

Turkey 'to fulfill EU visa criteria by deadline'

Hurriyet Daily News, 28.04.2016



Turkey will fulfill all 72 criteria required to ensure the European Union grants its citizens visa-free travel by a May 4 deadline, Turkish EU Minister and Chief EU Negotiator Volkan Bozkır said.

“If a situation does not emerge that has not been foreseen beforehand, we expect that the European Commission will present a report on May 4 that recommends the lifting of visas,” said Bozkır. In an EU-Turkey deal reached in mid-March to curb the migrant flow into the bloc, the EU pledged to grant Turkish citizens visa-free travel from July onwards provided Turkey meets the 72 necessary criteria.

The pledge was made after Turkey agreed to take all migrants back that reach Greece from March 20 onwards, in exchange for the EU taking one Syrian refugee for every migrant Turkey takes back. Bozkır said that if a draft bill to establish a supervisory commission to oversee law enforcement officers' compliance with the law had been adopted on the same day, then Turkey would have already completed its requirements.

The parliamentary session could discuss the law enforcement commission draft fully due to the “prevention” from the opposition parties, Bozkır said, adding that three articles of the law had been approved while a little more than 10 articles were expected to be finalized. “God willing, the 10-something article of the law enforcement commission draft will be adopted, but we can even say that [the remaining articles] have been already adopted,” said Bozkır. “And then we will have accomplished the 72 criteria.”

The European Commission is expected to present its advisory report on May 4, where it will define whether or not the EU should grant visa-free travel to Turkish citizens. This report will later be evaluated by the European Council. The measure has to be approved by a qualified majority of EU member states at the council and a majority in the European Parliament to take effect.

Asked whether a surprise would occur in the process, Bozkır said they did not expect such a thing as both of the sides new with what kind of a picture they were facing and what was being implemented. “I believe that this process will be finalized in a positive way before the end of June and the decision for visa-free travel for citizens of the Turkish Republic will be met,” said Bozkır. Bozkır added that the EU would grant 1 million euro to Turkey in July, as part of the 6 million euros pledged to be given to Turkey until the end of 2018. This money will be spent “on improving the infrastructure of the residential places and the settlements to be constructed in safe zones to be formed inside Syria,” said Bozkır, adding that once the Turkish Red Crescent, Kızılay, is accredited, this money would be transferred to Kızılay. “We and the EU have started to understand each other,” he said.

Turkey, US, EU condemn Russia's move on Crimea

Hurriyet Daily News, 27.04.2016



Turkey, the United States and the European Union have condemned an April 26 Crimean court decision to ban the Mejlis, the governing body of the Crimean Tatar community.

“The prohibition of the Mejlis’ activities is the latest step taken by Russia that targets the unity and integrity of the Crimean Tatars in the aftermath of the [2014] annexation [by Russia] of the [Crimean] Peninsula,” read the statement released by the Turkish Foreign Ministry, while adding that the Crimean Tatar Mejlis was “the democratically elected and legitimate representative and decision-making body” of the Crimean Tatars.

The United States also expressed its concern over the ban of the Mejlis. “We put out a statement and we called on the Russian Federation to reverse [the Justice Ministry’s] recent decision to designate the Mejlis as an extremist organization as well as a decision by de facto authorities in Crimea to suspend this democratic institution. We’re obviously disturbed by the reports banning the Mejlis council because, frankly, it removes what little representation and recourse that the Tatars have left under Russian occupation,” U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said.

Toner added that the Crimean Tatars faced oppression, repression and discrimination in Russian-occupied Crimea. Crimea banned the 33-member Mejlis, branding it an extremist organization in the latest move against the peninsula’s ethnic minority.

The Supreme Court of Crimea ruled in favor of a lawsuit lodged by the top prosecutor of the Black Sea peninsula, who had accused the body of illegal actions and “acts of sabotage” against the territory’s new Russian authorities. The European Union slammed the ban on the Crimean Tatar Mejlis, calling the move an “attack” on the rights of Crimean Tatars.

“The decision by the so-called Supreme Court of Crimea to prohibit the activities of the Mejlis, [...] labelling it ‘an extremist organization,’ represents a grave attack on the rights of the Crimean Tatars as a whole,” said EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini in a statement. Mogherini said the decision set a “further very negative escalation in the human rights situation on the Crimean peninsula since its illegal annexation by the Russian Federation in 2014.”

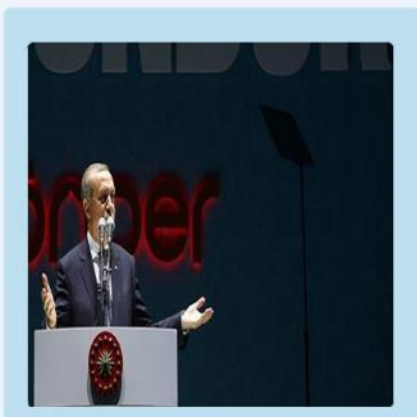
Council of Europe Secretary-General Thorbjorn Jagland in a statement called on Russian authorities to “take appropriate measures to reverse this decision rapidly,” expressing concern that the ruling would “considerably increase the risk of further alienation” of the Crimean Tatars. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko slammed the decision as a “criminal ruling” when discussing the issue with European Council head Donald Tusk, his office said.

Prosecutor Natalia Poklonskaya earlier this month ordered the Mejlis to cease its activities, accusing the respected body which has been working in Crimea for 25 years of “extremism.” The lawyer for the Mejlis, Dzhemil Temishev, said the organization would appeal the decision in higher courts. “The prosecutor did not prove that the Mejlis’ activities are extremist; everything we heard in court is her personal assessment,” Temishev told AFP.

The Crimean Tatars make up about 13 percent of Crimea’s population. They are a Muslim people native to the peninsula who were deported under Soviet leader Josef Stalin, returning only at the collapse of the Soviet Union when the territory was granted autonomous status within a newly independent Ukraine. The Mejlis resisted the peninsula’s return to Moscow rule in 2014 and has been operating under pressure ever since, with many key figures banished from the region and now working from Ukraine.

President Erdoğan questions Arab League

Anadolu Agency, 29.04.2016



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vows to do more as the president of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the next two years, while also questioning the name and implications of the Arab League. Citing racism as a major threat facing Islam, Erdoğan said he was saddened by people using the words “Turk” and “Arab.”

“Will there be a Turk League in response to this [the Arab league]? Why should there be [such a league]? Now you say the OIC on one hand, and the Arab League on the other. What kind of an issue is this? Why do we call it the Islamic Cooperation but call [the Arab League] the Arab League?”

The Arabs don’t have supremacy over the non-Arabs nor do the non-Arabs have supremacy over the Arabs. Supremacy is only [comes] through surrendering to God [takva]. This is the core,” said Erdoğan, while delivering a speech at the closing ceremony of a Turkish-Arab Higher Education Congress in Istanbul. “We have lost our standards. We encounter problems because we have lost our standards. We need to re-discover these standards. We need to once again go back to our origins,” Erdoğan added.

After taking over the two-year-long OIC presidency at the two-day 13th OIC summit in Istanbul, Erdoğan vowed to do more work under the organization’s umbrella. “Henceforth, I believe that it is possible to do much more diverse work with you in these two years,” said Erdoğan. Referring to the Turkish-Arab Higher Education Congress, he said that cooperation with the OIC could be made especially on the topic of education. Erdoğan also said the other threats facing Islam were sectarianism and terror. Stating that the Islamic world was threatened by Shiism and Sunnism, Erdoğan said there were no Shiite or Sunni religions; rather, these were only paths within Islam and no one should cast shadow on “our brotherhood as Muslims.” “We will not engage in such discrimination,” he added.

Turkey signs deal to deploy forces in Qatar

Anadolu Agency, 28.04.2016



Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has concluded a military agreement that involves the deployment of the Turkish Armed Forces in Qatar, during his official two-day visit to the Gulf nation. The measure was signed by Defense Minister İsmet Yılmaz and his Qatari counterpart Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah at a ceremony where Davutoğlu and Qatari Interior Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa al-Thani were also present.

According to reports, the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is expected to visit the command post of Turkish ground troops in Qatar.

Davutoğlu was set to discuss regional security and stability during his meetings in Qatar as the two states look to further boost their close cooperation. Davutoğlu held a bilateral meeting with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani when the two participated in a summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul.

Late last month, having attended a three-day Dimdex defense and security fair in Doha, Defense Minister Yılmaz said a Turkish military base being built in Qatar, the first Turkish military facility in the region, would be ready within two years. The deal is part of a defense agreement concluded by Qatar and Turkey in late 2014, which envisaged joint military training and the deployment of the Turkish armed forces on Qatar's territory.

Turkey demands more effective use of Hellfire missiles in ISIL fight

Hurriyet Daily News, 26.04.2016



Turkish government has demanded the U.S. Army use its unmanned aerial vehicles loaded with Hellfire missiles more effectively against the ISIL as a part of a new strategy to end deadly rocket hits in the border province of Kilis.

Ankara has demanded U.S. predators with two Hellfire missiles at the Incirlik Air Base be used more effectively as well as the deployment of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System rocket launchers in the Syria borderline, according to the strategy. According to Turkish sources, such moves would push ISIL militants southwards, leaving the border province out of battery ranges.

Currently Turkish fighter jets are inactive over Syrian skies following the downing of Russian jet on Nov. 24, 2015 for violating Turkish airspace. The Foreign Ministry has also demanded raising awareness on the Kilis issue by increasing dialogue with the Department of State, as predator hits have missed ISIL targets. There are currently four predators and 12 A-10 bomber aircrafts at the Incirlik Air Base.

Meanwhile, Kilis was also one of the agenda topics of a security meeting chaired by Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, one that demanded new strategies in the fight against ISIL on the border. Accordingly, communications with the U.S. will be increased regarding the effective use of U.S. air forces to hit ISIL missile and rocket launchers. In addition, Turkish artillery units will also be supported by HIMARS.

NATO member countries' early warning and monitoring systems in the region will also be used more frequently, according to the new initiatives. However, a ground operation to sweep ISIL militants from the south of Kilis is not on the government's agenda. Meanwhile, trained militants from Syrian opposition groups are readying for an offensive which will see missile launchers completely destroyed or driven away from firing range. Katyusha rockets fired from ISIL region in northern Syria into Kilis have claimed 17 lives since January with a fresh attack killing two people.

EBRD tells Turkey's journey to become its largest market

Hurriyet Daily News, 22.04.2016



On its 25th anniversary the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is celebrating its successful work with Turkish companies in Turkey and beyond in a written statement.

“The EBRD has been investing in Turkey since 2009. But our relationship with Turkey did not start in Turkey. It started all over the EBRD region where Turkish companies went to invest. And they went to many places where investors from Western Europe did not rush,” said the bank. Visitors arriving by air to Tbilisi and Batumi, cannot fail to notice the logo of TAV, a Turkish airport holding founded by Akfen Holding.

The modernization of both airports was carried out by TAV Urban Georgia in 2006 and 2007 and was financed by the EBRD in partnership with the International Finance Corporation (IFC). “On a hot summer’s day, a Russian, Kazakh or Moldovan – or indeed Serbian or Ukrainian – may cool down with one of 12 beer brands produced in these countries by Turkey’s Anadolu Efes, member of Anadolu Group, that are exported to these countries.

Drinking Coca-Cola may evoke an image of the U.S., but in over a dozen countries in the EBRD region the drink will have been bottled by a company belonging to the same company - Anadolu Efes - or indeed produced by Coca-Cola İçecek, a Turkish company, whose expansion the EBRD financed in places like Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan,” summarized the bank its support to the company.

“The glass producer Şişecam is another example. The EBRD’s cooperation with the company dates back to 1997. Since then the EBRD has financed Şişecam’s operations in Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine and later in Turkey with over 385 million euros.

Today, the EBRD is a 15 per cent shareholder in Paşabahçe, Şişecam’s internationally renowned glass tableware unit,” said the bank. With EBRD support, Şişecam also launched a glass recycling scheme. Green and white glass recycling containers bearing the logos of both Şişecam and the EBRD are now a common sight in Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya and Gaziantep.

So when the EBRD’s Board of Governors approved Turkey’s request to become a country of operations the EBRD already had a solid record of cooperation with Turkish corporates abroad. “The first EBRD investment in Turkey was made in 2009 and today, just seven years later, it is the largest EBRD country in terms of investment,” said the bank. “A lot is being done because there is a lot to do – we focus on sustainable energy and infrastructure; we work to strengthen the competitiveness of the private sector and to deepen capital and local currency markets; and we also promote regional and youth inclusion as well as gender equality across our investments,” it added.



The EBRD has an especially successful cooperation with Turkish banks, through which we finance small and medium-sized enterprises, energy efficiency improvements for businesses and households, smaller renewable energy projects and women-run enterprises – in fact, the EBRD’s flagship Women in Business program originated in Turkey and has since been rolled out in several other countries.

The EBRD’s pioneering Turkish partner Akfen Holding is a particularly good example of how the bank and its partners are boosting the Turkish economy and transforming whole sectors with best practices. Akfen CFO Kadri Samsunlu said: “The EBRD has educated us on the importance of the quality of our growth. With the Bank’s support and guidance we have focused on financial, social and environmental sustainability. We have improved transparency and accountability, learned to better deal with decision makers, regulators, and other stakeholders and were able to become a best practice example for other companies.”

When the port of Mersin, operated by a joint venture between Akfen and PSA International issued a Eurobond (in fact Turkey’s very first infrastructure bond) the EBRD acted as an anchor investor and catalyzed investment by others. Due to its success this bond issue has become a blueprint for other infrastructure investments in the country.

Another company in the holding, TAV Group, has built a brand new high-tech and energy-efficient terminal at İzmir airport with an EBRD loan. On top of many attractive features, the terminal has garnered international recognition for the fact that 99 per cent of the old building was reused and recycled in the construction of the new one.

Last year, in an expression of the EBRD’s support for Turkey’s comprehensive capital market reform program, the EBRD acquired a 10 percent stake in the country’s unified stock exchange Borsa Istanbul. Turkey’s reform path has not always been a straight line as is the case with many other countries. Therefore, over time the EBRD has intensified its engagement as an investor and its work with the authorities on public policies. There are always lessons to be learned and shared, said the bank.

Mehmet Şimşek, Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister, put it succinctly at an investment summit dedicated to Central Asia in Istanbul this year, organized by the EBRD and FT: “Turkey used the dynamism of the private sector. We made great progress. But we are not complacent. Turkey needs further reform to improve investment conditions, to improve business environment.

We are eager to share our experience of getting from a country with a broken economy, heavily reliant on FDI, to a country which both welcomes foreign investment and is itself an investor.” Jean-Patrick Marquet, Director for EBRD operations in Turkey, added:

“Recognizing Turkey’s role as a gateway to a wide and diverse region spanning Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the southern and eastern Mediterranean, the EBRD will continue boosting the country’s economy and work with Turkish companies at home and abroad to benefit the people living in Turkey and in its extended neighborhood.”

An East European-Turkish pact against Russian neo-imperialism

Turkish Policy Quarterly, 19.04.2016



An interim solution for Ukraine's and Georgia's current security problem, until they become members of the EU and NATO, could be the revival of an old inter-war Polish idea about an alliance of Central and South East European states located between Scandinavia in the north and Asia minor in the south, and between Germany in the west and Russia in the east.

As long the EU and NATO are not ready to expand further east, these countries could ally themselves in a so-called "Intermarium" bloc, i.e. in an association of the lands in between the seas.

This early 20th-century plan could today imply an entente cordiale or mutual aid pact of the countries in between the Baltic and Black Seas, i.e. of those states which perceive Moscow as a threat to their political sovereignty, territorial integrity, and core interests. The purpose of Intermarium's mutual assistance guarantees would be to: improve its member countries' national security, international embeddedness, institutional coherence and political self-confidence, deter Russia from attacking its member countries via traditional, hybrid, information, trade or other warfare, increase the freedom, range, weight, and impact of the actions of its member countries on the international arena.

A modern day Intermarium (...) could be a limited and single-purpose defense treaty of a group of countries ready to assist each other against hybrid warfare conducted by foreign powers against them. A modern day Intermarium would – unlike in the inter-war period – not imply some deeper union, federation or full-scale alliance. Instead, it could be a limited and single-purpose defense treaty of a group of countries ready to assist each other against hybrid warfare conducted by foreign powers against them. This anti-imperial pact could include those countries of Europe that are ready to commit to some degree of military and other cooperation in confronting Moscow. Many states across Russia's Western and Southern borders are already, to one degree or another, affected by the Kremlin's information, trade, cyber, cold or/and hot wars.

The signatories of an Intermarium security pact could unambiguously announce to the Kremlin their willingness to actively and multifariously assist each other in their hitherto bilateral conflicts with Russia. The fields of Intermarium's members' cooperation could include: multilateral coordination of economic and other sanctions, mutual lethal defensive weapons deliveries, enabling cross-border movement of volunteer troops, collaboration in matters of energy security and transportation, mutual assistance in combat training and arms modernization, sharing of strategic, counter- and other intelligence, joint military industrial and dual technology ventures, logistic help in resisting hybrid warfare measures, joint international counter-propaganda initiatives, exchange of military advisors and other experts, or/and support for establishing transnational NGOs in the Intermarium.

It could also include implementation of other targeted projects in a variety of secondary, yet also relevant spheres ranging from think-tank and university collaboration to international tourism and cultural exchange. As Ankara's relations to Moscow are now affected by tensions reminiscent of those experienced in many East European capitals, a modern day Intermarium could go beyond the former Soviet bloc.

It could include Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. It might also include the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, should the domestic political configurations there change, or further states from Scandinavia to the Balkans. In these countries too, many politicians and intellectuals perceive Russia as a threat, have memories of anti-imperial resistance against Moscow expansionism, and/or may be motivated to support Kyiv, Chisinau, and Tbilisi in their disputes with the Kremlin, over their territory and sovereignty.

For a while, the negative effects of Moscow's new foreign adventurism were mitigated by Turkey's economic interests in Russia. Partly, an informal Intermarium is already evolving, and – whether acknowledged or not – already becoming a problem for Moscow. On a bilateral basis, such cooperation is taking place between, for instance, Ukraine, on the one side, and Poland or Turkey, on the other. There is also some nascent multilateral cooperation between the countries of Intermarium, for instance, within the joint Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian brigade.

Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova are members and Turkey as well as Latvia are observers of the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. After the Orange Revolution in 2005, the Community of Democratic Choice was established by nine East European countries (Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, Ukraine) and eight observing delegations (Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, United States, European Union, OSCE) to promote democracy and the rule of law.

The NATO member Turkey and Eastern Partnership country Azerbaijan concluded in 2010 an Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support which provides for, among others, military and military-industrial cooperation. Since 2012, Turkey, Romania, and Poland are conducting yearly trilateral special meetings at which they consult on strategic and security issues.

Moscow's attack on Ukraine and annexation of Crimea has not only intensified existing feelings of mutual solidarity within Eastern Europe. It has also brought Turkey into the East European game, as the Crimean Tatars are closely related to the Turks and strongly resist their inclusion into Russia.

Over the last 25 years, the Crimean Tatars have become ardent supporters of Ukraine as a sovereign state and their preferred home country. At the same time, according to different estimates, the number of Crimean Tatars living in Turkey ranges from 150,000 to 6 million. German-Azeri historian Zaur Gasimov writes that, moreover, "a not inconsiderable part of Turkey's leading historians are of Crimean Tatar descent. [...]"

As authors of best-selling books and as public intellectuals, they frequently comment on issues in Turkish politics, historical interpretation and religion." These and other factors had, even before the more recent escalation, led to cracks in Turkish-Russian relations. For a while, the negative effects of Moscow's new foreign adventurism were mitigated by Turkey's economic interests in Russia.



Since autumn of last year, the schism has, however, been widening, especially after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet on 24 November 2015. As a result of the Kremlin's intervention in Syria and economic sanctions against Turkey, relations between Moscow and Ankara are now deeply damaged. The decline of the Russian economy and escalation of the conflict in Nagorno Karabakh too contributed to Turkey's changing perception of Russia as a reliable partner.

While it is thus no surprise that Ankara's empathy for Kyiv has recently increased, the magnitude of Turkey's new engagement with Ukraine is noteworthy. While it is thus no surprise that Ankara's empathy for Kyiv has recently increased, the magnitude of Turkey's new engagement with Ukraine is noteworthy. Not only has the Turkish leadership, since December 2015, taken some ad hoc measures to support Kyiv, such as delivery of military hospitals to Ukraine.

During a visit of President Petro Poroshenko to Ankara in early March 2016, Ukraine and Turkey signed a 21-point Joint Declaration that includes cooperation concerning economic, cultural, and consular issues, as well as in security affairs ranging from cooperation in weapons production to military education. Turkey and Ukraine hope to conclude in 2016 their ongoing negotiations for the creation of a free trade zone.

A new defense pact of non-nuclear states located between NATO's founding countries and Russia, based on the Community of Democratic Choice and modeled on the Turkish-Azeri mutual support agreement, would not principally change European geopolitics. Yet, it could help to deter Kremlin adventurism, and thus make these states more secure.

It would also assist in decreasing tensions in the West's relations with Moscow by refocusing Russia's attention away from the US and EU. Europe's current security structures have shown to be insufficient while effective frameworks other than an Intermarium are not on offer.

A reconfiguration of East European inter-state relations is overdue. The emergence of an Intermarium coalition would demonstrate not only to the Kremlin, but also to Russia's population, that Moscow's growing foreign adventurism is detrimental to Russian national interests.

Obama sending more forces to Syria to consolidate gains against ISIL

Reuters, 25.04.2016



President Barack Obama announced the biggest expansion of U.S. ground troops in Syria since the civil war there began, saying he would dispatch an extra 250 special forces soldiers to build on successes against the ISIL.

The new deployment will increase U.S. forces in Syria to about 300. The decision, announced by Obama, appears reflects growing confidence in the ability of U.S.-backed forces to claw back territory from the hardline Islamist group. “Given the success, I’ve approved the deployment of up to 250 additional U.S. personnel in Syria, including special forces to keep up this momentum,” Obama said.

“They’re not going to be leading the fight on the ground, but they will be essential in providing the training and assisting local forces as they continue to drive ISIL back,” he added. With German Chancellor Angela Merkel sitting in the audience, Obama also urged Europe and NATO allies to do more in the fight against ISIL.

The group controls the cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria and a swathe of territory in between, and has proven a potent threat abroad, claiming responsibility for major attacks in Paris in November and Brussels in March. “Even as European countries make important contributions against ISIL, Europe, including NATO, can still do more,” Obama said ahead of talks later in the day with Merkel and the leaders of Britain, France and Italy.

“In Syria and Iraq we need more nations contributing to their campaign. We need more nations contributing trainers to help build up local forces in Iraq. We need more nations to contribute economic assistance to Iraq so it can stabilise liberated areas and break the cycle of violent extremism so that ISIL cannot come back,” he said.

Obama pledged to wind down wars in the Middle East when he was first elected in 2008. But in the latter part of his presidency he has found it necessary to keep or add troops to help with conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, where a five-year civil war has killed at least 250,000 people. Last year he sent 50 U.S. special operations forces to Syria in what U.S. officials described as a “counterterrorism” mission rather than an effort to tip the scales in the war. Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes, briefing reporters before Obama spoke, said U.S. forces “are not being sent there on a combat mission”.

In Iraq, ISIL has been pulling back since December when it lost Ramadi, the capital of the western province of Anbar. In Syria, the jihadist fighters have been pushed from the strategic city of Palmyra by Russian-backed Syrian government forces. The Pentagon announced last week that about 200 more troops would be deployed to Iraq, mainly to advise Iraqi troops fighting ISIL.

Since U.S.-backed forces recaptured the strategic Syrian town of al-Shadadi in late February, a growing number of Arab fighters in Syria have offered to join the fight against the group, U.S. officials told Reuters in early April. Syria was a major theme talks between Obama and Merkel. The German leader had just returned from a trip to Turkey to see refugee camps along the border.

The European Union has grappled with the flood of about a million migrants last year, most fleeing the Syria crisis. Merkel pushed her EU partners to accept refugees, and recently hammered out a deal with Turkey to stop the migrant flow. After meeting with Merkel for about 90 minutes, Obama told reporters that he was “deeply concerned” about a surge in violence in Syria, where government forces have stepped up bombing of rebel-held areas around the strategic city of Aleppo.

ISIL advances against rebels in north Syria

AP, 27.04.2016



Militants from the ISIL group seized five villages from Syrian rebels close to the Turkish border, further weakening the rebels’ foothold in the Aleppo area.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a network of activists monitoring the Syria conflict, said the extremist group took five villages in Azaz district, north of Aleppo, where rebels hold an enclave host to tens of thousands of internally displaced civilians. The ISIL group’s news agency also reported the advance. Syrian rebels are anticipating a major government offensive against their position in Aleppo.

Aleppo is now divided between government and rebel control. Dozens of civilians have been killed in shelling and airstrikes on the city. A government offensive backed by Russian air power and regional militias earlier this year dislodged rebels from parts of Azaz and severed their corridor between the Turkish border and Aleppo. The predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are fighting for their autonomy in the multilayered conflict, also made ground against the rebels.

That left the rebels in Aleppo with just one narrow corridor to the outside world, through Idlib province. Those in Azaz are now squeezed between ISIL to the east and the SDF to the west and south, while Turkey tightly restricts the flow of goods and people through the border. Doctors Without Borders and other aid organizations warned earlier this month that the humanitarian situation for over 100,000 people trapped in the Azaz rebel-held pocket was critical. The advance puts ISIL in a better position to strike the towns of Marea and Azaz.

Syria’s conflict began with mostly peaceful protests in 2011, but a brutal government crackdown and the rise of an armed insurgency eventually plunged the country into a full-blown civil war. The fighting has killed more than 250,000 people, according to the United Nations, which stopped tracking casualties several months ago.

China, Russia urge US to drop Korea missile defence proposal

Reuters, 29.04.2016



China and Russia urged the United States not to install a new anti-missile system in South Korea, after Washington said it was in talks with Seoul in the wake of nuclear arms and missile tests by North Korea.

The United States and South Korea have begun talks on possible deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system after North Korea tested its fourth nuclear bomb on Jan. 6 and conducted missile tests. The nuclear test and missile launches are in violation of United Nations resolutions against North Korea backed by Russia and China.

U.S. and South Korean officials have expressed concern that the North could attempt a fifth nuclear test in a show of strength ahead of its Workers' Party congress, which begins. North Korea test-fired what appeared to be two intermediate range ballistic missiles, but both failed, the U.S. military said.

Speaking at joint press briefing with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the United States should respect "legitimate concerns" of China and Russia over the missile system. "This move goes beyond the defensive needs of the relevant countries. If it is deployed it will directly impact China's and Russia's respective strategic security," Wang said.

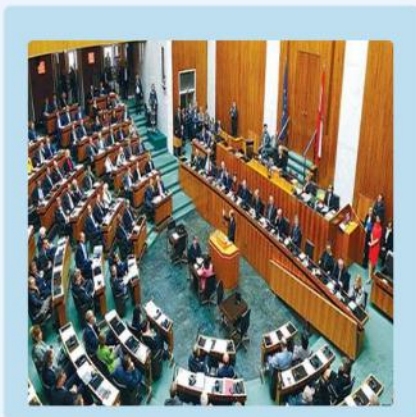
"Not only does it threaten the resolution of the peninsula nuclear issue, it quite possibly could pour oil on the fire of an already tense situation, and even destroy strategic equilibrium on the peninsula." North Korea's actions should not be used as an excuse to make moves that would escalate tensions, especially the U.S. deployment of an anti-missile system, Lavrov said, according to an interpretation in Chinese.

North Korea's drive to develop a nuclear weapons capability has angered China, Pyongyang's sole major diplomatic and economic supporter. But Beijing fears THAAD and its radar have a range that would extend far beyond the Korean peninsula and into China. Chinese President Xi Jinping said that Beijing would not allow war and chaos to break out on the Korean peninsula.

North and South Korea remain technically at war after their 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce, rather than a treaty. The North routinely threatens to destroy South Korea and its major ally, the United States.

UN chief slams ‘increasingly restrictive’ EU refugee policies, as Austria adopts tough new asylum law

AFP, 28.04.2016



U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon hit at what he called “increasingly restrictive” refugee policies in Europe as the continent faces its worst migrant crisis in decades whose parliament adopted one of Europe’s toughest asylum laws the previous day.

Ban also said he was “alarmed by the growing xenophobia here” and elsewhere in Europe, in a speech to the Austrian parliament. “I am concerned that European countries are now adopting increasingly-restrictive immigration and refugee policies,” Ban told lawmakers. “Such policies negatively affect the obligation of member states under international humanitarian law and European law.

Divisiveness and marginalization hurt individuals and undermine security.” His comments came one day after the Austrian parliament adopted one of Europe’s toughest asylum laws, as the country’s centrist government struggles to halt the surging far-right whose candidate won the first round of presidential polls.

The hotly-disputed bill, which passed by 98 votes to 67, allows the government to declare a “state of emergency” if migrant numbers suddenly rise and reject most asylum seekers directly at the border, including those from war-torn countries like Syria. Under Austria’s new law, the government can now declare an emergency if the migrant flow threatens “national security.”

Border authorities will then only grant access to refugees facing safety threats in a neighboring transit country or whose relatives are already in Austria. Some groups including minors and pregnant women will be exempt from the rule. The “special measures” will also force migrants to request asylum directly at the border in yet-to-be-built registration centers, where they may be held for up to 120 hours while their application is being checked.

Opposition parties and rights groups have slammed the legislation, with the U.N.’s refugee agency warning that it “removes a centerpiece of refugee protection.” But Austrian Interior Minister Wolfgang Sobotka insisted Austria had no other choice as long as “so many other European Union members fail to do their part” to stop the influx. “We cannot shoulder the whole world’s burden,” he said. Wedged between Europe’s two main refugee routes - the Balkans and Italy - Austria received around 90,000 asylum requests in 2015, the second-highest in the bloc on a per capita basis. More than a million people, primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, landed in Europe last year, triggering the continent’s worst migration crisis since the aftermath of World War II. The restrictions are similar to tough rules introduced by the right-wing government in neighboring Hungary last year.

In addition, MPs also voted to restrict existing asylum laws by placing limits on the length of asylum granted to migrants and making it harder for their families to join them. “These are extremely dangerous tools that are being sharpened here, especially if they fall into the wrong hands,” said the leader of the small NEOS opposition party, Mathias Strolz. Shortly before the vote, a group of protesters threw leaflets from the parliament’s upper gallery reading “Don’t walk over dead bodies, it won’t keep you afloat.”

The vote comes after the candidate of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), Norbert Hofer, sent shock waves through the political establishment by winning the first round of the presidential election. The two candidates of the ruling centrist coalition failed to even make it into the runoff on May 22.

Putin ‘sees NATO, EU a threat,’ says Obama

AFP, 26.04.2016



U.S. President Barack Obama said that his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin was trying to undermine European unity, which he sees as a threat. Speaking to CBS New, Obama said Europe’s migrant crisis was also a problem for the United States.

“But more importantly, more strategically, is the strain it’s putting on Europe’s politics, the way that it advances far-right nationalism, the degree to which it is encouraging a break-up of European unity, that in some cases, is being exploited by somebody like Mr. Putin,” he said. Putin sees NATO, the EU and transatlantic unity as a threat, Obama added.

“Now, I think he’s mistaken about that,” he said. “I’ve indicated to him that, in fact, a strong, unified Europe working with a strong, outward-looking Russia, that’s the right recipe.” “So far, he has not been entirely persuaded.” Relations between the U.S., the EU and NATO deterred since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, when NATO cut off all practical ties with Moscow in protest.

Relations worsened over Moscow’s air campaign in Syria and tensions have also flared after two incidents involving the U.S. military and Russian planes in the Baltic Sea. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Feb. 10 that the alliance increasing its presence in its eastern member states, which are alarmed by a more assertive Russia, sent a “clear signal” to any would-be aggressor.

Obama was speaking to CBS at the end of a trip to the Middle East and Europe, where he urged European leaders to show greater unity in the face of lingering economic crisis, an Islamist terror threat and the huge flow of migrants from the Middle East and elsewhere into the European Union. He also urged Britain not to vote to leave the European Union in a referendum in June.

Obama and the leaders of Germany, Italy, Britain and France on Monday called on parties in the Syrian war to respect an agreement to cease hostilities and make peace talks work, the White House said in a statement.

“They called on all parties to respect the cessation, ensure humanitarian access, and contribute to the success of the Geneva talks on political transition,” the White House said after a meeting attended by Obama, French President Francois Hollande, British Prime Minister David Cameron, Italian Premier Matteo Renzi and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. “They also called on those with influence on the parties to the conflict to press them to refrain from any actions that put the cessation and political talks at risk,” it said.

South Korea: North Korea fires submarine-launched missile

Reuters, 23.04.2016



North Korea fired what appeared to be a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) off its east coast, South Korea said, amid concerns that it might conduct a nuclear test or a missile launch ahead of a key ruling party meeting in May.

The North fired the missile to the northeast from an area off its east coast at about 6:30 p.m. local time (0930 GMT), the South’s office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said. North Korea will hold a rare congress of its ruling Workers’ Party in early May for the first time in 36 years. South Korea’s Yonhap news agency said the missile flew “for a few minutes,” citing a source. There were no further details.

The North first attempted a launch of the submarine-based missile last year and was seen to be in the early stages of developing such a weapons system, which could pose a new threat to its neighbors and the United States if it is perfected.

However, follow-up test launches were believed to have fallen short of the North’s expectations as its state media footage appeared to have been edited to fake success, according experts who have seen the visuals. South Korea’s military has said it is on high alert over the possibility that the isolated North could conduct its fifth nuclear test “at any time” in defiance of U.N. sanctions after setting off what it said was a hydrogen device in January.

Satellite images show that North Korea may have resumed tunnel excavation at its main nuclear test site, similar to activity seen before the January test, a U.S. North Korea monitoring website reported. South Korea and the United States, as well as experts, believe the North is working to develop a submarine-launched ballistic missile system and an intercontinental ballistic missile putting the mainland United States within range.

Cruz, Kasich team up to stop party frontrunner Trump

AFP, 27.04.2016



Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were a giant step closer toward securing their parties' presidential nominations with powerful wins in a string of primary wins in the U.S. Northeast.

Barring a dramatic turn of events, Clinton has now cleared the way to become the Democratic nominee in the November presidential election, which would make her the first woman in U.S. history to reach that milestone. The former secretary of state won four out of five primaries in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland and the night's big prize, the battleground state of Pennsylvania.

She conceded only the small state of Rhode Island to rival Bernie Sanders in a near sweep that gives her an almost insurmountable delegate lead. Clinton now has 2,168 delegates, including more than 500 "super-delegates," against Sanders's 1,401, with about 1,000 more to be distributed in the 14 remaining nominating races. "What a great night," Clinton told a thrilled crowd of supporters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The 68-year-old former first lady telegraphed her eagerness to shift toward the general election and a showdown with Republicans. "Let's go forward, let's win the nomination, and in July let's return as a unified party," she said. Clinton's strong showing heaps pressure on the well-funded Sanders, a self-declared democratic socialist senator from Vermont, even as he has vowed to fight on until the California primary on June 7.

"The people in every state in this country should have the right to determine who they want as president and what the agenda of the Democratic Party should be. That's why we are in this race until the last vote is cast," Sanders said in a statement. "That is why this campaign is going to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia with as many delegates as possible to fight for a progressive party platform." Trump swept all five presidential races, strengthening his grip on the Republican race.

He demolished his rivals Ted Cruz and John Kasich in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island - a stunning show of force by a candidate seen as a populist political savior by millions despite being loathed by the party establishment. "I consider myself the presumptive nominee," the real estate mogul told a crowd at Trump Tower in New York, despite still being short of the 1,237 delegates required to win the nomination outright. "As far as I'm concerned, it's over." Most importantly, the bombastic 69-year-old extended his lead in the all-important race for delegates who will officially choose the Republican nominee at the party's convention in July.

Trump's triumph comes in the heated aftermath of the revelation that Cruz and Kasich, desperate to prevent the frontrunner from securing the nomination, were teaming up to block him in future races. Kasich agreed to forego campaigning in Indiana, a winner-take-all state that votes on May 3 and is the next focus in the GOP race. Cruz will return the favor later in New Mexico and Oregon. But Trump slammed the alliance as "pathetic" and ineffective.

"This joke of a deal is falling apart, not being honored and almost dead," Trump said on Twitter. "Very dumb!" Trump now stands at 988 delegates, according to CNN's running estimate. Cruz was a distant second with 568, while Kasich increased his numbers only slightly, to 152. But the convoluted system of delegate allocation in some states means Trump is still a considerable way from reaching 1,237.

Cruz, Kasich team up to stop party frontrunner Trump

AFP, 25.04.2016



Ted Cruz and John Kasich have agreed to join forces to try to deny frontrunner Donald Trump the Republican Party's presidential nomination, their campaigns said. The alliance, arose due to the pressing timing of the Republican party's presidential primary season.

Trump, has pushed close to amassing the number of delegates to the party convention that would ensure he will be the Republican standard-bearer. Cruz's campaign manager Jeff Roe said the campaign would "focus its time and resources in Indiana and in turn clear the path for Governor Kasich to compete in Oregon and New Mexico."

Kasich's team put out a similar statement. "Both know their best shot at preventing Trump from clinching the nomination outright is to team up to block his path and force a contested convention. And it may still be too late," Politico reported.

A dismissive Trump said on Twitter: "Wow, just announced that Lyin' Ted and Kasich are going to collude in order to keep me from getting the Republican nomination. DESPERATION!" Some influential party figures such as 2012 nominee Mitt Romney have aligned with a Stop Trump movement, which may or may not be benefiting Trump's chief rival Cruz, an arch-conservative U.S. senator from Texas.

Cruz told reporters Trump has been "lying to us" and is pretending to be a conservative in order to "fool gullible voters." Barely 36 hours before voters in five states head to the polls, Trump lashed out at Cruz, accusing him of "bribing" all-important delegates as part of the convoluted primary system for choosing the Democratic and Republican nominees.



Trump has repeatedly described the process as rigged, and has mocked the party for allowing campaigns to bestow gifts such as flights and dinners on delegates. Hillary Clinton is increasingly seen as the presumptive Democratic Party choice. Earlier, Trump and his presidential campaign pushed back against accusations by rivals in both parties that the celebrity billionaire is a political fraud who has been misleading American voters.

The Republican frontrunner's new senior advisor Paul Manafort raised eyebrows when he told Republican heavyweights at a closed-door meeting that Trump has been playing a "part" in front of rally audiences and that the role was "evolving" into a more serious and policy-focused one. Manafort went on the same channel to try to quell the furor over his remarks. He insisted that Americans were seeing "the real Donald Trump in campaign mode talking to people," and that the New York real estate mogul was not out to mislead anyone. "We were evolving the campaign, not the candidate, and the settings were going to start changing," he told Fox.

Announcements & Reports

► *Financial Risks and Opportunities in The Time of Climate Change*

Source : Bruegel

Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/04/financial-risks-and-opportunities-in-the-time-of-climate-change/>

► *Analysis of the FY 2017 Defense Budget*

Source : CSIS

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/analysis-fy-2017-defense-budget>

► *Military Health Engagement*

Source : CSIS

Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/military-health-engagement>

Upcoming Events

► *The Search for Europe*

Date : 29 April 2016

Place : Brussels - Belgium

Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/the-search-for-europe/>

► *The UK and the EU: Managing the Euro and the Single Market*

Date : 29 April 2016

Place : London - UK

Website : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/uk-and-eu-managing-euro-and-single-market>

► *Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union*

Date : 30 April 2016

Place : Brussels - Belgium

Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/534-competitive-gains-in-the-economic-and-monetary-union/>

► *The Future of Capitalist Democracy: UK-Japan Perspectives*

Date : 30 April 2016

Place : London - UK

Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>



► *Emerging Markets and Europe: Time for Different Relationships?*

Date : 01 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/524-emerging-markets-and-europe-time-for-different-relationships/>

► *What future for Europe's Social Models?*

Date : 02 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/526-what-future-for-europes-social-models/>

► *Challenges for Growth in Europe*

Date : 02 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/521-challenges-for-growth-in-europe/>

► *Global Governance of Public Goods: Asian and European Perspectives*

Date : 03 May 2016
Place : Paris - France
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/529-global-governance-of-public-goods-asian-and-european-perspectives/>

► *The Future of the Welfare State*

Date : 04 May 2016
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>