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Cultural Relations Policy

News and Background

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About CRP News & Background

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Military intervention in Syria is round the corner

Based on US intelligence reports, no less than 1,429 people were killed on 21st August near Damascus during what the United States suspects to be a chemical weapon attack. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's administration completely denied the accusations, stating "terrorists" are to blame, referring to the country's rebel militants. Saying that the US claim is "full of lies," the Syrian government have allowed UN chemical weapons experts to exploit the attack site and conduct a thorough search for traces of chemical substances between 25th and 30th August.

The USA was not convinced at all by the Syrian gesture, claiming that the Syrian government could have covered up traces by destroying, altering and degrading evidence during the period of 4 days that passed between the attack and the start of the investigation: "Much of the evidence could have been destroyed by... artillery bombardment; other evidence could have become degraded over the last few days, and other evidence could have been tampered with," said US Foreign Secretary William Hague.

The chances of an international retaliation have increased day by day, as more and more national statements would suggest

so. US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the use of chemical weapons is a "moral obscenity" that could not go unanswered, and that Syrian actions are "not the behaviour of a government that has nothing to hide." President Barack Obama also backs military action in Syria, but first he would ask for approval from the Congress.

French President Francois Hollande said that his country is "ready to punish those who took the heinous decision to gas innocents," and that he had decided to increase France's military support to the National Syrian Coalition, the main Syrian opposition group. As the leader of one of Europe's biggest military powers, Hollande said "there are several options on the table," including strengthening international sanctions, arming rebel militants or even carrying out airstrikes.



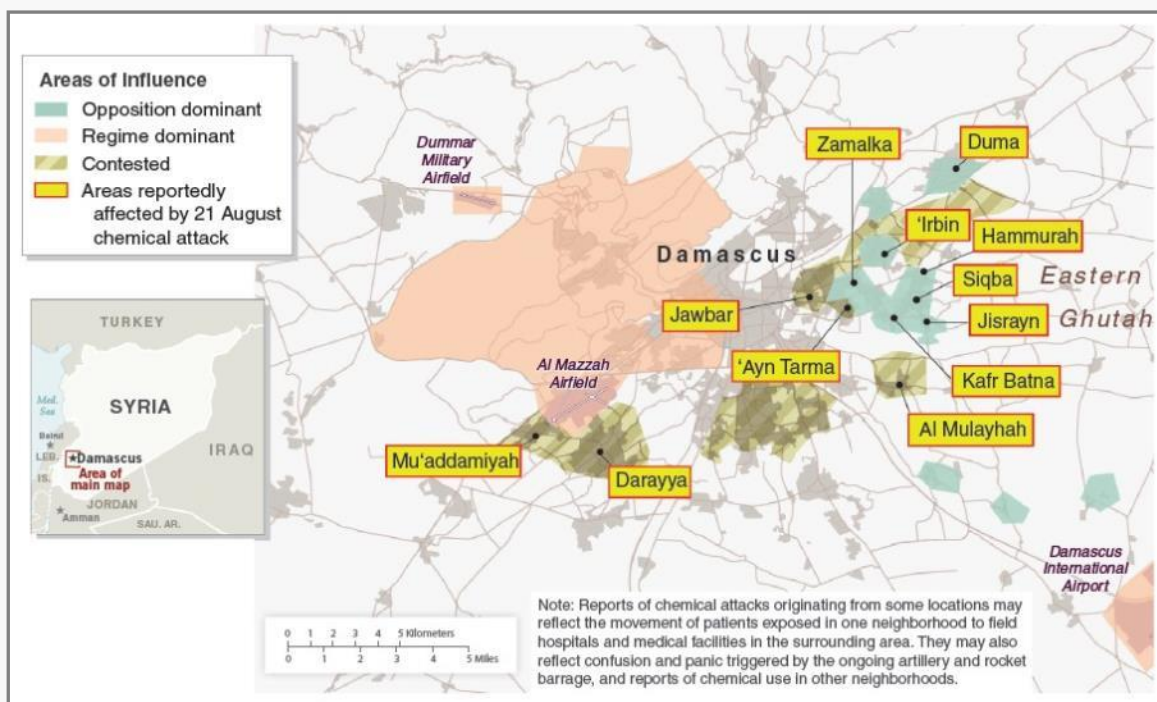
Great Britain stated their military was drawing up contingency plans for a possible attack. British Prime Minister David Cameron said that the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government is “morally indefensible,” and that the crime – if committed – cannot be swept under the carpet. Cameron and Obama agreed in a telephone conversation that the threat that the Syrian

government poses demands a firm response from the international community. The Syrian government has warned the USA that an attack against Syrian territory would meet with firm resistance. “The Syrian Army’s status is on maximum readiness and fingers are on the trigger to confront all challenges,” Prime Minister Wael Nader al-Halqi said.

Russia stands with Syria

Russia said that an intervention in Syria would have “catastrophic consequences” for the whole region and called on the international community to show “prudence” over the crisis. President Vladimir Putin said it would be “utter nonsense” for the Syrian government to provoke opponents with such attacks.

Russia said they were convinced that rebels were behind the chemical attack and warned any military action without UN approval would violate international law. Spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said that making space for the repeatedly postponed peace talks between the Damascus regime and the rebels should be the most urgent task.



Chemical attacks 21 August 2013 in Ghouta, Damascus, Syria. Map: whitehouse.gov



US State Department issues a global warning

The US Department of State decided to issue an alert and consequently close 22 American embassies and consulates in the Arabian Peninsula region after receiving information about probable terrorist threats to the US diplomatic facilities. Concerns about eventual attacks prepared by al Qaeda, particularly against the US embassy in Yemen, raised after Nasser al-Wahishi became general manager of the al Qaeda terror network. Consequently, the UK embassies in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Iraq, were warned by the UK government on Friday to be alert as the Eid al-Fitr holiday is approaching and this fact may cause greater risk of terrorist attacks made by militant group. The US embassies were closed on the 4th August in the mentioned turbulent geopolitical area, but UK diplomatic facilities remained working, although the staff was advised to be

extremely vigilant. Also French and German embassies in Yemen remained closed for few days due to terrorism alert. The warnings regarding safety of Western civilians in the Middle East and North Africa likewise touched the Canadian High Mission in Dhaka which was closed for one day on Sunday 4th August. It reopened its door on Monday after one-day security shutdown.



Headquarters of the United States Department of State. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

“concerns raised after Nasser al-Wahishi became general manager of the al Qaeda”



Tensions rise between Spain and the UK over Gibraltar

Three hundred years after Gibraltar was ceded by Spain to the UK under the terms of the Utrecht Treaty in 1713, tensions seem to have reborn between the two countries over what started to be a minor disagreement over an artificial reef and disputable border checks – the debate, however, eventually led to a more problematic issue: where does Gibraltar rightfully belong?



Border between Spain and Gibraltar. Photo: Ame Koehler

The most recent diplomatic row between the two countries started when Gibraltar decided to extend its artificial reef surrounding the peninsula by pouring blocks of concrete into the sea early in August. This drew the protest of fishermen on board of more than 60 Spanish boats, who claimed that the concrete blocks,

some of which with steel rods protruding, could snare and damage their nets, preventing them from fishing there. Dozens of Spanish and Gibraltar police vessels monitored the protest, keeping the boats away from the reef for the duration.

The dispute escalated days later, when Spain tightened the border check of cars entering and leaving Spain from and towards the peninsula. Spain explained that these strict checks serve the prevention of smuggling, an activity that Gibraltar is famous of. When Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo, however, declared that “the party’s over” as he threatened to charge motorists 50 euros for crossing the border, impose flight restrictions and investigate the tax status of 6,000 Gibraltarians who have properties in Spain, it was clear that Spain wanted to somehow show retaliation after the extension of the Gibraltar artificial reef.

A Spanish government spokesman also said Spain was seriously considering taking the dispute to the UN Security Council, hoping to get support from Argentina. He told that although the Falkland Islands – over which the UK and Argentina had a war in the past – and Gibraltar were different issues, there



were considerable similarities between the two debates.

Spain has also suggested one-on-one talks with the UK about the sovereignty of Gibraltar. The British, citing the results of the 2002 referendum on the status of the territory which showed that 99% of the population of almost 30,000 Gibraltarians wanted to stay a part of Great Britain, rejected to hold talks with Spain over the issue.

The row did not seem to ease afterwards – as Spain rejected to remove the additional border checks, three British Royal Navy warships set sail for the Mediterranean on the 19th August, in what defence officials stressed was a long-scheduled deployment. Spain reportedly responded a week



later by introducing an export ban on construction materials destined to Gibraltar. The Government of the overseas territory of Britain informed the media that its neighbour was “denying export permission” for rock, sand and aggregate destined for building projects. Ever since the beginning of the dispute, Britain has repeatedly asked the European Commission to send a group to investigate the legitimacy of the border checks, and to help resolve the issues over Gibraltar. As tensions have simmered week by week, the Commission finally decided to send a fact-finding mission to Gibraltar.

Many experts and independent writers suggest that the tiff between Spain and the UK is a well-staged decoy for their governments to ramp up fake patriotism while they remain servants of Chicago-school economics. Meanwhile, Gibraltar stays ready to continue its role as one of the World’s most favoured places of shady activities.



Gibraltarians encircle the Rock holding hands to celebrate the tercentenary

“Spain was seriously considering taking the dispute to the UN Security Council”



Israeli-Palestinian peace talks

A real compromise or an illusion of progress?

Revitalized peace talks between Israel and Palestine opened in Washington on 30th July, with the USA acting as both conductor and referee of the negotiation process. Both sides seem to be eager to find a permanent solution for their almost half-century-long dispute, but there are some factors that could push the success of the talks in peril.

The latest peace talks broke down three years ago in a dispute over settlement building. Three years later, the United States urged the two sides to resume peace negotiations; which they did – after the meeting in Washington, further talks were agreed to take place later in the West Bank. The United States is committed to broker an agreement on a “two-state solution” in which Israel and Palestine would exist peacefully next to one another as independent states.

On 11th August, however, Israel revealed plans about expanding its settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, lands occupied by the Israelis since the 1967 war and territories that Palestinians seek to establish their state on. The construction plans for about 2,000 new settler homes were heavily condemned next day by both the US and the European Union, as well as by the United Nations and Palestine. Moreover, the Palestinians replied by threatening to walk out ahead of the next session of the talks, originally scheduled for 14th August. US Secretary of State John

Kerry asked Palestine “not to react adversely” to Israel’s plans, and urged the two sides to move ahead with the talks.

As a prompt response, on 12th August, Israel released a list containing the names of 26 of its Palestinian prisoners that it would free from jail later during the week – a move that is intended to be a goodwill gesture for the peace talks. In total, Israel promised to free 104 Palestinians who had been convicted for murdering Israelis, despite protests by the relatives of the victims.

The United States expects a peace deal within the next nine months. However, with so many differences between Israel and Palestine, such as borders, settlements, Palestinian refugees and the divided city of Jerusalem, only those with limitless optimism might think that the latest negotiations would resolve issues that have caused disagreement between the two sides for decades.



Obama cancels joint military exercises between the United States and Egypt

Short of options for rebuking Egypt's military-backed government for its atrocious crackdown on supporters of ousted president Mohamed Morsi, US President Barack Obama announced on 14th August that the United States had cancelled its joint military exercises with the Egyptian Army scheduled for September.

President Obama used one of his available forms of leverage to rein the Egyptian military's campaign against members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and to show the United States' role on the matter as an increasingly frustrated bystander.



The Egyptian generals showing no sign of caring about American calls to stop the violence in their country, the US administration is presented a tough choice: they have to decide whether to keep

supporting the generals through all costs, or to take more obvious measures in order to make it clear that the current state of the relationship between the two countries is no longer sustainable. "Our traditional cooperation cannot continue as usual when civilians are being killed in the streets and rights are being rolled back," President Obama said in his statement.

Just until the latest atrocities, US officials were hopeful that the Egyptian military would give democracy a fresh chance in Egypt and would not restore the autocratic way of rule that has dominated the country in the past. Now, however, they claim that they are no longer that optimistic.

Republican Senator John McCain says that President Obama should act more forcefully against the military takeover, citing a law requiring the cut-off of American aid to countries where a military coup has dislodged an elected government. "We violated our own rule of law by not calling it for what it is," Mr. McCain said on CNN. "We undercut our own values." Should the United States threaten to, or actually cut its yearly \$1.5 billion economic and military aid to Egypt, the Egyptian generals would most probably be forced to give in and show some much expected democratic progress in the country.



India-Pakistan peace talks in jeopardy

Five Indians killed in Kashmir

India claims that a Pakistani militant group is responsible for the death of five Indian soldiers, ambushed along the disputed border in Kashmir on 6th August. The accusation might very well derail the two sides' recent efforts to resume peace talks.

In its initial statement, the ministry of Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony directly accused the Pakistani army of jointly carrying out the attack with militants. Soon after, this allegation was withdrawn as it could have deepened the state of conflict between the rivals. Antony then said to the parliament that "the ambush was carried out by approximately 20 heavily armed terrorists along with persons dressed in



Mountains in Kashmir, India. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Pakistan Army uniforms." The main opposition in the Indian parliament demands giving a "befitting reply" to their rival.

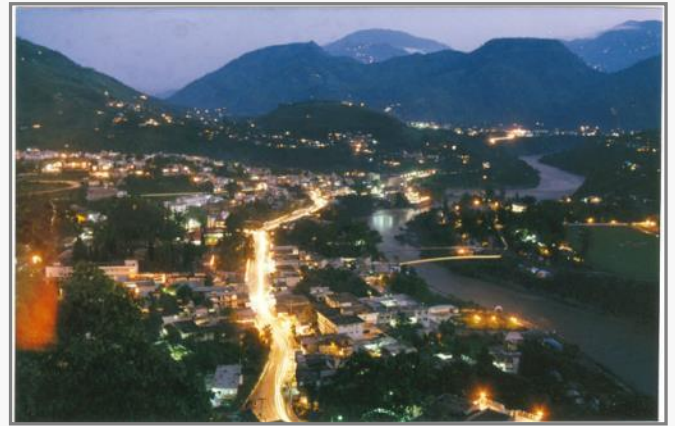
Pakistan states that the accusations are false, denying there having been an exchange of fire along the border in Kashmir. The Pakistani Foreign Ministry, calling the allegations "baseless", said it was looking forward to begin talks soon. "Pakistan is committed to a constructive, sustained and result-oriented process of engagement with India and looks forward to an early resumption of the dialogue process", the ministry said in a statement. The peace talks were called off by India in January, after two of its soldiers were killed in an armed clash along the border.



Jammu and Kashmir in India (de facto and disputed areas)



Though minor acts of aggression are common along the heavily militarised border in Kashmir – the disputed territory that had caused two of the three wars between India and Pakistan – this attack is reported to be one of the worst since the 2003 truce along the Line of Control. The ambush, having taken place only a few days after a failed bomb attack against the Indian consulate in eastern Afghanistan, has put Indian decision makers under heavy pressure to respond aggressively. Defence experts, on the other hand, do not expect large-scale retaliation



*Muzaffarabad, the capital of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan.
Photo: Eirtaza [Wikimedia Commons]*

from India, and say that the main interest of the two countries should be to bury the hatchet – hopefully once and for all.

“Pakistan looks forward to an early resumption of the dialogue process”



Russia and Japan held talks to terminate a 68-year-old debate

On 19 August Russian and Japanese diplomats held talks in Moscow over territorial disputes between the two countries. The debate has been going on for decades as the Japanese administration still does not recognise the supremacy of Russia over the Kuril Islands.

The disputed territory consists of four smaller islands: Iturup, Kunashir, Shikotan and

Habomai. This area was annexed by the Soviet forces in the end of World War II and now it is a part of the Russian administration under the name South Kuril District. Moscow refers to the islands as Russia's Southern regions while Tokyo claims it to be their own Northern territory. What makes it even more difficult is the San Francisco Treaty in which Japan gave up all its claims to the Kuril Islands. To avoid this legal part, Japan does not recognise all of these islands as a part of the Kuril area.

The dispute between Moscow and Tokyo is so serious that it prevented the sign of a peace treaty since the end of World War II. Japanese leaders talk about the return of these islands as a condition for signing the treaty, while the Russian administration entirely rejects the idea. Even almost the whole population, 89% of Russian citizens opposes the transfer of the Kuril area- while Japan has an own day, 7 February to celebrate the Northern Territories.

For more than 68 years basically nothing happened that could lead to any kind of solution. The first try happened in 1955, but it was rather a symbolical step from both sides. From the fall of the Soviet Union more and more steps were taken, mostly in the form of principles. In the recent years the solution of the dispute has started to



*Monument to those who enlarged Russia's territory with the Kuril Islands.
Photo: Vasuly Lapuzin [Wikimedia Commons]*



become a priority for the Russian-Japanese foreign policy as the relations of the two countries are turning into a destabilizing point for the Asia-Pacific region.

During the meeting on 19 August the delegates agreed to set up further negotiations via diplomatic channels and decided to strengthen the economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. The next round of talks can be held in a few months.



A volcano in the Kuril Islands, Russia. Photo: Dr. Igor Smolyar [NOAA/NODC]

“the dispute between Moscow and Tokyo is so serious that it prevented the sign of a peace treaty since the end of World War II”



Philippine-Vietnamese cooperation on maritime dispute with China

On 1st August 2013, a meeting was held in Manila, Philippines between Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh. The politicians treated maritime security as the main topic of the talks, as both countries have recently had serious conflicts with China about territorial claims over certain parts of the South China Sea. The ministers have agreed to work together towards putting an end to the constant territorial debate between the nations in the region.

After Thursday's meeting, del Rosario told reporters that he and his Vietnamese colleague agreed to try to jointly convince the ASEAN's ten other member states to enforce progress on the issue during a meeting with Chinese officials later this year. The Philippine Secretary said: "We want to be able to bring it to a negotiations stage. Consultation probably is not enough. We need to talk about negotiation."

Back in 2002, the ASEAN member states signed a non-binding declaration about using peaceful measures when approaching sovereign disputes in the South China Sea. Six of the signatories – China, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam – have entire or



A map from 1780 shows the Paracel Islands on the South China Sea

partial claims to the sea. Since then, the Philippines and Vietnam have repeatedly complained about Chinese intrusions into their waters.

Some neutral countries, including the USA, have urged the region's leaders to establish a legally binding code of conduct over the South China Sea. Other Southeast Asian states, however, that have no territorial claims in the sea, have been slow to react. China, which opposes outer interference in this particular issue says that it would agree to sign such a code when "the time was ripe."

A meeting between ASEAN foreign ministers is scheduled for late August in Thailand to discuss the South China Sea conduct, before meeting with Chinese officials later in 2013.



■ News in Brief

Bilateral relations

Kerry's explanation on NSA interception vehemently rejected by Brazilian Foreign Minister

■ John Kerry travelled to Brazil to moderate vigorous tensions in relations between the US and Latin American states after NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed the fact that the U.S. was monitoring communication channels of South American countries. The US Secretary of State explained that one of the main purposes of the US surveillance was to strengthen effective methods in fighting against global terrorism. The Head of Brazilian diplomacy rejected Kerry's explanation, condemned US intentions and emphasized that defensive approach and explanation from the US side are not enough for Brazil and there should be taken concrete steps to avoid such practices.

Obama decides to cancel meeting with Putin before the G20 summit

■ The US-Russia political and diplomatic relations became even more fragile after Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to grant an ad interim political asylum to the American NSA leaker Edward Snowden. The White House considered the act of Kremlin highly provocative and very disappointing. Obama concluded that the political atmosphere between two states is not appropriate for leading bilateral talks as the tensions are still growing and cancelled the meeting with the Russian President. However, he will attend the G20 talks in St. Petersburg.



First meeting at 2013 G-20 Saint Petersburg summit. From the left to the right: Barack Obama, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Bob Carr, Vladimir Putin, Enrique Peña Nieto and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Photo: Presidencia de la Nación Argentina



■ News in Brief

International relations

Accidental death of 5 Afghan policemen during the US airstrike in Nangarhar

■ Five Afghan policemen were accidentally killed and two wounded by US troops in an airstrike during an armed conflict with Taliban rioters. The accident happened when US and Afghan troops were fighting against Taliban members attacking on a police building in Nangarhar. The botched attack will likely have negative effects on the negotiations between President Hamid Karzai and the US government on the presence of US armed forces in the country.



CIA documents revealed notable US influence on Iraq's use of chemical weapons



Iranian volunteer child soldier in the Iran-Iraq-war

■ The use of chemical weapons in the attack on Syrian civilians in the end of August was profoundly condemned by international community, mainly by the US. However, recently discovered materials have showed the opposite attitude the US had to the use of chemical weapons in Iran-Iraq war. On the basis of CIA documents, the US was aware of the fact Iraq was using chemical weapons in the mentioned military conflict, but did not take any steps to prevent it either, on the contrary, it latently supported it to achieve its own political goals.



Snowden leaves the Moscow airport

■ The US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden could have stepped out of the Moscow's airport after granting a one-year political asylum in Russia. Russia reiterated, that giving Snowden a temporary political asylum was a result of the Russian humane approach, that's why should not be implemented any sanctions on the country. However, this Russia's decision caused an immense disappointment on the American side, considering Russian act provocative and seriously aggravating US-Russia relations. US authorities are even reconsidering the cancellation of the planned meeting between Obama and Putin in September in Moscow, that was supposed to be a preparation for the G20 summit.



UN troops launch attack on M23 rebels in DR Congo



■ On 23rd August, UN troops launched a shelling attack on positions held by Congolese rebels near the city of Goma. Congolese governmental reports say that five civilians died during the bombing, including two children and a woman. According to a UN spokesperson, the attack was a response to the rebel assault on the city that took place two days before. The M23 denies attacking the city, saying that the army provoked the fighting. The new UN intervention army, consisted of 3,000 soldiers, has a mandate to neutralise and disarm rebel fighters in DR Congo. They join forces with the regular UN peacekeeping unit, Monusco, which counts 18,000 troops.





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