in favor of a bailout from Russia. The deal, offered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, was designed to keep Ukraine a close political ally to Moscow. The United States and European Union have imposed limited sanctions on a few dozen Russian individuals and small firms but have threatened much stronger action to squeeze the Russian economy and effect a change in attitude from Moscow. However, Zaoralek, while underlining the importance of a coordinated Western response on sanctions, was skeptical of any near-term change in Putin's stance. "In the real world this process is going to happen over the more long term - to solve it in a few months is probably impossible," he said. "Putin's behavior is ambiguous and probably will continue to be.

On one side he is trying to show that he is ready to negotiate and make some concessions, and on the other side we see the Russians are delivering uniformed militaries to Donetsk and the Dombas (region)." The West's best chance of securing a shift in policy from Russia is to show them that Europe is an economic partner they need to modernize their economy, Zaoralek said. "For Russia I see no other alternative than to co-operate with Europe when we're talking about modernizing," he said. "Maybe for us this situation represents difficulties but for Russia this isolation could be a fundamental problem." I see no future development of Russian industry this way.

United States reviews military presence in Europe after Russian moves in Ukraine

Politics Syndicate, 01.06.2014



The United States is reviewing its military presence in Europe as a result of Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the White House said on Tuesday at the start of a four-day European trip by President Barack Obama.

Obama will call on Congress to support a "European Reassurance Initiative" of up to \$1 billion to increase United States military rotations on the continent, it said. The effort would involve increased participation by the United States Navy in NATO naval force deployments, including "more persistent deployments" to the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, it said.

Russia says Ukraine situation worsening, will submit U.N. resolution

Newsweek, 02.06.2014



Russia will submit a draft resolution to the U.N.S.C. on Monday calling for an immediate end to worsening violence in Ukraine and the creation of humanitarian corridors in the east of the country, Lavrov said.

Lavrov said that Western nations had assured Russia the situation in Ukraine would improve after its May 25 presidential election but that "everything is happening in exactly the opposite way". "People are dying every day. Peaceful civilians are suffering more and more - the army, military aviation and heavy weapons continue to be used against them," he said when asked about.

The draft resolution "will contain a demand for the immediate halt to violence and the beginning of actual negotiations with the aim of establishing a stable and reliable ceasefire," Lavrov said. It will also include "a demand for the creation, without delay, of humanitarian corridors through which peaceful civilians could leave combat zones if they wish," he said. The text would also call for guarantees of unhindered access for humanitarian aid. Ukrainian President-elect Petro Poroshenko and the pro-Western authorities in Kiev have defied Moscow's repeated calls for an end to the government's operation against armed separatists in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

G7 willing to step up sanctions on Russia over Ukraine

Reuters, 04.06.2014



The world's leading industrialized nations threatened on Wednesday to impose harder-hitting sanctions on Russia if it does not help restore stability to eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian militias continue to operate at will.

While Ukraine was able to hold a peaceful presidential election, the situation in the east near the Russian border remains volatile, with armed groups attacking Ukrainian government forces and occupying state buildings. "We stand ready to intensify targeted sanctions and to consider significant additional restrictive measures to impose further costs on Russia should events so require," the G7 said.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Western powers would check "again and again" to verify that Russia was doing what it could to stabilize the situation, which erupted in March after Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine and annexed it. "We cannot afford a further destabilization in Ukraine," Merkel told reporters. "If we do not have progress in the questions we have to solve there is the possibility of sanctions, even heavy sanctions of phase 3 on the table," she said, referring to restrictions on trade, finance and energy.

So far, the United States and European Union have imposed relatively minor travel bans and asset freezes on dozens of Russian officials in reaction to the seizure of Crimea. Further steps were threatened if the May 25 elections were affected. However, they went smoothly and new President Petro Poroshenko will be sworn in on Saturday. Some saw that as an indication that Russia was being more cooperative, reducing the threat of further sanctions. But Wednesday's statement suggests the West is not yet satisfied that President Vladimir Putin is doing enough to calm the situation. Russia denies it is behind the revolt in eastern Ukraine, where militias allied to Moscow have seized buildings, attacked Ukrainian troops and declared independence. Putin has also defended his right to protect Russian-speaking people. While Putin has been cut out of the G7 - this is the first meeting without Russia since it joined the club in 1997 - he will hold face.

Obama sets out to reaffirm U.S. commitment to security, democracy in Eastern Europe

The Washington Post, 01.06.2014



With the long history of battles for democracy in Europe shadowing him, President Obama on Monday embarks on a week-long trip to Poland, Belgium and France that he hopes will convince the world that the United States remains a bulwark defending democratic government at the same time it closes the book on more than a decade of war.

The trip begins with a visit to Warsaw on the 25th anniversary of Poland's first democratic elections and concludes with events in Normandy marking the 70th anniversary of D-Day, comes just days after Obama unveiled a new vision for American foreign policy at the U.S. Military Academy.

The president's argument that the United States can strike an effective balance between global leadership and "foreign entanglements" will be immediately tested by a European public skeptical that the country will do what is necessary to rebuff the encroachments of Vladimir Putin's Russia into Ukraine and, more broadly, Eastern Europe. Obama, who would prefer to focus U.S. foreign policy on other threats and opportunities, is being thrust into a role that was played more comfortably by predecessors in the defining years of the Cold War. His remarks Wednesday in Warsaw, just a few hundred miles from Ukraine and the old borders of the Soviet Union, have the potential to resonate like similar speeches by Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy at the Brandenburg Gate decades ago.

But some Europeans are not certain that Obama will embrace that mantle. "The European mood has moved from seeing America as doing too much under George W. Bush to America doing too little under Barack Obama," said Dominique Moisi, co-founder of the French Institute of International Relations. Moisi added, "I think there is growing skepticism that to confront Putin, America may not be best represented by a lawyer with a great intellect but who is maybe not strong enough to face the harsh geopolitics of the moment."

Senior U.S. officials, however, say Obama will make absolutely clear that he remains firmly committed to the defense of democracy and self-rule in Europe. Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser for strategy communications, said that in Europe, Obama will "have a chance to reaffirm America's unwavering commitment to secure democracy and to the security of our Eastern Europe allies, recognizing that Poland, as much as any nation, understands that democracy is something that needs to be constantly defended and constantly advanced." The trip itself is a reminder of how quickly things have changed. Obama was set to attend the G8 meeting in Sochi, Russia, but that plan was scuttled after the Ukraine crisis broke out.



After meeting with Central and Eastern European heads of state in Warsaw — including Ukrainian president-elect Petro Poroshenko — Obama will attend a G7 meeting in Brussels. In Poland, however, leaders hope that Obama will go beyond rhetoric and commit to an increased military presence in the region to protect the interests of Eastern and Central Europe against Russia. Nobel Prize laureate Lech Walesa, who helped bring democracy to Poland and was its second president, told the Associated Press late last month that “the world is disorganized and the superpower is not taking the lead.” In response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the United States has modestly bolstered its presence in Central Europe, sending several hundred troops on a rotational basis and a group of F-16 fighter jets for joint exercises. But Heather Conley, director of the Europe program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Obama would face pressure to do much more this week.

“They need the physical reassurance,” she said of the Eastern and Central Europeans. “This is the first time we have really been called, or NATO has been called, to reinforce its eastern border, and potentially we’ll have to reinforce it for a very long time.” Other experts argued that Obama, in his remarks at West Point, offered a highly articulate vision of the need to work through international organizations to enforce global norms. But, they said, Obama has been far less clear about how he aims to respond when countries such as Syria or Russia shirk those laws. “During the Cold War, the issue wasn’t only deterring the Soviets but reassuring our allies,” said Robert Lieber, a professor of government and international affairs at Georgetown University. “That reassurance is missing right now. And the Europeans feel it palpably.”

U.S. officials would not say what, if any, new commitments the United States or Western European allies would make while in Poland. But they said Obama’s approach would reflect the principles he outlined last week. “You heard the president at West Point talk about how American leadership can work together, as well as a set of common values, a commitment to democracy and human rights,” Rhodes said. “And I think on this trip you will see a concrete manifestation of what the president was talking about.” Ukraine is also likely to dominate the agenda at the G7 meeting in Brussels on Wednesday afternoon and Thursday, although it is likely to be joined by discussions over intelligence, energy, climate change and trade. Obama is likely to continue to put pressure on his European counterparts to be prepared to intensify sanctions against Russia if it escalates its intervention in Ukraine, although no new sanctions are seen in the near future.

At the same time, Europeans will pressure Obama to take steps to help reduce reliance on Russia for energy, urging the president to permit the export of liquefied natural gas from the United States, a move that is opposed by many environmental organizations. Germany, which is most wary of sanctions, also is likely to pressure Obama for more work to address concerns about the U.S. surveillance programs that were exposed by former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden. Europeans, meanwhile, are likely to welcome Obama’s new measures to regulate carbon emissions by coal-burning power plants, which he is to announce as part of a climate-change initiative Monday before departing for Europe. After a bilateral meeting with British Prime Minister David Cameron on Thursday, Obama travels to Paris for dinner with French President Francois Hollande. On Friday, Obama is scheduled to attend and make remarks at D-Day festivities at Omaha Beach in Normandy — a visit that will pay tribute to the U.S. servicemen who helped liberate France. The visit, however, comes in the shadow of the scandal over wait times and doctored records at the Department of Veterans Affairs back in the United States.

Poland says welcomes U.S. plans to boost military presence in Europe

Chicago Tribune, 03.06.2014



Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski on Tuesday welcomed a U.S. plan to boost its temporary military presence in eastern Europe in response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine. "The U.S. authorities' decisions to increase the level of presence in NATO's eastern members are incredibly important," Komorowski told a joint news conference with visiting U.S. President Barack Obama.

"We welcome them as an announcement of a real return by NATO to standing very strongly by the basis of the alliance, which is article 5, which speaks about the collective defense of the countries' territories," Komorowski said.

"For us it is most important that it is made clear that there are no second-rate NATO members. That there are no countries that are told by some outside countries, particularly Russia, whether U.S. forces can or cannot be stationed there."

NATO to consider longer-term response to Ukraine crisis

Kyiv Post, 02.06.2014



NATO defense ministers will consider on Tuesday what longer term steps the alliance needs to take to bolster its eastern defenses and improve its ability to respond to the unorthodox tactics used by Russia in Ukraine.

In the three months since the Ukraine crisis erupted, the U.S.-dominated alliance has sent fighter planes and ships and stepped up military exercises to reassure eastern European allies alarmed by Russia's actions, while making clear it has no intention of intervening in Ukraine. On Tuesday, defense ministers from the 28 NATO members will look at longer term measures to strengthen alliance defenses in eastern Europe.



They will also consider how to combat the tactics used by Russia in Ukraine, which one senior military officer described as “half insurgency, half deliberate destabilization.” “It is ... clear to the alliance that this is the most severe challenge to stability in Europe since the end of the Cold War,” the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, Douglas Lute, told reporters on Monday. Poland has been calling loudly for NATO to permanently station forces on its territory in response to Russia’s actions, a move that Moscow says would violate a 1997 agreement between Russia and NATO. NATO’s top military commander, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, said last month that NATO would have to consider permanently stationing troops in eastern Europe. ut some NATO allies argue that permanent basing of large numbers of troops in the east is too expensive, not a military necessity and needlessly provocative to Moscow.

They argue that NATO can deter Russia by increasing its ability to react quickly to a crisis. This could be done by pre-positioning equipment in eastern Europe and being ready to send reinforcements there quickly. Such measures could form part of a “readiness action plan” that NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen wants NATO leaders to adopt at a summit in Wales in September. The United States is also likely to drive home its case for NATO to reverse a slide in defense spending since the start of the 2008 financial crisis. Meanwhile, Russia has been sharply increasing its military spending. “We need to reverse the trend of the last six years on defense spending,” Lute said. One part of NATO’s plans is likely to be an agreement to upgrade the readiness of a NATO headquarters in Poland, that of the Multinational Corps Northeast set up by Poland, Germany and Denmark in Szczecin.

The headquarters is likely to get more staff and equipment so it could take charge of any reinforcement effort needed in eastern Europe. The unconventional tactics used by Russia, such as the use of military exercises to cover an intervention in Ukraine’s Crimea region and support for pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine, are also causing concern at NATO headquarters. “The Russian armed forces have shown a ... capability which is significant. They have shown that they are able to mobilize on short notice a significant amount of forces, concentrate them and deploy them at every point of their choosing along their Western border ... These are extremely destabilizing factors from a military-strategic point of view,” a senior NATO official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said. NATO has suspended all practical cooperation with Russia in response to Moscow’s annexation of Crimea. NATO and Russian ambassadors met on Monday for the first time since March but their views on the Ukraine crisis remained far apart.

China's foreign minister to meet new Indian government

Times of India, 03.06.2014



China's foreign minister Wang Yi will visit India next week for the first high-level meeting between the two countries after new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said Foreign Minister Wang Yi would arrive in New Delhi on Sunday for a two-day trip as a special envoy of China's President Xi Jinping.

Hong said that Wang would meet Indian officials, including the country's new foreign minister, though he added that the agenda was still being worked out and could not say if Wang would also meet Modi.

Modi last month invited Xi to visit, seeking greater engagement between the world's two most populous nations on issues of trade and regional security. Beijing has yet to formally respond to that invitation. The last Chinese head of state to visit India was Hu Jintao in 2012. The Hindu nationalist Modi won election by a landslide, ending a decade of rule by the Congress party that for most of the time since Indian independence in 1947 has been associated with a policy of non-alignment. Modi is keen to rebalance relations between New Delhi and Beijing that have long been marked by suspicion. China's closest ally in the region is India's traditional foe, Pakistan, whose prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, attended Modi's inauguration. China and India fought a brief Himalayan war in 1962 that India lost. Tension has occasionally flared on their common border, which runs for a total of nearly 3,400 km (2,100 miles) and is still partly in dispute. India runs a \$40-billion trade deficit with China, and Modi is expected to seek greater market access to reduce that gap. China's own embrace of an export-led model has helped its economy outgrow India's fourfold since 1980.

Announcements & Reports

► *Power and Order in Asia*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/power-and-order-asia0>

► *New Energy, New Politics: Background Report 2*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : http://csis.org/files/publication/140324_Jackson_LessonsFromAbroad_Web.pdf

► *NATO and Ukraine: The Need for Real World Strategies and for European Partners Rather than Parasites*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/nato-and-ukraine-need-real-world-strategies-and-european-partners-rather-parasites>

► *Internal Tensions in Iran: Some Underlying Metrics*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/internal-tensions-iran-some-underlying-metrics>

► *West Point 2014: What's the "Theory of the Case"?*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/west-point-2014-whats-theory-case>

► *Iraq Crisis*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : http://csis.org/files/publication/140326_new_perspectives_issue6.pdf

► *China's War on Pollution and the Uncertain Fate of "King Coal"*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/chinas-war-pollution-and-uncertain-fate-king-coal>

► *Middle East Daily Bulletin*

Source : ORSAM

Weblink : http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/trUploads/OrtadoguBulteni/2014327_27%20Mart%202014.pdf



Upcoming Events

► *Exponential Finance*

Date : 10 – 11 June 2014
Place : New York, NY – U.S.A.
Website : <http://exponential.singularityu.org/finance/>

► *The Fourth Asian Conference on Sustainability, Energy and the Environment*

Date : 12 - 15 June 2014
Place : Osaka - Japan
Website : <http://acsee.iafor.org>

► *The Global Business, Marketing, Finance & Economics Research Conference*

Date : 12 - 15 June 2014
Place : Los Angeles, California – U.S.A.
Website : <http://www.jaabc.com/losangeles.html>

► *4th International Conference on Management*

Date : 16 – 17 June 2014
Place : Bali - Indonesia
Website : <http://www.internationalconference.com.my>

► *International Conference on Trade, Business, Economics and Law*

Date : 16 – 19 June 2014
Place : Edinburgh – United Kingdom
Website : <http://www.flelearning.co.uk/ictbel-2014/call-for-papers>