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#### NATO Update

*By: Pavle Levkovic*

On 2 January, [General Knud Bartels took over as the Chairman of NATO's Military Committee](#), having been nominated for the position in September 2011. He previously held the position of Chief of Defence of Denmark. Although originally due to start his term in July 2012, he has been handed an early start as his predecessor Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola resigned his position last November after being named Minister of Defence of Italy in the wake of Silvio Berlusconi's resignation. A 25-year veteran, Bartels has prior experience with the assignment, having already served as the Danish Military Representative to NATO's Military Committee from 2006 to 2009. As Chairman his responsibilities include coordinating the Defence Chiefs of Alliance members as well as advising the Secretary General of NATO. The appointment is for three years, with the possibility of a one year extension.

Once again the [situation in northern Kosovo was in the news](#), after Serbian President Boris Tadic visited a monastery in Visoki Decani last Friday to mark Orthodox Christmas celebrations. NATO's Kosovo mission (KFOR) and its European Union counterpart (EULEX) worked together to ensure the safety of the officials at the UNESCO World Heritage site, as the president was joined by EULEX chief Xavier de Marnhac and the Commander of KFOR, General Erhard Drews. The trip was marked by protests in which about 200 ethnic Albanians blocked the presidential motorcade and threw stones at some of the cars. No injuries were reported, however. Although the government of Kosovo originally approved the visit, Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci announced on Saturday that President Tadic would no longer be welcome after the latter told journalists that Serbia would "never" recognize the independence of Kosovo. President Tadic added that Belgrade would not consider removing Serbian institutions from the north of the country, where most of the ethnic Serbian minority population lives. The tension stems from last July's decision by the Albanian-dominated government of Kosovo to impose control on its northern border with Serbia.

On the home front, [HMCS Charlottetown sailed last Sunday from Halifax](#) with a complement of 250 sailors to take part in another NATO mission in the Mediterranean. She will assist in counter-terrorism operations in Operation Active Endeavour, launched in October 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks. Unlike her role in Libya, where she came under attack by missiles and small boats, Charlottetown will be responsible for tracking, boarding, and reporting on possible terrorist targets, with a view to combat proliferation and the smuggling of weapons of mass destruction. Although the expectation is that this voyage will entail less risk, the recent unrest in Syria has been cited by Defence Minister Peter MacKay as one reason for her quick return to the Mediterranean.

In Afghanistan, NATO has been preparing for the end of operations in 2014 by [withdrawing military equipment](#) from the country well in advance of the deadline. The United States in particular is expected to ship back almost \$30-billion in gear it has accumulated in the past decade of operations. Transporting everything by air has been deemed too expensive, owing to the weight of some of the 10,000 vehicles the US estimates it has. A northern overland route through Russia is rumored to be a possibility, as the lack of good roads and the landlocked nature of Afghanistan are complicating factors in the withdrawal. The move comes at the same time as US President Barack Obama announced that the country's defence budget is to be reduced by an estimated half trillion dollars. In an official press release, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen [stated](#) that he welcomed the support by President Obama pledging that the US will continue to invest in NATO, despite the planned reductions.

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## **Putin Equivocates His Way to Reform**

*By: Simon A. Miles*

Following the spate of political protests which transpired in Russia during late 2011, many in the West have wondered what the Putin regime's response would be. In [an earlier article](#), I argued that Putin would not play the role of Nicholas II in this turbulent time. Recent events have borne this prognosis out. However, what is transpiring in Russia is patently little more than window dressing.

This process first manifested itself during President [Dmitry Medvedev's final address to the Russian Federal Assembly](#) as President of the Federation, on 22 December 2011. In it, he proposed political reforms focused on two key areas: returning to the practice of direct elections of regional governors and facilitating the creation of political parties in order to broaden political engagement. One of the many idiosyncrasies of the current Russian political system is that some regions are effectively unrepresented in the State Duma (parliament), a state of affairs he hopes to rectify by introducing a more proportional system of representation.

Russian dissidents have relied heavily on the internet to rally support and organize their actions. This not only enabled them to evade the censorship which runs amok throughout Russia's media; but also is a necessity in so massive a country. Putin is attempting to co-opt this, [appealing directly to heavy users of the internet](#) (he himself proudly uses it only infrequently) to participate in a web discussion on the Russian political system. Furthermore, [the Kremlin has sacked Vladislav Surkov](#), the former head of the presidential administration. Surkov is publically seen as a key architect of Putin's "managed democracy" system and his dismissal is believed to have been an attempt to placate opposition elements. That he was also largely responsible for United Russia's poor showing in the recent elections (and therefore likely being punished by the Putin regime) has not gone unnoticed.

In [a recent press interview](#), however, the new State Duma Speaker dismissed suggestions that these measures were responses to popular protests. Rather, insists Sergei Naryshkin, these measures predate the summer of 2012. Indeed, for all this pacification, there is a great deal of evidence that the fundamental nature of the Putin regime has not changed. All of the aforementioned examples of the softening image of the Putin regime have been heavily equivocated by said regime. In Medvedev's address, after suggesting the aforementioned two areas of reform, he transitioned into an attack against provocateurs and those seeking to overturn the results of the elections. Such talks have been ruled out entirely—save for through legal channels—by Putin. Meanwhile, further restrictive laws have been passed, such as [instituting a one-year sentence for insulting state officials](#). Moscow also released a lengthy and bizarre discourse on how [Western states \(Canada included\) are equally guilty of human rights violations](#) as Russia allegedly is. Anti-Western sentiment (which has a history of playing well politically in Russia) continues to be espoused by the state. Most recently, the head of Russia's space program blamed the five major and high-profile failures his organization faced on [foreign forces](#).

[A recent editorial by The Moscow Times](#) offers a different historical parallel for Putin to emulate from Nicholas II: Pyotr Stolypin, Tsar Nicholas II's prime minister, who mixed strict discipline with intelligent reforms. The fact that Stolypin was assassinated in 1911 by radicals who deemed his reforms inadequate notwithstanding, this seems to be the model the Kremlin is attempting to emulate. The Kremlin is being nudged in this direction by the leadership of the Russian Orthodox church—still a major force in the country—whose Patriarch, Kirill I, declared in a [television interview](#) that it would be “a very bad sign” if the country’s leaders failed to heed recent protests over perceived electoral fraud. In short, this is a situation which will continue to develop in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections which Putin is expected to win (in all probability legitimately). The Kremlin must balance the need to save face with the impetus to maintain control over Russia.

Further Reading: [Putin's 3 Choices](#); [The gray cardinal leaves the Kremlin](#); [Head of Russian Church Says Leaders Must Listen to Protests](#); [Medvedev calls for major reform of Russia's political system](#)

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## **US-Taliban Negotiations: A Political Office in Qatar?**

*By: Alexander Corbeil*

In a dramatic turn of events last week, the spokesman for the Afghani Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, announced that the insurgent group was looking into opening a [political office in Qatar](#). Although no concrete steps have been taken in this direction, the announcement comes as the result of more than [two years of secret negotiations](#) begun by the now-deceased US special envoy Richard C. Holbrooke and continued by his successor Marc Grossman. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and various US officials are wary of discussing any negotiations but it seems that the opening of the Qatar office is not without Taliban preconditions. Mujahid has made it clear that the opening of a political office, a key demand of the US which was previously backed by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, rests upon the willingness of the US to [release five senior Taliban leaders](#) from Guantanamo Bay. Although preliminary steps have been taken, the road to transparent peace negotiations is not without major obstacles that may derail crucial confidence building measures.

While the US administration has [agreed in principle](#) to the release of Taliban detainees, there are domestic issues at play. To begin with, there is congressional resistance to the release of Taliban leaders from America’s most notorious prison. Many [congressional members](#) have reportedly sent classified letters to the Obama administration challenging this transfer plan. Given previous instances of released Guantanamo detainees returning to the battlefield, lawmakers from both parties have enforced strong restrictions on transfers. For the Taliban deal to go forward, both the Secretary of Defence and the Secretary of State would have to certify to Congress that the detainees would be monitored and transferred to a country where they could not re-engage in terrorist activity. Given the high profile links between Qatar and the Taliban, including the possible opening of a political office in Doha, it seems that the Gulf country could become home to these five Taliban leaders.

Domestic constraints are not the only roadblock towards normalized relations between the US and Taliban. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is reportedly hesitant to give his blessing to the peace talks, due to the lack of involvement of his government. Karzai views direct talks between the US and Taliban as a precursor to a power sharing arrangement between Kabul and the Taliban, which has [attempted to assassinate him multiple times](#). In response to the Taliban office announcement, President Karzai recalled the Afghan ambassador to Qatar in protest. The Afghan president had previously wanted a Taliban office to be situated in either Saudi Arabia or Turkey, his strongest regional allies. Due to [political strong-arming](#) by the US government and Taliban reluctance to open up shop in either country, Karzai will now be forced to allow the Qatari office. In order to gain Karzai’s approval, Marc Grossman, the current Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan will [visit Kabul next week](#). According to [Dean Nelson](#) of the *Daily Telegraph*, it seems that Mr. Grossman will spin the talks as a preliminary step to transparent and robust negotiations between Taliban leadership and Afghan government representatives.

If Karzai is willing to stand up to those in opposition to peace talks within his own government, it is likely that he will bow to US pressure and agree to the negotiations. Given the fact that NATO and American troops will leave Afghanistan by 2014, Karzai may be forced to begin the peace process before his strongest allies depart.

The other big player who has been uncharacteristically silent on burgeoning US-Taliban negotiations is neighboring Pakistan. As the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has close links with the Afghani Taliban, any peace process must be given a green light from Islamabad. The ISI views the [Taliban as a key strategic asset](#) in its regional competition with India and as a safe guard against losing clout within Afghanistan following NATO's withdrawal. With [US-Pakistani relations at an all time low](#) it is unclear if these negotiations will get the full support of regional interests, a much needed precondition for success. Current constraints aside, the Pakistani government has previously voiced concerns regarding marginalization from peace negotiations between the major actors in Afghanistan. Thus, the Obama administration may get the reconciliation process started with both the Pakistani government and military in order to be given their full support in any Afghan peace endeavor.

Although promising, the possibility of a new chapter in US-Taliban relations will not equate to an immediate end to open hostilities between the two forces. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid on Thursday stated that, "...[this understanding does not mean a surrender from Jihad](#)." His statement comes as a suicide bomber killed the governor of Panjwai district on Thursday near Kandahar city, a day after the city's police chief narrowly escaped an attempt on his life.

Further Reading:

[Taliban to Open Political Office in Qatar](#); [Against Odds, Path Opens Up for US-Taliban Talks](#); [Taliban set Terms as US Pushes for Talks](#); [Guantanamo Bay Taliban Detainees to be Released: Report](#); [Lawmakers may seek to Block Taliban Transfer](#); [The Road Map to the Afghan End Game](#); [Peace Talks with Taliban await nod from Karzai](#); [Hamid Karzai condemns US Marines urinating video](#); [Taliban: More Fighting Amid Peace Talks](#); [The ISI and Terrorism: Behind the Accusations](#)

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## **Things Fall Apart: Nigeria Slides toward Sectarian Conflict**

*By: James Marcus Bridger*

Just two short years ago, the Islamist militant organization Boko Haram was [discounted by government and intelligence officials](#) as a spent force that lacked the organizational capabilities to threaten the state or endanger foreign interests. By 2011 however, the group had evolved from a small religious sect to a simmering regional insurgency: improvised explosives and drive-by shootings were replaced by coordinated attacks and suicide bombings. The most recent round of violence—which has targeted Christians living in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim northeast—has left the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan scrambling to prevent the divided country from spiraling into sectarian violence. Western officials are also cautious, warning that the group is becoming more internationalist in its outlook and choice of targets and is forging links with Islamist insurgent groups across the Sahel region.

Boko Haram, whose colloquial moniker translates to "Western education is forbidden," was responsible for [up to 600 deaths in 2011](#). Seeking to create a strict Islamic state in northern Nigeria, the group has launched attacks against government and security installations, as well as Christian communities. Previously sequestered to the northeast of the country, Boko Haram's August 2011 truck bombing of the UN headquarters in the capital, Abuja, demonstrated its expanded capabilities. The group's choice of targets, [regional expert J. Peter Pham contends](#), is "designed to show that the militants can strike anywhere and that they can make the country ungovernable for President Goodluck Jonathan."

Over the Christmas weekend, more than 40 people were killed in a series of coordinated bombings and shootings targeting Christian worshippers. Attacks have since been a weekly occurrence.

Boko Haram claimed responsibility for a New Year's Eve bombing of a bar frequented by soldiers in one of the capital's most secure areas. Attacks against Christians continued on 5 January when nine were killed in a church shooting. [Two separate attacks the following day](#) saw over 30 members from the Christian Igbo community gunned down, several of whom had been mourning the victims of the earlier attack.

### **Towards the Tipping Point**

The greatest danger for the government is that Boko Haram will push Africa's most populous country into a state of sectarian warfare. President Jonathan stated that the latest spiral of violence, claiming at least 80 lives in the last month, is "[even worse](#)" than the country's 1960s civil war. The government declared a state of emergency in four northeastern states following the Christmas attacks, but the move has done little to deter violence. While a Boko Haram ultimatum caused thousands of Christians to flee south, Ayo Oritsejafor, head of the Christian Association of Nigeria, appealed to his followers to hold fast and [defend themselves from "ethnic and religious cleansing."](#) Militant groups in the southern Niger Delta (who have been largely subdued since a government amnesty was offered in 2009) warned that they will be "[forced to retaliate](#)" for the killing of Christians if the federal government is unable to secure the country. In what may have been a religiously inspired reprisal, a crowd attacked a mosque in Benin city in the Christian-dominated south on 9 January; injuring ten. [Observers have noted](#) that Nigeria's bloody 1967-70 Civil War was preceded by similar mass migrations, pogroms, and sectarian attacks.

### **Linked In**

Boko Haram's rise is a part of a larger trend that has seen violent extremism spread across the Sahel belt of northern Africa. Government forces in Mali, Mauritania, Algeria and Niger have recently engaged in skirmishes with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—[an emboldened terrorist group](#) that has also intensified its campaign to kidnap and ransom Westerners in the region. On the opposite side of the continent, Somalia's al-Shabaab continues to thwart the joint efforts of the African Union force (AMISOM), Kenya, and Ethiopia to destroy it. While all three militant groups began as localized responses to specific grievances, their outlook has increasingly become one of internationalist global struggle and cooperative links have begun to form between them.

The emir of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, has boasted that his organization is providing weapons and training to Boko Haram, a report confirmed by [US intelligence assessments](#). Nigerian security officials also contend that the man responsible for the 2010 UN bombing, Mamman Nur, had received sanctuary and [training from al-Shabaab](#) in Somalia. These developments have been met with worry by Western officials. In November, the US House of Representatives' subcommittee on counter-terrorism and intelligence identified Boko Haram as an "[emerging threat](#)" to the US and its interests. General Carter Ham, Commander of US Africa Command, [contends that](#) "if left unaddressed, you could have a [terrorist] network that ranges from East Africa through the center and into the Sahel."

### **A Better Way Forward**

The closing of the country's northern border, imposed curfews, and an increased troop presence have thus far done little to bring meaningful security to Nigeria, nor to alleviate public concern. It appears that Abuja is now gearing up for a renewed military offensive, said to be the largest since the Civil War. In November, [it was disclosed](#) that the US Army has been assisting in this endeavor, deploying 100 Special Forces soldiers to provide the government with counter-insurgency training.

Defeating Boko Haram requires addressing the underlying issues that allow the group to flourish. Northern Nigeria falls well behind the south [in all indicators](#) of wealth, literacy, and health. Though their tactics are abhorrent, Boko Haram presents a number of legitimate grievances. A heavy handed strategy which fails to address these issues will likely push the group further towards a global jihadist ideology, making negotiations all but impossible.

Further Reading: [Who are Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists?](#); [Islamist Terror Network Gains Strength in Africa](#); [Nigeria declares state of emergency](#); [The Islamist Threat to Africa's Rise in 2012](#); [Boko Haram Seen Linked to Other African Terror Groups](#); [Is Nigeria on the brink after north-south clashes?](#)

## **Storm Brewing over *Mistral* Sale to Russia**

By: Simon A. Miles

It has long been acknowledged that Russia possesses a powerful military; but equally broadly accepted that it is in dire need of modernization. Of late, the Russian government of Dmitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin has been taking steps to rectify this defect and bring the Russian military in line with the standard of modernity in NATO countries. Most recently, this necessitated obtaining NATO-standard materiel directly from one of the Alliance's founding members: the French Republic.

[Moscow and Paris have signed an agreement](#) to build a total of four *Mistral*-class amphibious assault vessels for the Russian Navy. France currently operates two *Mistral* vessels, and has ordered a third using economic stimulus funds. Such a craft is an important tool of power projection, carrying up to 16 helicopters (including attack helicopters like France's [Tiger](#) or Russia's [Ka-52](#)). Their main operational use, however, are their four landing barges or two medium hovercraft which deliver armored vehicles, tanks, and soldiers to the shore. Vessels of this class are equipped with a 69-bed hospital, and could be used as amphibious command ships as well.

For Russia, this is an important procurement milestone—the first major arms import deal since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It marks an about-face in procurement strategy, which heretofore [did not envision the construction or acquisition of large ships before 2012](#). During the 2008 war with Georgia, Russia was unable to gain control of Georgia's coastal regions: a shortcoming which deploying a vessel such as the *Mistral* would address directly. Russian navy chief Vladimir Vyssotski last year [declared](#) that the Georgia conflict could have been resolved in “40 minutes and not 26 hours” if his forces had had the ships at the time. Domestically, this acquisition will enhance Russia's own maritime security, particularly in the Baltic and Black Seas.

The new head of military procurement, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin (formerly Russia's Ambassador to NATO), has been [charged by Putin](#) with marshalling the “three trillion roubles earmarked for the modernisation of defence industry enterprises, which means the purchase of new equipment and the latest technologies, and bringing in fresh blood, promising personnel capable of using that equipment to strengthen our country's defensive capabilities.”

The acquisition of the *Mistral* is therefore a significant boon to Russian shipbuilding as an investment in the future. [Russia's input to the construction of the first \*Mistral\*-class warship](#) will be 20% and 40% for the second. The third and fourth ships are to be built in Russia, whose share of labour input will subsequently rise to 80%. The construction of such vessels engender confidence in the flagging shipbuilding industry, which suffered a recent setback as [the nuclear-powered submarine \*Yekaterinburg\* caught fire](#) during repair work in dry dock at Roslyakovo on 29 December 2011, injuring 11 workers and putting it out of commission until the summer of 2014. The acquisition of French expertise and its transfer to Russian shipyards will therefore, it is hoped, reinvigorate shipbuilding and the defence industry at large. Finally, gaining hands-on access to a NATO-standard vessel (albeit one stripped of much high-sensitivity fittings such as encoding devices etc.) will be an asset for both Russian industry and the military force it supplies.

Not surprisingly, this has deeply worried many other nations. In Washington, the Chair of the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, [declared](#) it “deeply troubling that France, a NATO ally, has decided to ignore the clear danger of selling advanced warships to Russia even as Moscow is taking an increasingly hostile approach toward the US, its neighbors, and Europe itself. Many of our allies in the region, such as Georgia and the Baltic states, have experienced cyber attacks, severe economic pressure, and even invasion by Russia.” She went on to decry “arm[ing] our opponents for profit or for the mirage of cooperation that never materializes.”

This stance is in line with the current angle taken by Republicans *vis-à-vis* the Obama administration's "Reset" policy towards Russia. Mitt Romney, the front-runner in the Republican nomination race, has made this one of the key tenets of his foreign policy alternative to that of the Obama administration. Romney [has described](#) New START, the treaty under which Russia and the United States have agreed to reduce their nuclear stockpiles, as Obama's "worst foreign-policy mistake" and [thinks](#) that Prime Minister Putin is "rebuilding the Russian empire."

As Ros-Lehtinen implied, the acquisition of amphibious assault ships by Russia is not at all universally welcome, especially by Georgian authorities. On a visit to Paris, Georgian President Saakashvili [admitted that the sale raised concerns](#), but insisted that he remained confident in France's support for Georgia in its longstanding dispute with the Kremlin.

Further Reading: [Russia Orders French Mistral Amphibious Assault Ships](#); [Russia, France sign warship agreement](#); [How Romney Will Attack Obama](#); [France ready to sell all to Russia save for NATO codes and ICBMs](#); [Ros-Lehtinen Says French Sale of Assault Ships to Russia Threatens Regional Security](#)

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## **The Syria Brief: A Weekly Examination of the Syrian Uprising**

*By: Alexander Corbeil*

### **Assad's Speech**

In a defiant speech Tuesday, President Bashar al-Assad addressed supporters at Damascus University. While promising a multitude of reforms, Assad lashed out at protestors and the international community. The Syrian president promised to restore order by, "[hitting terrorists with an iron fist](#)." Continuing the regime's ongoing rhetoric of foreign conspiracy and international subversion of the protest movement, Assad blamed "[outside planning](#)" for the uprising. The president increased the scope of this so-called conspiracy to include the Arab League.

Assad harshly condemned the regional bloc during his speech on Tuesday, highlighting a shift in the regime's approach to the league and its observer mission. Assad continued the verbal assault Wednesday in a speech to supporters in Damascus' Umayyad Square. The Syrian leader said that the league had "failed for six decades to take a position in the Arab interest," and that "[the Arab League without Syria suspends its own Arab identity](#)," referencing the league's suspension of the country in November due to on-going human rights abuses. The Syrian National Council (SNC), which has not been spared of [criticism](#), was quick to respond to Assad's Tuesday speech. The leader of the SNC, Burhan Ghalioun described the address as an "[incitement to violence](#)". Describing Assad's remarks as a "[rupture with the Arab environment](#)," Basma Qadami a member of the SNC called for the United Nations to stop the killing of innocent Syrian civilians. Qadami said that the next step for the SNC is to approach the Security Council with the cooperation of the Arab League in order to formulate measures to bring the Syrian crisis to an end.

In a meeting with Qatar's Prime Minister, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded on Wednesday to Assad's speech. The Secretary of State went on to say that the US and its Arab allies are awaiting the final report of the monitoring mission due 19 January. Clinton [continued](#), "[We cannot permit Assad and his regime to have impunity](#)," calling Assad's televised address, "chillingly cynical". Mrs. Clinton's reaction comes as the [US diplomatic mission in Damascus is scaling down](#) due to increased violence, the inability of diplomats to meet with Syrian officials, and tensions created by Assad's claims of foreign conspiracy.

### **Arab League mission**

In another blow to the reputation of the Arab League, Anwar Malek a member of the mission to Syria resigned, [calling the operation a "farce"](#). In an interview with Al Jazeera, Malek described the presence

of snipers and tanks in restive urban areas. He stated that the Assad regime refused to meet any requests of the Arab League and that many events were staged in order sway the opinion of observers. Malek believes the Assad regime has gained a considerable amount of time by stalling monitors. In the harshest criticism of observer actions, Malek highlighted that many of the observers tried to remain on good terms with the regime, denying the presence of the snipers.

Eleven monitors were lightly wounded in Latakia when their vehicle became surrounded by demonstrators who broke the car's windows and beat monitors. In response, the head of the Arab League, Nabil El-Araby rejected "[any pressure or provocation from any party, be it the government or the opposition.](#)" Given the tenuous relationship between the league and the Assad regime, especially after the president's remarks, it is quite possible that more violent attacks on monitors may occur.

In light of these attacks the Arab League has stalled the deployment of monitors to Syria citing security concerns. This setback comes as Qatar Prime Minister al-Thani spoke out [against the mission](#), stating that he believed the possibility of success to be minimal.

### **United Nations Security Council discusses Syrian crisis**

The crumbling of the Arab League mission comes as the United Nations Security Council heard the report of Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe. The Under-Secretary presented a grim picture of the current crackdown on pro-democracy protestors. She stated that since the Arab League mission began [400 civilians have been killed at a rate of around 40 per day](#). This represents a large increase in the number of daily deaths before Arab League observers entered Syria on 26 December.

### **Israel's offer**

Israel's military chief Lieutenant-General Benny Gantz [stated](#) at a parliamentary hearing that, "On the day that the (Assad) regime falls, it is expected to result in a blow to the Alawite sect. We are preparing to take in Alawite refugees on the Golan Heights." This comes in the wake of Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak's statement last week that Assad would not see the end of next year. According to the International Crisis Group, [Israel's intelligence depth in Syria is lacking](#) in comparison to that of Turkey or Saudi Arabia, so it is unclear if Israeli statements are accurate. That being said, [analysts believe](#) that it seems more likely that Gantz's remarks were intended as a jab at the Assad regime, that the Israelis would offer security to Assad's people after he is unable to do so.

### **Russian and Iranian arms**

Two arms shipments to Syria have been stopped this week by officials in neighboring countries in an attempt to stem the rearmament of forces loyal to Assad. Turkish customs officers intercepted [five trucks of Iranian origin](#) at a border crossing with Syria that officials believe were carrying military equipment. The Turkish government has reportedly sent military experts to examine the contents of these vehicles to determine if Iran has attempted to break the Turkish embargo on Syria. Turkey, once a close ally of Assad, has implemented an arms embargo against Syria in light of the regime's violent crackdown on civilians. Enforcing a European Union arms embargo against Damascus, Cyprus on Wednesday announced that Cypriot officials had diverted a Russian-chartered ship carrying, "[tons of arms](#)" to Syria. While the ship's owners, the Russian conglomerate Westberg Ltd. promised to change the ship's destination, the *Chariot* arrived at the Syrian port of Tartus, a main resupply point for Russian warships, thus violating the EU embargo.

Further Reading: [Syrian Leader Vows 'Iron Fist' to Crush 'Conspiracy'](#); [Assad Speech Draws West's Outrage](#); [Assad Vows Victory, Syria Accused of War Crimes](#); [Observing the Observers](#); [Al Jazeera's Syria Live Blog](#); [Assad's Speech 'Incitement to Violence': Syria Rebels](#); [Arab Observer Calls Syrian Mission a 'Farce'](#); [Arab League Condemns Attack on Observers](#); [UN says Syria has 'Stepped up Killings'](#); [Israel Prepares for Fall of Assad, Syrian Refugees](#); [Will Assad's Supporters Flee to Israel?](#); [Turkey Holds Trucks Taking Suspect Iranian Cargo to Syria](#); [Russian Gun Boat Bolts for Syria Despite Assurances](#)

## Kosovo's Uncertain Future

*By: Pavle Levkovic*

The political climate in Kosovo is heating up as 2012 gets under way. The latest round of protests that took place over Orthodox Christmas (6-7 January) are signs that the status of the breakaway nation is far from being resolved. The move by ethnic Albanians to disrupt Serbian President Boris Tadic's motorcade as it visited monasteries in the north underscores a trend -- one where restricting freedom of movement is an important weapon in the arsenal with which the dissenting camps are ready to do political battle.

The visit comes at a time when Belgrade is attempting to harmonize relations with its European neighbours in the face of economic difficulties and an upcoming election in 2012. The situation is creating a stir across the spectrum as well, since the question of independence directly impacts NATO and the EU, both of which have ongoing missions in the form of Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).

The Christmas fracas is the latest in a series of disturbances set in motion by the Albanian-dominated government in Kosovo as it has tried to enforce its authority in the north. In July 2011, a move by the Kosovo Police Service (KPS) to take control of checkpoints on its border with Serbia resulted in a backlash by the Serb minority in the region. Fearing their ties with Belgrade would be further severed, the demonstrators clashed with KFOR troops who were called in to dismantle improvised roadblocks and restore freedom of movement. The unwilling protesters made clear that they refused to submit to the authority of the Kosovo government and instead would continue to rely on Serb-run parallel structures.

More recently, the ill-will between all parties escalated after four ethnic Serb municipalities threatened to hold a referendum on Kosovo's sovereignty at the start of 2012, with the clear intent of rejecting it. As a political gesture it sends the message that these communities feel marginalized and expect Serbia to be doing more to support their cause. The latter is under pressure, however, as it wants to resolve the sovereignty question in advance of its own candidacy for the EU. Failure to do so after the events of last year resulted in the rejection of candidate status for membership on 9 December, and was a blow to the ruling Democratic Party, the largest member of the strongly pro-EU *For a European Serbia* coalition. As leader, President Tadic has advocated for accelerated accession talks; however, his position is complicated by the fact that his government continues to view the Kosovo independence declaration as unilateral and a breach of international law, a position not shared by the majority of European nations.

On 19 December, German Chancellor Angela Merkel hinted that a way back to the negotiating table was possible if certain concessions were made, including freedom of movement and the dismantling of parallel Serb-controlled institutions. The call has been echoed by other concerned parties. Speaking for NATO, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that freedom of movement was "non-negotiable" for individuals as well as KFOR. So far, Belgrade has been non-committal about these specific demands. But it has made overtures of goodwill in negotiating with the Kosovo Albanian government in Pristina on some mutual issues, such as university standards and driver licencing. It also appears to be clamping down on potential troublemakers in the region, having arrested one of the alleged Serb ringleaders of the clash with KFOR troops last year.

Despite this, it remains to be seen what lasting positive outcome, if any, will materialize in the near future. The Serbian minority in Kosovo appears to be frustrated with the political decisions being made above their heads and is growing more vocal. Meanwhile, Kosovo remains an important NATO mission. Secretary General Rasmussen has made it clear that NATO plans to stay in Kosovo "as long as it takes." He also hinted that the mission would be one of the topics for the upcoming 2012 Summit in Chicago, scheduled to take place on 20-21 May.

Further Reading: [Politically sustainable solution through dialogue](#); [Merkel wants no parallel structures in Kosovo](#); [Kosovo Serbs call referendum on recognizing Pristina](#)

## **Indian Aerospace: Poised For Takeoff?**

*By: Rodnie Allison*

April's short listing of India's Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) competition to two European manufacturers (Dassault Aviation and Eurofighter GmbH) has capped a significant shift in commercial, industrial, and defence relations between India and the West.

In the realm of strategic technologies there is a considerable gap between what India's domestic industry can offer and what is expected of it by the nation's forces. According to Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony, "Our aim is to have a strong defence industrial base in India, because a country like India cannot indefinitely depend on foreign suppliers for the majority of our equipments. At the moment 65-70 percent of the equipment is imported; we have to reverse this trend."

Given the current economic and budgetary woes afflicting many Western states, India's timing could not be more opportune. New Delhi has found considerable leverage in procurement negotiations to modernize large portions of its currently outdated weapons systems—an estimated 50% of which [are considered obsolete](#). Flush with cash from record GDP growth, the Subcontinent is now playing catch up via the acquisition of notable quantities of foreign strategic defence technologies. In what can effectively be considered a leapfrog policy, the Indian defence industry is bypassing the substantial research development costs associated with weapons development.

What India lacks in technology and domestic manufacturing capacity it makes up for with the ability to strategically focus capital. The International Monetary Fund in 2009 projected India's GDP would grow in real terms by more than 7.5% on average from 2010 to 2014. Consequently, India's defence budget has grown by some 64% (in real terms) since 2001—reaching \$36.3 billion in the 2011–2012 [budget](#). News out of New Delhi indicates that India is [on track](#) to spend more than \$100 billion on capital acquisitions in the 2007-2012 timeframe and \$120 billion in the next plan period (2012-2017).

Given the economic downturn and subsequent Euro zone crisis, India is poised to take advantage of the weakened positions of many organizations within the technologically rich, and now capially poor, European defence industry. Case in point: the MMRCA negotiations. With its new found leverage, India has become more confident to negotiate on its own terms in regards to technology transfers and industrial offsets.

For the MMRCA competition the Indian Request for Proposals (RFP) required that 60% of the aircraft's technology be transferred to India in four phases. The MMRCA contract places extraordinary demands on the winning vendor to supply not only manufacturing technology (including six-axis computer controlled milling machines and large-sized advanced forging and foundry facilities), but also design data associated with key technologies, such as engines, radar and early warning components. Only 18 of the 126 fighters will come directly from the vendor selected. After the subsequent transfer of technology, the remaining 108 jets will be manufactured by the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL)

In large part the indigenization of the Indian defence industry has been a constant battle complicated by corruption and ideological differences concerning the role of the state in weapons manufacturing. The state has refused to relinquish control of domestic defence research, development and manufacturing infrastructure; or to create the regulatory environment where one could sufficiently develop. Indigenous defence production is largely dependent on the public sector accounting for around 86% of the [indigenous market](#). As such it should come as no surprise that India is now the world's largest weapons importer making up 9% of the world's international arms [transfers](#).

Should the West be worried about India's increasing clout? No - for two important reasons. First, is the undeniable pull of aligned strategic interests over the medium to long term. This includes cooperation on China, Afghanistan and anti-terrorism and anti-piracy arenas.

According to the Pentagon's [February 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review](#) Report, "As the economic power, cultural reach, and political influence of India increase, it is assuming a more influential role in global affairs. This growing influence, combined with democratic values it shares with the United States, an open political system, and a commitment to global stability, will present many opportunities for cooperation."

Second, as evident in the MMRCA competition, is the continued reinforcement of anti-corruption efforts within India. Given the size of many of the upcoming contracts between Western defence providers, and the ongoing maintenance and supply chain that will result, there is a significant opportunity to create positive institutional momentum within the Indian procurement process. The size of such contracts has the ability to promote positive spillover effects; thus strengthening transparency and accountability mechanisms within Indian governance - something that would undoubtedly benefit us all.

In the pursuit of building long term strategic cooperation, the MMRCA competition has thus far raised the standard for industrial, commercial and defence integration between the West and India. Only time will tell if these advancements will make the transition from prudent fiscal leveraging, on India's behalf, to a more permanent and concrete security compact between for all actors involved.

Further Reading: [Prospects for Global Defence Export Industry in Indian Defence Market](#); [International arms transfers](#); [Dogfight! – India's Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft](#)

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## **New Year Brings Heightened Tensions for Iran and the West**

*By: Jason Wiseman*

The beginning of 2012 has seen a dramatic heightening of tensions between Iran and the international community. With pressure mounting on the Islamic Republic, the upcoming few months will see a dangerous unfolding of events in the Middle East.

### **Trouble in the Gulf**

Ending a 10 day naval exercise dubbed Velayat 90 on 3 January, Iran upped the stakes in Gulf security with a show of force and boastful rhetoric. Stating that closing off the Persian Gulf to oil tankers would be "easier than drinking a glass of water," Iranian Naval Chief Habibollah Sayyari authorized the testing of shore-to-sea long range missiles while conducting a variety of military offensive drills to add credibility to their repeated threats that they will close the Strait of Hormuz if provoked.

Iran's statements elicited a harsh response from US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta who stated that "the U.S. will not tolerate the blocking of the Straits of Hormuz," calling the Iranian threat a "red line ... that we will need to respond to."

The [vital chokepoint](#) which facilitates the passage of roughly 90% of the Persian Gulf's oil exports (40% of the global seaborne oil trade) and all of its liquefied natural gas exports was the target of Iran's naval war games. Iranian threats of closing the Strait have been abundant for years, each time affecting the stability of energy markets and the global price of oil. With the price of Brent crude [rising by 4%](#) to \$112.13 on 2 January, increased tensions in the Gulf will continue to disrupt energy markets and heighten pressure on energy dependent nations.

The continued saber-rattling has many of America's Arab allies worried that a military confrontation may be on the horizon. Heightened concerns have prompted the Saudis to lead the initiative of pressuring the Obama Administration to take a more forceful approach against Iranian provocations in the Gulf. As the US continues to watch Iranian activity closely, they have reportedly sent the USS *Bataan* and the USS *Makin Island* to assist the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet's super-carrier USS *John C. Stennis* while putting their Pacific aircraft carrier on [standby](#).

Despite increased tensions, the Iranian navy has already announced that another naval exercise will be held sometime in [February](#).

### **International Standing**

With new US sanctions signed into law on New Year's Eve, Iran is feeling the increasing burden of economic constraint. The new round of unilateral sanctions puts [pressure on Iran's central bank](#) and curbs Iran's badly needed oil imports while also making it extremely difficult for most countries to pay for Iranian oil.

With European countries raising concern over Iran's raiding of the British Embassy in November and their continued nuclear proliferation, the EU, which buys a fifth of Iran's 2.6 million barrels per day of exports, is expected to [announce an embargo this month](#).

Even some of Iran's Asian partners have begun distancing themselves from the Islamic Republic. With roughly [62%](#) of Iran's exports going to the Asia-Pacific market, Iran's top three buyers: China, Japan and India, which account for approximately [40% of Iran's crude oil exports](#), have been entertaining US proposals to cut back their energy ties with Tehran. Resulting from US Treasury Secretary Geithner's Asia tour; Japan, which receives [13% of Iran's crude](#), pledged to cut its Iranian oil imports. Geithner hopes to make similar headway with South Korea when he visits next week.

Even countries where the US did not visit, such as Thailand or Indonesia, or failed to make headway with such as China and India, will feel the effect of US sanctions on Iran. Since Washington has begun [targeting Asian based energy companies](#) in the Middle East such as Singapore's Kuo Oil Pte and FAL Oil Company which are based in the UAE, Asian countries will likely begin looking more vigorously to diversify their growing energy needs.

In an effort to counter the effects of these sanctions, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad began a Latin America tour that furthered highlighted Iran's decreased international standing before the tour even began.

His sixth official trip to Latin America since 2005, Ahmadinejad was snubbed by regional heavyweight Brazil and did not get the chance to appear in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay or Nicaragua, all of which have a history of cooperating with Iran. Although Ahmadinejad did receive a red carpet welcome in Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela, he was unable to secure an economic counter balance against US sanctions. Moreover, having only visited four countries, his lack of welcome across the region highlights the distance that many Latin American states want to place between themselves and a hostile American enemy.

### **Nuclear Woes**

At the heart of the campaign to mount pressure on the Islamic Republic is its suspected program to develop nuclear weapons. Since the International Atomic Energy Agency's report in November, the international community has become increasingly alarmed with Iran's proliferation activities. The controversy has led the IAEA to schedule [another delegation visit](#) to Iran towards the end of January in the hopes of clearing up claims that Tehran is in fact developing nuclear weapons.

In addition to the international campaign to halt Iran's uranium enrichment is a covert one. On 11 January, the director of the Natanz uranium enrichment plant, Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, was killed in an explosion when two men on a motorcycle attached a [magnetic bomb to his car](#), killing him and his bodyguard. Admadi-Roshan was the fifth Iranian scientist with ties to Tehran's nuclear program to be killed in the [last five years](#). The killing comes just a day after Iran announced plans to start up a second, heavily fortified, underground uranium-enrichment plant near Qom.

Safarali Baratlou, Tehran's deputy governor, immediately blamed the attack on "Zionists" while the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stated that the attack was conducted "with the planning or support of the intelligence services of the CIA and Mossad." Both Israel and the United States have denied the accusation.

Additional [setbacks to Iran's nuclear program](#) have included assassinations, kidnappings, defections, sabotaged equipment, computer viruses and mysterious explosions at nuclear sites, missile-testing grounds, refineries and pipelines. Iran has allegedly responded by increasing its attacks on US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan using its proxy forces armed with Iranian developed IED's.

As the Iranians have repeatedly stated that they will continue with their enrichment program unabated, recent reports indicate that they are having difficulties with their enrichment capacity and are beginning to pursue gas diffusion more aggressively, indicating some of the technological challenges they are facing.

Further Reading: [Iranian Naval Exercises in the Strait of Hormuz: Threat or Rhetoric?](#), [Iran's warning Iran to hold new naval exercises](#), [Iranian leader ends lackluster Latin America tour](#), ['62% of Iran exports go to Asia-Pacific'](#), [U.S., Japan unite on toughening oil sanctions in Iran over atomic bomb fears](#), [Iran pressing on with nuclear plans despite growing support for oil embargo](#), [UN nuclear watchdog to visit Iran](#)

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