



AS OF 0530 HOURS, FEBRUARY 2

OVERVIEW

An array of U.S. military and administration officials appear to be “edging toward” supplying defensive weapons to Ukrainian forces after a series of recent setbacks in the fight against Russian-backed rebels, the *New York Times* reported. On Africa, the *Wall Street Journal* underscored the ways in which ISIL’s affiliate in Libya has capitalized on recent battlefield failures and ideological divisions among other Islamist groups in the country. Also of note, a *Washington Post* Page One story described how President Obama’s views on war have been influenced by “private moments,” including meeting with wounded troops and observing the return of war dead to American soil.

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0500

- Brady rallies Patriots to 28-24 Super Bowl win over Seahawks
- Obama proposes one-time 14 percent tax on overseas earnings
- Ukraine separatist leader vows to mobilize 100,000 men
- Thai junta steps up security after Bangkok pipe bombs
- Australian Al Jazeera journalist freed by Egypt; two others still held
- Rebels agree to cease-fire in South Sudan

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Al Arabiya*: Egypt seeking military equipment from France – report
- *Xinhua*: ISIL can be defeated within months – Iraqi defense minister
- *Yonhap*: U.S. nuke sub visits South Korea for joint drill

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1848 – The Mexican-American War comes to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which adds 525,000 square miles to United States territory

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New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt

With Russian-backed separatists pressing their attacks in Ukraine, NATO's military commander, Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, now supports providing defensive weapons and equipment to Kiev's beleaguered forces, and an array of administration and military officials appear to be edging toward that position, American officials said Sunday.

2. Islamic State Takes Root Amid Libya's Chaos

Wall Street Journal (Analysis), Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Matt Bradley and Benoît Faucon

Islamic State's affiliate in Libya has capitalized on the battlefield failures and disillusionment among better-established, more moderate Islamist groups in the country, following the same formula that brought the radical movement success in Syria and Iraq, Western counterterrorism officials said.

3. Private moments helped shape Obama's education about war

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Greg Jaffe

Air Force One, its windows blacked out to guard against attack, touched down in Afghanistan well after dark. President Obama's war-zone visits are usually short and ceremonial. In his six hours on the ground, he appeared alongside Afghanistan's leader, pinned Purple Hearts on the wounded and spoke to a hangar full of U.S. troops. But Obama also made time for something else, something personal. Just after 2 a.m., the president slipped away for a meeting that he had deliberately kept off his public schedule.

UKRAINE/RUSSIA

4. Ukraine Fighting Rages: 'Just a Horror Living Here'

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A3 | Andrew E. Kramer

For more than a week, this unremarkable small town in eastern Ukraine has been almost surrounded by attacking rebels. And because enveloping maneuvers are common in this nine-month war, there is even a phrase for it: "falling into a kettle." Debaltseve in the kettle is a glum place. "It's just a horror living here," said one woman in a crowd of mothers clutching children and packed bags made of plastic at a bus stop, waiting for a ride out.

5. Kiev appeals for aid in 'electronic war'

Financial Times (UK), Feb. 2, Pg. 6 | Christian Oliver

Ukraine has appealed for urgent international military assistance to combat an "electronic warfare" offensive, which it said is giving pro-Russian rebels a critical advantage in the worsening conflict.

IRAQ/SYRIA

6. Hackers Use Old Web Lure To Help Assad

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt

The Syrian conflict has been marked by a very active, if only sporadically visible, cyberbattle that has engulfed all sides, one that is less dramatic than the barrel bombs, snipers and chemical weapons -- but perhaps just as effective. The United States had deeply penetrated the web and phone systems in Syria a year before the Arab Spring uprisings spread throughout the country. And once it began, Mr. Assad's digital warriors have been out in force, looking for any advantage that could keep him in power.

7. Price of Victory: City of Ruin Remains After Islamic State Defeat

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Ayla Albayrak and Joe Parkinson

Kurdish commander Harun Kurdistan toured what was left of a neighborhood this weekend in a battered minivan, a Soviet-era sniper rifle propped on his seat, after his forces successfully ended a four-month battle to wrest control of this border town from Islamic State jihadists.

8. Kurdish fighters in Iraq struggle to hold gains against IS

Associated Press, Feb. 2 | Vivian Salama

While Islamic State fighters have been forced to retreat from Kobani, the strategic town on Syria's border with Turkey, the battlefield picture suggests they are far from beaten in northern Iraq, where harsh winter

weather and thick mud underfoot hampers military moves — and even rear-line positions such as Snuny remain in surprising range of the enemy. Whichever side triumphs will determine whether Islamic State can use the main highway west to funnel weapons and reinforcements to their retreating comrades in Syria.

9. ISIS Tactics Questioned as Hostages Dwindle

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Rod Nordland

The extremists of the Islamic State managed to parlay their Japanese and Jordanian hostages into 12 days of worldwide publicity. But other than depleting their supply of foreign hostages, did they really accomplish anything? Analysts who study terrorist groups were skeptical, and many said the militants' tactics had backfired badly, particularly in Jordan. The extremists apparently killed two Japanese men, but failed to achieve either of their professed goals: \$200 million in ransom, and the release of a female Iraqi suicide bomber from death row in Jordan.

ASIA/PACIFIC

10. Departing From Country's Pacifism, Japanese Premier Vows Revenge for Killings

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Martin Fackler

When Islamic State militants posted a video over the weekend showing the grisly killing of a Japanese journalist, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reacted with outrage, promising "to make the terrorists pay the price."

11. Battle for Okinawa: Islanders face off with Tokyo over bases

Reuters, Feb. 1 | Elaine Lies

Japan's Okinawa, a chain of tropical islands more than three hours southwest of Tokyo by plane, looks and feels almost like a different country. A growing number of islanders say it should be just that.

12. Fresh reports circulate on China's second aircraft carrier

Reuters, Feb. 2 | Megha Rajagopalan

Fresh reports that China is building a second aircraft carrier circulated over the weekend on a city government microblog and a state-owned newspaper, as the country scrambles to modernize its military.

13. China to join Cobra Gold war games

Bangkok Post (Thailand), Feb. 2, Pg. 3 | Wassana Nanuam

China will take part in this year's Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand for the first time, a source at the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF) said Sunday.

14. With change in Sri Lanka, U.S. eyes deeper ties

Associated Press, Feb. 2 | Matthew Pennington

The surprise defeat of Sri Lanka's authoritarian leader and the new government's early steps to end repression have stirred U.S. hopes that the South Asian island nation can revive ties with Washington and distance itself to some degree from Beijing.

MIDEAST

15. Shiite militia sets deadline to unravel Yemen crisis

Agence France-Presse, Feb. 1 | Not Attributed

A Shiite militia on Sunday set a three-day deadline for political parties to resolve the power vacuum in Yemen since the president and prime minister offered to resign last month.

16. Explosion Kills at Least Six on Bus of Lebanese Pilgrims Visiting Shrines in Syria

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad

An explosion on Sunday ripped apart a bus carrying Lebanese pilgrims to Shiite shrines in Damascus, Syria, killing at least six people and wounding 27, official news channels reported. The attack stood out for striking a specific vehicle in a tightly secured area just outside the Syrian capital's Old City, and speculation quickly rose that Hezbollah fighters could have been targeted, or that the attack was a baldly sectarian provocation.

17. U.S. Sees Iran Pressed To Reach A Deal

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Jay Solomon and William Mauldin

Iran's economy is now fundamentally incapable of recovery without a nuclear accommodation with the West, increasing Washington's leverage in final negotiations with Tehran, said the Treasury Department's outgoing sanctions czar David Cohen.

AFRICA

18. Nigeria Coalition Repels Attack

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A7 | Drew Hinshaw

Soldiers and local vigilantes repelled a massive Boko Haram attack on the largest city of Nigeria's northeast on Sunday, dealing a rare and significant defeat to the Islamic insurgency.

19. Mali armed groups clash near Timbuktu – security sources

Reuters, Feb. 1 | Tiemoko Diallo and Adama Diarra

Malian rebels fought pro-government militia in the northern village of Kano overnight, three security sources said, firing rockets and briefly kidnapping at least 20 people in the latest spike of violence between armed groups.

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

20. Training Teachers to Take Aim Against Taliban

New York Times (Peshawar Journal), Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Ismail Khan

Dangerous times call for unusual measures in northwestern Pakistan, where the police are offering firearms instruction to schoolteachers and university lecturers since the Taliban massacred 150 people at a Peshawar school in December.

POLITICS

21. Budget battle could presage 2016 election

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A16 | Greg Jaffe

The battle over the budget that President Obama will submit Monday is emerging as a preview of the 2016 presidential election debate on national security, an area that for now appears to be the greatest vulnerability of Obama and the Democrats. The president will ask Congress to break through its own spending caps - commonly referred to as "sequestration" - and allocate about \$561 billion for Pentagon expenditures, about \$38 billion more than is currently allowed under the law.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

22. Defense chief pick primed for confirmation

USA Today, Feb. 2, Pg. A3 | Tom Vanden Brook

For Ashton Carter, President Obama's nominee to lead the Pentagon, winning Senate confirmation may be the least of his worries. He'll confront urgent concerns: automatic budget cuts slated to gouge the Pentagon's proposed \$561 billion budget, countering Islamic State militants menacing Iraq and Syria, and what Sen. John McCain has called "incessant White House micro-management" of the military.

ARMY

23. Interview: John McHugh

Defense News, Feb. 2, Pg. 22 | Not Attributed

The number of unforeseen missions is making for a busy time for the US Army, according to Secretary John McHugh. In an interview with reporters and editors from Army Times and Defense News in Washington, McHugh said nine of the Army's 10 divisions are deployed.

NAVY

24. Building 197: Navy Yard workers begin returning to the scene of a deadly rampage

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | DeNeen L. Brown

They begin returning Monday to the place where they hid beneath desks, barricaded themselves behind office doors and fled down corridors as 12 colleagues were shot to death at the Washington Navy Yard. Some Navy Yard workers are looking forward to going back to Building 197 and regaining a sense of normalcy 17 months after the shooting rampage. Others are so traumatized that they can't bring themselves to reenter their old workplace, where contractor Aaron Alexis stalked cubicles, hallways and stairwells with a sawed-off Remington shotgun on Sept. 16, 2013.

NATO

25. NATO sees resilience as key issue in AWACS replacement

Reuters, Feb. 1 | Andrea Shalal

Resilience, innovation and advances in technology will be key factors as NATO maps out a multibillion-dollar effort to replace its aging fleet of 17 Boeing Co E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, a top NATO official told Reuters.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

26. Mr. Putin Resumes His War in Ukraine

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A18 | Editorial

The fighting in eastern Ukraine has flared up again, putting an end to any myth about the cease-fire that was supposed to be in force since September.

27. Six Ways to Help Ukraine Resist Russia's Latest Invasion

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A13 | David Kramer

European Union foreign ministers failed to agree Thursday on new sanctions in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine—including recent rocket attacks on the city of Mariupol that killed 30 civilians. The ministers lamely extended by six months existing sanctions against individuals and companies in Russia and their cronies in eastern Ukraine.

28. Hamas girds for war

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A14 | Editorial

The Post's William Booth witnessed a chilling event in the Gaza Strip on Thursday: thousands of youths lined up "in crisp military fashion" for a "graduation ceremony" after a week of training by the armed wing of the Hamas movement. Even as thousands of Gazan families struggle to survive amid the rubble of last summer's war with Israel, and children are reported to be dying from exposure, Hamas is once again investing its resources in preparing for another unwinnable battle.

29. The Case for Security Cooperation Abroad

National Interest Online, Feb. 2 | Melissa G. Dalton

When legions of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants poured across eastern Syria into western Iraq last summer, the Iraqi army evaporated, despite over \$20 billion in U.S. training and equipment spent to build it over eleven years. Doubts have been raised about whether the U.S.-trained Afghan National Security Forces will effectively provide stability following the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan. With such a questionable track record, why should the United States continue to invest in security cooperation with foreign militaries?

30. A Democratic split over foreign policy

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A15 | Jackson Diehl

For more than two years, a breach has been opening between President Obama and the foreign policy establishment of the Democratic Party. Last week, as Russia pressed a new offensive in Ukraine and the Senate debated sanctions on Iran, it cracked open a little wider.

TOP STORIES

1. U.S. Considers Supplying Arms To Kiev Forces

A Shift On Lethal Aid; Obama Is Said to Weigh Move as Pro-Russian Separatists Gain

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt

WASHINGTON -- With Russian-backed separatists pressing their attacks in Ukraine, NATO's military commander, Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, now supports providing defensive weapons and equipment to Kiev's

beleaguered forces, and an array of administration and military officials appear to be edging toward that position, American officials said Sunday.

President Obama has made no decisions on providing such lethal assistance. But after a series of striking reversals that Ukraine's forces have suffered in recent weeks, the Obama administration is taking a fresh look at the question of military aid.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who plans to visit Kiev on Thursday, is open to new discussions about providing lethal assistance, as is Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, officials said. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, who is leaving his post soon, backs sending defensive weapons to the Ukrainian forces.

In recent months, Susan E. Rice, Mr. Obama's national security adviser, has resisted proposals to provide lethal assistance, several officials said. But one official who is familiar with her views insisted that Ms. Rice was now prepared to reconsider the issue.

Fearing that the provision of defensive weapons might tempt President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to raise the stakes, the White House has limited American aid to "non-lethal" items, including body armor, night-vision goggles, first aid kits and engineering equipment.

But the failure of economic sanctions to dissuade Russia from sending heavy weapons and military personnel to eastern Ukraine is pushing the issue of defensive weapons back into discussion.

"Although our focus remains on pursuing a solution through diplomatic means, we are always evaluating other options that will help create space for a negotiated solution to the crisis," said Bernadette Meehan, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council.

Fueling the broader debate over policy is an independent report to be issued Monday by eight former senior American officials, who urge the United States to send \$3 billion in defensive arms and equipment to Ukraine, including anti-armor missiles, reconnaissance drones, armored Humvees and radars that can determine the location of enemy rocket and artillery fire.

Michèle A. Flournoy, a former senior Pentagon official who is a leading candidate to serve as defense secretary if Hillary Rodham Clinton is elected president, joined in preparing the report. Others include James G. Stavridis, a retired admiral who served as the top NATO military commander, and Ivo Daalder, the ambassador to NATO during Mr. Obama's first term.

"The West needs to bolster deterrence in Ukraine by raising the risks and costs to Russia of any renewed major offensive," the report says. "That requires providing direct military assistance -- in far larger amounts than provided to date and including lethal defensive arms."

In his State of the Union address last month, Mr. Obama noted that the sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies had hurt the Russian economy.

But American officials acknowledge that Russia has repeatedly violated an agreement, reached in Minsk in September. The agreement called for an immediate cease-fire in Ukraine, the removal of foreign forces and the

establishment of monitoring arrangements to ensure that the border between Ukraine and Russia would be respected.

In recent weeks, Russia has shipped a large number of heavy weapons to support the separatists' offensive in eastern Ukraine, including T-80 and T-72 tanks, multiple-launch rocket systems, artillery and armored personnel carriers, Western officials say.

Some of the weapons are too sophisticated to be used by hastily trained separatists, a Western official said. NATO officials estimate that about 1,000 Russian military and intelligence personnel are supporting the separatist offensive while Ukrainian officials insist that the number is much higher.

Supported by the Russians, the separatists have captured the airport at Donetsk and are pressing to take Debaltseve, a town that sits aside a critical rail junction.

All told, the separatists have captured 500 square kilometers -- about 193 square miles -- of additional territory in the past four months, NATO says. The assessment of some senior Western officials is that the Kremlin's goal is to replace the Minsk agreement with an accord that would be more favorable to the Kremlin's interests and would leave the separatists with a more economically viable enclave.

The administration's deliberations were described by a range of senior Pentagon, administration and Western officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were talking about internal discussions.

A spokesman for General Breedlove declined to comment on his view on providing defensive weapons, which was disclosed by United States officials privy to confidential discussions.

"General Breedlove has repeatedly stated he supports the pursuit of a diplomatic solution as well as considering practical means of support to the government of Ukraine in its struggle against Russian-backed separatists," the spokesman, Capt. Gregory L. Hicks of the Navy, said. But a Pentagon official familiar with the views of General Dempsey and Adm. James A. Winnefeld Jr., the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said they believed the issue of defensive weapons should be reconsidered.

"A comprehensive approach is warranted, and we agree that defensive equipment and weapons should be part of that discussion," the Pentagon official said.

Russian casualties remain an unusually delicate political issue for Mr. Putin, who has denied that Russian troops have been ordered to fight in Ukraine.

The report by Ms. Flournoy and the other former officials argues that the United States and its allies should capitalize on this fact to dissuade the Russians and the separatists from expanding their offensive.

"One of the best ways to deter Russia from supporting the rebels in taking more territory and stepping up the conflict is to increase the cost that the Russians or their surrogates would incur," Ms. Flournoy said in an interview.

The current stock of Ukrainian anti-armor missiles, the report notes, is at least two decades old, and most of them are out of commission. So the report recommends that the United States provide the Ukrainian military with light anti-armor missiles, which might include Javelin antitank missiles.

"Providing the Ukrainians with something that can stop an armored assault and that puts at risk Russian or Russian-backed forces that are in armored vehicles, I think, is the most important aspect of this," she added.

The Obama administration has provided radars that can locate the source of mortars. But the report urges the United States to also provide radars that can pinpoint the location of longer-range rocket and artillery fire. Enemy rocket and artillery attacks account for 70 percent of the Ukrainian military's casualties, the report says.

Ukraine, the report notes, also needs reconnaissance drones, especially since the Ukrainian military has stopped all flights over eastern Ukraine because of the separatists' use of anti-aircraft missiles supplied by Russia.

The report also urged the United States to provide military communications equipment that cannot be intercepted by Russian intelligence.

Poland, the Baltic States, Canada and Britain, the report says, might also provide defensive weapons if the United States takes the lead.

The report was issued jointly by the Atlantic Council, the Brookings Institution and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. The other officials who prepared it are Strobe Talbott, who served as deputy secretary of state in the Clinton administration; Charles F. Wald, a retired Air Force general who served as deputy commander of the United States European Command; Jan M. Lodal, a former Pentagon official; and two former ambassadors to Ukraine, John Herbst and Steven Pifer.

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2. Islamic State Takes Root Amid Libya's Chaos

Wall Street Journal (Analysis), Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Matt Bradley and Benoît Faucon

Islamic State's affiliate in Libya has capitalized on the battlefield failures and disillusionment among better-established, more moderate Islamist groups in the country, following the same formula that brought the radical movement success in Syria and Iraq, Western counterterrorism officials said.

A group calling itself Islamic State's Tripoli Province claimed responsibility for an attack on Tuesday on a hotel that killed nine people, including an American. It was the first time the group came to prominence in Libya, raising concerns that the reach of the extremists is spreading beyond Syria and Iraq.

But the attacks also underlined the threat Islamic State poses to more entrenched Islamist groups such as Libya Dawn, a more moderate Islamist militia that is ideologically close to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and now fights secular insurgents in eastern Libya.

Oil-rich Libya has gradually slipped into chaos since rebels toppled strongman Moammar Gadhafi three years ago, with two rival governments now claiming to run the country and myriad competing local militias effectively in control on the ground.

In an example of the anarchy creeping into the country, the head of planning at the National Oil Co., Samir Kamal, was kidnapped two weeks ago before being released Sunday. The identity and motives of his kidnappers remain unknown.

The threat to Libya represented by Islamic State is on an altogether different scale. The North African nation's experience with local militants pledging allegiance to Islamic State follows a pattern in which the group gains a foothold by seizing on the vulnerabilities of countries embroiled in chaos and war or with weak central governments.

Since its inception in Syria in 2013, Islamic State has behaved opportunistically, piggybacking on more powerful, more moderate Islamist groups. They appear to be following a similar pattern to capitalize on the conflict dividing secularists and Islamists in Libya, Western counterterrorism officials said.

"The secularists and the Muslim Brothers have been fighting each other and the Salafi-jihadists like Islamic State are taking advantage of that and are in the ascent" in Syria, Egypt and Libya, said a Western counterintelligence official. An umbrella of moderate Islamist political groups in the country, such as Libya Dawn, share an ideological affinity to the Muslim Brotherhood in neighboring Egypt while Islamic State and other extremists follow a hard-line ideology known as Salafism.

By hanging back from much of the front-line fighting, Islamic State's affiliates have been able to save their strength while seizing recruits, land, weapons and other resources from the more moderate, religiously driven groups--aiming to build up until it is powerful enough to become the dominant Islamist force.

"Taking the upper hand from the Muslim Brotherhood is Islamic State's priority," said the Western counterterrorism official.

That strategy worked best in Syria, where Islamic State spent the first part of the civil war almost entirely disengaged in the fight against dictator Bashar al-Assad.

An Islamic State affiliate also appears to be gaining momentum in Egypt's restive Sinai Peninsula.

If Islamic State's attacks over the past week caused anxiety in the West, it is unclear how the leadership of Libya Dawn will respond to the challenge. The coalition of militias, which governs the capital Tripoli and much of the country's lawless western half, has condemned the hotel attack. The coalition grew out of the remnants of Islamist parties that resisted leaving office after Libyans voted out the country's first parliament last summer.

Last week, few in Libya Dawn's leadership were prepared to acknowledge that the attack may have actually come from Islamic State. Terrorism experts warn that Libya Dawn's lack of focus on Islamic State's expanding presence is only playing into the extremist group's ambitions.

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3. Private moments helped shape Obama's education about war

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Greg Jaffe

Air Force One, its windows blacked out to guard against attack, touched down in Afghanistan well after dark.

President Obama's war-zone visits are usually short and ceremonial. In his six hours on the ground, he appeared alongside Afghanistan's leader, pinned Purple Hearts on the wounded and spoke to a hangar full of U.S. troops.

But Obama also made time for something else, something personal. Just after 2 a.m., the president slipped away for a meeting that he had deliberately kept off his public schedule.

In a small, private room, 15 mortuary affairs soldiers waited to greet him. These were the soldiers who prepared the bodies of troops killed in battle for their trip home. To blunt the overpowering stench of death, they wore masks when they worked, burned their uniforms regularly and dabbed Vicks VapoRub under their noses.

Now that they were about to meet Obama, members of a unit used to working in the isolation of war's grim aftermath all had the same question: Of all the soldiers in Afghanistan, why had the president asked to see them?

Obama's visit came in the spring of 2012, just months before his election to a second term, in which he had promised to speed America's exit from its post-9/11 wars. Since then, a new war has erupted, while an old war continues. Today, the president faces mounting pressure to send more troops to Iraq to help in the battle against Islamic State extremists.

His decision will be influenced by the counsel of his generals. It will also be guided by more private moments in his wartime education - at the bedside of wounded troops; on the tarmac of Dover Air Force Base, where the war dead return to American soil; and in that small room with the mortuary affairs soldiers one middle of the night in Afghanistan.

Discussions of war and peace in Washington often revolve around abstract questions of policy and national interest. Rarely mentioned are the human costs of war and how they weigh on a commander in chief. "It's probably the least appreciated and most difficult part of leadership," said Michele Flournoy, who served at the top levels of Obama's Pentagon. "It's not an abstraction, and, if you have any doubt, it eats at you, because the human costs are very real."

Every president experiences war differently. Some become consumed with its politics and special ability to unravel prized domestic agendas. Others see in war an opportunity to reshape the world, build a legacy, deter future enemies.

As a wartime commander, Obama has often focused his words on war's tragedies and his actions on ratcheting down risks to troops. "We believe it is a national security objective not to be losing service members in wars," said Ben Rhodes, the president's deputy national security adviser for strategic communications.

Obama has sent commandos on dangerous raids to save American hostages facing imminent death in Iraq and Syria and to disrupt active terrorist plots. But outside those narrow missions, he has been unusually cautious about putting U.S. troops in harm's way - especially in Iraq, where American troops are today restricted from operating as close to the front lines as their Canadian and British counterparts, according to senior U.S. officials.

The president's Republican critics say that Obama's caution undermines the military's ability to fight and achieve his stated goals.

"He never had the steel and fire to be a wartime president," said Eliot Cohen, who was a senior State Department official in the George W. Bush administration and is now a professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. "You have to be able to give orders to send people into harm's way. You have to have the hardness to make those decisions."

Obama's closest aides counter that rather than distancing himself from - and hardening himself against - the costs of war, the president's impulse is to understand as intimately as possible the human consequences of his decisions.

And so in the quiet of 2 a.m., he arrived for his meeting with the mortuary affairs soldiers, who had just received word that the body of a 23-year-old sergeant, killed in a Taliban ambush in southern Afghanistan, was on an inbound plane. Obama thanked them for their diligence and posed for a group picture.

"He told us how important our job was," recalled Sgt. 1st Class Jorge Cruz, "and said that our work had not gone unnoticed."

Twenty minutes later, Obama left to prepare for a prime-time speech to the nation in which he would outline his plan to end the U.S. involvement in the Afghan war. The mortuary affairs troops strode out to the air base's tarmac, where the body of Sgt. Nicholas Dickhut was waiting for them. They documented his wounds and searched his body for pictures, letters, a pocket Bible or other talismans that could be sent home to his family.

They were still working on him when Obama, speaking to a single camera in an empty airplane hangar, delivered his address.

"As president, nothing is more wrenching than signing a letter to a family of the fallen, or looking into the eyes of a child who will grow up without a mother or father," Obama said. "I will not keep Americans in harm's way a single day longer than is absolutely required for our national security. But we must finish the job we started in Afghanistan and end this war responsibly."

The troops finished their work about 8:30 a.m. By then, Obama was already on his way back to Washington, having left for security reasons before the sun rose.

Three weeks later, a letter from the president arrived at the Rochester, Minn., home of the dead sergeant's mother. "In life your son was a shining example of all that is best in our land," Obama wrote. "In rest, may he find the peace we all seek."

From Oslo to West Point

Before he had much firsthand experience with the costs of war or the burdens of being commander in chief, Obama delivered a speech about both.

In December 2009, just days after he issued orders sending 30,000 new troops to Afghanistan, Obama flew to Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize.

To prepare for his Afghanistan decision and Nobel address, Obama visited Dover Air Force Base to witness the return of 18 Americans killed in Afghanistan. He met with families of deceased troops and asked his speechwriters to pull together a packet of writings about war by people he admired: King, Gandhi, Churchill, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Reinhold Niebuhr.

"I'm responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land," Obama said in Oslo. "Some will kill, and some will be killed. And so I come here with an acute sense of the costs of armed conflict - filled with difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace."

That was war as the president imagined it to be. His real-world education in the human consequences of his decisions would take place over the next several years, and, for the most part, he would reveal little of what he was learning. Obama rarely displays strong emotions, even during discussions of war. The trait has bothered some of his most senior advisers, especially those closest to the military.

"One quality I missed in Obama was passion, especially when it came to the two wars," former defense secretary Robert M. Gates wrote in his autobiography. Bush would sometimes tear up when meeting with the families of deceased soldiers. "I worked for Obama longer than Bush, and I never saw his eyes well up," Gates wrote.

Obama's reserve left his top advisers guessing how he was handling the growing American losses in Afghanistan, which more than tripled from 155 deaths in 2008 to nearly 500 during 2010. Those who backed his troop surge recognized that the president had made a tough decision on Afghanistan that ran counter to his instincts and the advice of his most trusted civilian advisers.

"Half his staff and the vice president were telling him that he had made a mistake," said a former senior administration official, who, like other administration officials, spoke on the condition of anonymity to talk about internal deliberations. "They were constantly hounding him."

Others who were sure that the surge was a mistake wondered how the president's regular visits with the wounded and maimed in military hospitals were influencing his decisions. "It's very hard to go to Walter Reed if you think you are just sustaining the status quo or a stalemate," said a member of the president's senior staff.

One glimpse into Obama's thinking came last year at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where the president outlined his new strategy for fighting terror.

Obama questioned the wisdom of large-scale military occupations that stir local resentments and carry a heavy price at home. Instead, he said, he would employ small detachments of military advisers to work with local partners away from the front lines.

Just as he had in Oslo, Obama talked about the horrors and human costs of combat. This time, though, he wouldn't need to draw on the abstract - the wisdom of Churchill, Niebuhur or King.

In a brief section that Obama wrote into his speechwriter's draft, the president noted that he had announced his Afghan surge nearly five years earlier at West Point. Four soldiers in the audience that day had been killed in Afghanistan following his orders, and many more had been maimed.

"I believe America's security demanded those deployments," Obama told the crowd of soon-to-be second lieutenants, whose job was now to follow his orders. "But I am haunted by those deaths. I am haunted by those wounds."

Mosul and American lives

Obama had barely finished delivering his West Point speech when thousands of Islamic State extremists seized Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, sweeping aside an Iraqi army that had been the beneficiary of billions of dollars in American training and equipment over the past decade.

The president has responded with more than 2,100 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and dispatched more than 1,000 military trainers and advisers. Those troops are restricted from taking part in combat and are relegated to working with Iraqi forces at secure bases or rear-area headquarters.

Obama set the limits on American military involvement to prevent rash or unnecessary escalations that might result from U.S. casualties, said White House officials. "Whenever an American is harmed, it creates pressures to do something in response," Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser, said. "You saw that - even though they were not service members - with the hostages that were killed by [the Islamic State]."

The restrictions have led some senior military officials to ask whether the United States is approaching a zero-casualty moment, similar to the one that defined U.S. foreign policy under President Bill Clinton.

Then, the pressure to eliminate combat losses was fueled by a belief that Americans would not tolerate the deaths of their sons and daughters in the Balkans, Somalia and Haiti, none of which were seen as essential to the nation's security. Some top generals at the time argued that these post-Cold War missions sapped U.S. firepower and prevented the military from focusing on more pressing threats.

Today, there's a broad consensus among Republicans and Democrats that the Islamic State, whose forces span the Iraq-Syria border, must be defeated. "Our interest is in making sure Iraq is whole and not riddled with safe havens that can be used to hit us," said Denis McDonough, Obama's chief of staff.

The first major battle in that campaign is expected to take place this spring or summer, when Iraqi army forces will launch an offensive to drive Islamic State rebels from Mosul.

Senior U.S. officials said the credibility of the Iraqi government and its rebuilt army hinges on the offensive's success. "Mosul has an iconic meaning to the Iraqis, an iconic significance," said a senior U.S. official involved in planning for the attack. "We've got something big brewing out there . . . and it's in our interests that we win."

Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that if he determines that the Iraqis need front-line help from U.S. combat advisers to retake Mosul, he will make that recommendation to Obama.

"We're certainly considering it," he told lawmakers late last year.

Front-line American combat advisers would help strengthen the resolve of untested Iraqi troops. "We call it the steel rod up the backbone," said the senior U.S. official. "It is a remarkable thing to see." Front-line combat advisers could also help improve the accuracy and effectiveness of American airstrikes as Iraqi forces surge into Mosul.

The decision will fall to Obama, who his advisers say will weigh a series of questions.

Some will be of a military nature: If U.S. advisers help lead the fight from the front, providing the "steel rods" up the Iraqis' spines, will the Iraqi forces be able to hold and sustain their gains when the U.S. advisers leave?

Some will hinge on Iraqi politics: After the battle, will the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government be able to win the support of Sunnis in Mosul, whose disaffection from Baghdad provided the opening for the Islamic State's victories last summer?

Ultimately, a war-weary Obama's decision could hinge on his answer to a single, personal question.

It's a question only this commander in chief can answer: After 11 years of almost nonstop war in Iraq, is driving the Islamic State from Mosul worth any more American deaths?

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UKRAINE/RUSSIA

4. Ukraine Fighting Rages: 'Just a Horror Living Here'

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A3 | Andrew E. Kramer

DEBALTSEVE, Ukraine -- Ukrainian soldiers rattled along the snowy streets here in armored personnel carriers with the hatches battened down, their helmeted heads safely below plates of steel.

A few drunks staggered along the sidewalks, oblivious to the booms of artillery echoing through town.

Stray dogs scurried about, and in another sign that nobody ventures above ground for anything but pressing business, the carcass of one dog lay uncollected, frozen in the middle of a street.

For more than a week, this unremarkable small town in eastern Ukraine has been almost surrounded by attacking rebels. And because enveloping maneuvers are common in this nine-month war, there is even a phrase for it: "falling into a kettle."

Debaltseve in the kettle is a glum place. "It's just a horror living here," said one woman in a crowd of mothers clutching children and packed bags made of plastic at a bus stop, waiting for a ride out.

After seizing a strategic airport outside Donetsk a week ago, the Russian-backed rebels have turned their sights on this town, valuable for its railroad switching yards, which they will need to revive the economy in areas under their control.

As fighting rages on in places like Debaltseve, the prospects for peace in Ukraine look dim.

A new round of cease-fire talks among Ukraine, Russia, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and separatists broke down Saturday evening, dashing hopes of a diplomatic breakthrough.

Ukraine's representative, former President Leonid D. Kuchma, said Sunday that disagreement arose over a rebel demand that any new cease-fire line should reflect gains from an offensive that began last month, rather than the line established under a Sept. 5 agreement in Minsk, Belarus.

In Europe, too, hopes for diplomacy are fading. "Russian separatists no longer accept Minsk agreement," Carl Bildt, the former foreign minister of Sweden, wrote on Twitter. "And behind them is Moscow."

It is towns like Debaltseve that have seen the worst of the fighting.

Rebels have hemmed in the town on three sides and are trying to close the remaining gap, or the mouth of the kettle -- an exposed, 31-mile stretch of highway across the open steppe that is being defended by Ukrainian troops.

The stakes are high for the defense of Debaltseve. If the rebels seize the road, something that seems possible at any moment, thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians could be trapped in an area exposed to surrounding artillery. Already, the death toll is steadily rising; on Saturday, artillery killed 12 people here.

The road is both the only means for civilians to evacuate and the only supply route for the army.

"We have closed the kettle," the main rebel leader, Aleksandr V. Zakharchenko, told Russian television Friday, making clear his intention to cut off and then capture Debaltseve.

"Anybody who leaves this kettle will be in the interlocking field of fire of our artillery," Mr. Zakharchenko added, referring to the shelling of the road. "From today, the road is under fire."

The authorities are scrambling to evacuate residents in minibuses, but their numbers are inadequate; each departing vehicle leaves hundreds of women and children behind at the bus stop. When this happens, they trudge back to a dank basement in a train station in which they have been sheltering since the siege began.

After nearly two weeks living in a basement without electricity, Ludmilla L. Ulyanenko, a retired nurse, decided to risk the road out on Saturday morning -- only to find that all seats on a bus were taken.

After missing one bus, she stood on the sidewalk, pursing her lips in worry. "This whole situation reminds me of the sinking of the Titanic," she said, gesturing at the women standing about, some crying. "They also stood around waiting for lifeboats, and there weren't enough."

"You don't happen to know when the next bus will come?" she asked.

By Sunday, the road out had become all but impassable. Artillery hit two buses packed with evacuees, wounding four people, including two children. A car with volunteer aid workers was also struck on the road. In the town, a Grad rocket sprayed a group waiting for buses with shrapnel, wounding eight.

Ukrainians have taken to calling Debaltseve a second battle of Ilovaisk, an event sometimes called the "Ilovaisk kettle," after the disastrous envelopment of that city last summer by Russian-backed rebels and, Western officials say, by regular Russian Army troops.

Today, critics have attacked the military leadership for stumbling into another near encirclement.

The missteps were as much political as military, Semen Semenchenko, a member of Parliament and paramilitary leader, said in an interview, a day before he suffered a concussion in fighting in Debaltseve.

The Ukrainian Army neglected to reinforce the road because the plan was to trust the cease-fire, he said.

In particular, a combined European, Russian and Ukrainian military monitoring group, jointly led by a Russian general, had been regularly traveling the road, ostensibly diminishing the chances of an attack on it.

As it turned out, when the fighting started in Debaltseve in late January, the Russian general simply stopped making the trip, staying behind at a barracks for peacekeeping officials.

"The general staff had a political strategy" of trying to bolster the cease-fire, not a military strategy to defend the town, Mr. Semenchenko said. Not enough attention was paid to the flanks, he said, leaving the road exposed.

The Ministry of Emergency Situations in Ukraine says it is doing all it can to diminish the risks to civilians. The ministry said 956 people, including 161 children, were evacuated from Thursday to Saturday. The prewar population was about 10,000.

At the bus stop, all attention was focused on the battle for the road and the journey ahead for those waiting for minibuses out. "They shoot the buses," one woman said, yelling.

Spread out along tiny checkpoints of concrete bunkers along the 31 miles of road, Ukrainian soldiers can do nothing now but brace for assaults -- even as the minibuses of evacuees bump slowly past.

"In the mist, you cannot see the enemy," Mr. Semenchenko said. "You just hear the incoming rockets."

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5. Kiev appeals for aid in 'electronic war'

Shortage of sophisticated equipment and training puts forces at disadvantage

Financial Times (UK), Feb. 2, Pg. 6 | Christian Oliver

BRUSSELS -- Ukraine has appealed for urgent international military assistance to combat an "electronic warfare" offensive, which it said is giving pro-Russian rebels a critical advantage in the worsening conflict.

Western nations have so far rebuffed Kiev's calls for direct military assistance in the fight against Moscow-backed separatists in the east of the country.

But Pavlo Klimkin, Ukraine's foreign minister, said a deeper "understanding" was growing in the US and EU that Ukraine needed high-tech gadgetry and training as much as weapons.

"The terrorists have been given the most modern weapons by the Russians [and are] trained by Russians and guided by Russians," he told the Financial Times. "We badly need communications equipment, jamming equipment — not just things considered lethal."

Mr Klimkin, who became foreign minister in June, is a former Ukrainian ambassador to Germany who was born in the Russian city of Kursk.

Ukrainian forces are at a strategic disadvantage against separatists equipped with sophisticated technology including drones, which allow them to target artillery strikes and track troop movements. Ukrainian units are also often unable to contact each other because the separatists jam their communications.

While Ukraine has received some equipment from the west, including radar technology, as well as assistance such as army food packages, body armour and training, it is pushing for state of the art hardware.

Mr Klimkin said greater military support was vital because Russian-backed forces were engaged in a “deliberate escalation” of the conflict. Recent shellings in the town of Volnovakha and the port city of Mariupol, which killed dozens of civilians, were the opening salvos in a broader campaign, he argued.

“These are not random events . . . they are cynically raising the stakes,” he said. “If there is another tragedy on the scale of Mariupol, the whole situation could spiral out of control with the extreme risk of spillover — not only for Russia and Ukraine, but the whole EU.”

Russia denies its forces are fighting in Ukraine.

European diplomats fear Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president, is seeking to win more territory in Ukraine to distract from the fragility of his country’s economy, which has been undermined by sanctions and the collapsing oil price.

But Mr Klimkin said any attempt to seize a foothold on the coast and build a “land bridge” to Crimea would lead to a bloodbath rather than a propaganda coup. “There will not be any kind of big victory . . . just a very dangerous military mess, which will lead to very many people killed and injured.”

He also warned EU leaders that it made no sense to differentiate between sanctions imposed over the conflict in eastern Ukraine and those imposed over the occupation of Crimea.

This suggestion has been gaining ground in the EU as a means to encourage Russia to withdraw from the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine. In theory, this would allow the EU to moderate sanctions in case of a de-escalation there, even while Crimea remained under Russian occupation.

There should be “no distinction”, Mr Klimkin said, pointing out that dissatisfaction about Russian annexation was growing among Crimeans.

“People who were very supportive of Russia’s unlawful action last year now find there is no facility to interact with the outside world, not even to travel with passports issued in Crimea.”

He added: “There is no possibility of investment. They are not treated as normal Russians . . . The situation in Crimea will change far earlier than anyone expects.”

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IRAQ/SYRIA

6. Hackers Use Old Web Lure To Help Assad

Rebel Flirts via Chat, and Data Are Stolen

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt

WASHINGTON -- To the young Syrian rebel fighter, the Skype message in early December 2013 appeared to come from a woman in Lebanon, named Iman Almasri, interested in his cause. Her picture, in a small icon alongside her name, showed a fair-skinned 20-something in a black head covering, wearing sunglasses.

They chatted online for nearly two hours, seemingly united in their opposition to the rule of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian leader still in power after a civil war that has taken more than 200,000 lives. Eventually saying she worked

"in a programming company in Beirut," the woman asked the fighter whether he was talking from his computer or his smartphone. He sent her a photo of himself and asked for another of her in return. She sent one immediately, apologizing that it was a few years old.

"Angel like," he responded. "You drive me crazy."

What the fighter did not know was that buried in the code of the second photo was a particularly potent piece of malware that copied files from his computer, including tactical battle plans and troves of information about him, his friends and fellow fighters. The woman was not a friendly chat partner, but a pro-Assad hacker -- the photos all appear to have been plucked from the web.

The Syrian conflict has been marked by a very active, if only sporadically visible, cyberbattle that has engulfed all sides, one that is less dramatic than the barrel bombs, snipers and chemical weapons -- but perhaps just as effective. The United States had deeply penetrated the web and phone systems in Syria a year before the Arab Spring uprisings spread throughout the country. And once it began, Mr. Assad's digital warriors have been out in force, looking for any advantage that could keep him in power.

In this case, the fighter had fallen for the oldest scam on the Internet, one that helped Mr. Assad's allies. The chat is drawn from a new study by the intelligence-gathering division of FireEye, a computer security firm, which has delved into the hidden corners of the Syrian conflict -- one in which even a low-tech fighting force has figured out a way to use cyberespionage to its advantage. FireEye researchers found a collection of chats and documents while researching malware hidden in PDF documents, which are commonly used to share letters, books or other images. That quickly took them to the servers where the stolen data was stored.

Like the hackers who the United States says were working for North Korea when they attacked Sony Pictures in November, the assailants aiding Mr. Assad's forces in this case took steps to hide their true identities.

The report says the pro-Assad hackers stole large caches of critical documents revealing the Syrian opposition's strategy, tactical battle plans, supply requirements and data about the forces themselves -- which could be used to track them down. But it is not evident how or whether this battlefield information was used.

"You've got a conflict with a lot of young, male fighters who keep their contacts and their operations on phones in their back pockets," said one senior American intelligence official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss espionage matters. "And it's clear Assad's forces have the capability to drain all that out."

Mr. Assad was also the victim of cyberattacks, but of a far more advanced nature.

A National Security Agency document dated June 2010, written by the agency's chief of "Access and Target Development," describes how the shipment of "computer network devices (servers, routers, etc.) being delivered to our targets throughout the world are intercepted" by the agency. The document, published recently by Der Spiegel, the German magazine, came from the huge trove taken by Edward J. Snowden; this one shows a photograph of N.S.A. workers slicing open a box of equipment from Cisco Systems, a major manufacturer of network equipment.

After being opened, electronic "beacon implants" were placed in the circuitry. One set of devices was "bound for the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment to be used as part of their Internet backbone," the document reveals.

To the delight of American intelligence agencies, they soon discovered they had access to the country's cellphone network -- enabling American officials to figure out who was calling whom, and from where.

Such interceptions are still highly classified; the United States government has never discussed its access to the Assad communications network. But the FireEye report, which will be released on Monday, makes it clear that such "network exploitation" is now a routine part of even the most low-tech if brutal civil wars, and available to those operating on a shoestring budget.

And that is a new development. The theft of the rebel battle plans stands in contrast to the cybervandalism carried out in recent years by the Syrian Electronic Army, which American intelligence officials suspect is actually Iranian, and has conducted strikes against targets in the United States, including the website of The New York Times. But mostly these have been denial-of-service attacks, which are annoying but not potential game-changers on the battlefield.

Exactly who conducted the hacking on behalf of Mr. Assad's forces remains a mystery, as does whether the stolen data was ever used by the Syrian military. One of the authors of the report, Nart Villeneuve, a threat intelligence analyst for the company, said that it was likely that the hackers were based in Lebanon -- which would be the only true statement in the chat with the Syrian fighter. They used a computer server in Germany, where FireEye found many of their chats in unprotected directories. A handful of the targets of the Syrian operation were contacted in recent months by FireEye researchers. "They really didn't understand what had happened," Mr. Villeneuve said. "They didn't know their computers and phones had been compromised."

But if information was forwarded to Mr. Assad's forces, it would have provided his troops or their allies with important intelligence and a critical battlefield advantage, according to analysts and Syrian military specialists.

"This activity, which takes place in the heat of a conflict, provides actionable military intelligence for an immediate battlefield advantage," the FireEye report concluded. "It provides the type of insight that can thwart a vital supply route, reveal a planned ambush, and identify and track key individuals."

By mid-2013, according to the information that FireEye recovered, 10 rebel groups fighting Mr. Assad's regime were planning a major operation intended to reclaim from Syrian government forces a key portion of territory along a strategic north-south highway linking Damascus, the capital, with Jordan.

The plans called for retaking the town of Khirbet Ghazaleh, a strategic gateway to the major city of Daraa. In May 2013, Syrian troops had seized control of the town near the highway.

"The Assad regime's biggest vulnerabilities over the last year have been in south Syria, so disrupting that operation would be key to the regime fending off an attack on Damascus from the south -- the traditional route for invading armies," said Andrew J. Tabler, a Syria specialist at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Mr. Tabler said he was not aware of the stolen information.

According to FireEye, which merged last year with the Mandiant Corporation, the company that has tracked Unit 61398, the Chinese Army's hacking operation, the rebels shared photocopied battle plans, and in red ballpoint pen added defensive embankments, storing their plans electronically as pictures taken with their cellphones. They prepared for a battle involving 700 to 800 men, who were divided into groups to launch separate attacks, including an ambush. They used Google Earth to map their defensive lines and communicate grid coordinates.

They mapped locations for reserve fighters, staging areas and support personnel; settled on a field operations area; and planned supply routes for their forces, according to FireEye. Commanders received stern instructions not to make any "individual" decisions without approval from rebel superiors.

The battle details that the security service recovered are impressive. The rebels, who are not identified, would begin the attack with 120-millimeter mortar fire, followed by an assault against key Syrian Army locations. They drew up lists of men from each unit, with names, birth dates and other identifying information. But they stored them on their phones and laptops, and they were vulnerable to slightly customized versions of commercially available malware.

"It's the democratization of intelligence," said Laura Galante, a former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst who now works for FireEye and oversaw the Syria work. "We in the private sector can see some of this, and adversaries can steal it in a wholesale way and understand the full picture of an operation."

And perhaps they can even stop an operation. The retaking of Khirbet Ghazaleh never materialized, Syria analysts say. It is unclear whether Syrian authorities thwarted the plot before it could be carried out, or if the rebels aborted the plan, perhaps suspecting the hacking or for some other reason.

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7. Price of Victory: City of Ruin Remains After Islamic State Defeat

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Ayla Albayrak and Joe Parkinson

KOBANI, Syria -- Kurdish commander Harun Kurdistan toured what was left of a neighborhood this weekend in a battered minivan, a Soviet-era sniper rifle propped on his seat, after his forces successfully ended a four-month battle to wrest control of this border town from Islamic State jihadists.

"The fighting was face to face, inside buildings. Us shooting from downstairs as they were upstairs," said Mr. Kurdistan, as he drove along the same thoroughfare used by militants to enter the town last year. "We only survived because we believed in our cause."

Victory seems to have come at the price of the town itself. Streets lie in ruins. Water and power systems are shattered. Decaying corpses of jihadist fighters remain, some stripped of footwear and clothing, and one still swaddled in a suicide vest. Thousands of people died, and another 200,000 remain refugees across the border in Turkey.

Four months ago, this little-known town caught the world's attention with televised images showing Islamic State fighters bombarding its streets and hoisting their black flag on a nearby hill.

Now, tricolor flags of red, green and yellow fly over the city after Kurdish fighters -- backed by the air power of a U.S.-led coalition -- dealt Islamic State a humiliating battlefield defeat.

The Syrian Kurdish victory stemmed from a combination of guerrilla tactics, the assistance of Iraqi Kurdistan's Peshmerga forces and the airstrikes. Since September, coalition jets completed more than 700 strikes that helped kill more than 2,000 jihadists, according to U.S. Central Command. With Kurdish fighters spotting militants on a battlefield emptied of civilians, a senior U.S. official said, "We basically had free rein."

The absence of civilians in Kobani was an advantage unlikely to be repeated in larger cities held by Islamic State, including the Iraqi city of Mosul, another target of U.S. war planners and their Iraqi partners.

Islamic State on Saturday conceded defeat in Kobani but said it would attack again. In a video published by pro-jihadist Amaq News, two fighters blamed their defeat on the air campaign, diminishing the role of the Kurdish militiamen they called rats.

Secretary of State John Kerry said Saturday that the retaking of Kobani was "a big deal." "We have a long way to go in the overall campaigns but Daesh said all along that Kobani was a real symbolic and strategic objective," Mr. Kerry said in Boston, referencing the Arabic word used to identify Islamic State.

Gen. Lloyd Austin, the top U.S. commander, said in an interview that the Americans focused firepower on Kobani because that is where Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi choose to make a stand.

"We said a long time ago Kobani was not strategically important to us," Gen. Lloyd said. "But it is awfully important to him. . . In that alone, we have taken out over 2,000 of his troops, which is a phenomenal sacrifice."

When Islamic State began its assault on Kobani in mid-September, there was little to suggest how big the battle would grow.

Kurdish fighters at the time evacuated the villages surrounding Kobani, pushing thousands of people north toward the Syria-Turkey border after Kurdish officials warned of death or enslavement by Islamic State militants.

"We got 30 minutes to pack and go. Only those who could stay to fight, should stay," said Muhammed Apo, 22 years old. "My family decided to flee to Turkey."

The fighters and volunteers who remained, men and women, dug trenches and planted bombs in empty buildings on the outskirts of Kobani. The Syrian Kurdish fighters were boosted by recruits, arms and training from their affiliate, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which is listed as a terror organization in the U.S. and Turkey.

The wave of refugees fleeing to Turkey -- the largest single movement of refugees since the Syrian war began in 2011 -- drew crowds of international reporters. Live images of battle showed the Kurds outnumbered and outgunned.

In late September, the U.S.-led coalition began airstrikes on Islamic State positions. Shortly after, the militants -- armed with U.S.-made weaponry, tanks and artillery looted from Iraqi army bases -- smashed through Kurdish defenses, entered the town and hoisted their black flag in victory.

In Washington, U.S. officials said they couldn't keep Kobani from falling. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rejected pleas by the Kurds for arms and supplies.

Kurdish fighters withdrew to several buildings in a last stand viewed by many in the West as an important symbol of resistance against the jihadists.

Inside Kobani, the Kurds said their knowledge of the city and experience in close-contact guerrilla fighting arrested the Islamic State advance. Kurdish forces detonated booby traps and used an elaborate network of tunnels dug through houses to launch attacks and avoid Islamic State snipers, fighters said.

Evindar Berkel, a 24-year old woman who enlisted with an all-female unit, was wounded after entering a house held by jihadist fighters.

"We thought the apartment was empty. They looked just as surprised as we were," she said. "One man, a sturdy tall guy with a dark beard, whisked a hand grenade at my direction."

Her injured ankle was still bound this weekend.

Islamic State said in late October that U.S. airstrikes were of little effect, Militants released a video, anchored by imprisoned British journalist John Cantlie, that said jihadists were near victory and "mopping up" the remaining Kurdish fighters.

But the Kurds received a boost in early November with the arrival of 160 Peshmerga fighters from northern Iraq. The forces were equipped with artillery to pound Islamic State positions and thwart attacks.

As Islamic State dug into positions around town, the U.S. role rapidly evolved with stepped-up airstrikes and closer coordination with Syrian Kurdish commanders, who relayed precise targeting information to U.S. aircraft.

Finally, the tide began to turn. Kurds in the field and at a Joint Operations Center in Erbil began using the same detailed maps and imagery as U.S. forces. Information on Islamic State positions provided by Kurdish forces allowed the U.S. to pick up the tempo of strikes, even in bad weather, U.S. officials said. This undermined an important Islamic State tactic: launching attacks under cloud cover.

The airstrikes finally helped the Kurds break Islamic State's last lines of defense, officials said.

The Kurds in Kobani "were masters in street fighting, but we brought heavy weaponry at a critical time, when ISIS was working on surrounding them," Maj. Izzettin Temo, a Peshmerga doctor, said Friday.

With morale boosted by the Peshmerga deployment, and Islamic State reeling under the bombardment of U.S. jets, the jihadists suffered heavy losses, Kurdish and U.S. officials said. In January, the insurgents began to withdraw from the center of Kobani to surrounding villages.

Last week, the Kurds declared victory, celebrating on Kobani's broken streets. Fighters like Egit Botan, a commander of 40 men and a senior PKK guerrilla, chased retreating jihadists.

"We are trying to avoid clashes and loss of more manpower," said Mr. Botan, a Turkish Kurd wearing a black baseball cap with a hand-stitched picture of Che Guevara. "We have lost hundreds of our fighters already."

Fighters and refugees said they were struggling to comprehend the task of reconstructing the city, which they believe will take years. Local authorities must figure out how to get heavy equipment, as well as plot the safest way to clear away rubble and ruin that could contain unexploded ordnance.

Refugees from Kobani are waiting on the Turkish side of the border, where officials just finished construction of Turkey's largest refugee camp, with a capacity of 35,000.

Some Kobani residents said they would return home if allowed by Kurdish officials, even if home is now a crushed pile of concrete.

For many who fought here, Kobani is just the first victory in a wider conflict.

"Even though the battle for Kobani is over, I will not go back home," said Ms. Berkel, the Kurdish fighter, a Kalashnikov rifle slung over her shoulder. "I will continue to fight in other parts of Kurdish Syria."

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8. Kurdish fighters in Iraq struggle to hold gains against IS

Associated Press, Feb. 2 | Vivian Salama

SNUNY, Iraq — Only stray dogs and a dozen armed fighters walk the streets of Snuny, a ghost town at the base of Mount Sinjar where rapid military changes of fortune are written on the walls.

"Smoking is banned" has been scribbled in Arabic outside one cafe. A nearby building bears the warning: "Submit to the Islamic State, you infidels."

Those messages don't reflect the views of the new management. Today, flags representing various Kurdish political groups flap furiously in the wind over Snuny, claiming ownership of the town's barren streets.

But all along the Kurds' shifting front lines, it's a tenuous hold sustained only with timely air support from the U.S.-led coalition. Questions remain whether the coalition-backed Kurds can secure strategic crossroads like Snuny and renew an offensive versus the Islamic State group, which controls a broad swath of northern Iraq from its base in Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul.

The Kurds retook Snuny from the Sunni militants last month, but a weeks-old battle has reached a point of stalemate on the other side of the mountain for militant-held Sinjar. To the southeast, the oil-rich city of Kirkuk remains at risk of Islamic State recapture.

While Islamic State fighters have been forced to retreat from Kobani, the strategic town on Syria's border with Turkey, the battlefield picture suggests they are far from beaten in northern Iraq, where harsh winter weather and thick mud underfoot hampers military moves — and even rear-line positions such as Snuny remain in surprising range of the enemy. Whichever side triumphs will determine whether Islamic State can use the main highway west to funnel weapons and reinforcements to their retreating comrades in Syria.

Just after midnight Friday, fighters from a Yazidi militia and an Associated Press crew were startled awake by the whoosh and thud of mortar shells nearby as Islamic State fighters targeted a headquarters of the Kurdish Democratic Party. Such attacks underscore the sense that disparate Kurdish militias drawn from Iraq, Syria and Turkey have yet to consolidate their gains despite strong coalition air support.

And when the literal fog of war descends, Islamic State fighters have demonstrated a clear edge. Last week they retook most of Sinjar during a period of heavy fog that made it impossible for U.S. and other coalition warplanes to offer close air support to the often lightly armed Kurds.

In Kirkuk, Kurdish forces have suffered painful losses from incessant IS militant activity. On Friday, militants attacked several Kirkuk targets and the Kurds lost a senior commander and eight of his troops in battle. Kurdish authorities since have deployed heavy reinforcements to the city, depriving other positions of needed peshmerga fighters.

Overlooking the main highway near Sinjar linking northern Iraq to Syria, a few dozen peshmerga fighters remain in a holding position as they await more arms and troops. Islamic State fighters sought to overrun them last week but were repelled. Kurds described their enemy as cunning and relentless.

"They will never give up," the commander of that position, Brig. Gen. Bahjat Taymes, said of Islamic State fighters dug in barely 100 yards (meters) away. "They are ready to die. They are happy to die."

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9. ISIS Tactics Questioned as Hostages Dwindle

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Rod Nordland

AMMAN, Jordan -- The extremists of the Islamic State managed to parlay their Japanese and Jordanian hostages into 12 days of worldwide publicity. But other than depleting their supply of foreign hostages, did they really accomplish anything?

Analysts who study terrorist groups were skeptical, and many said the militants' tactics had backfired badly, particularly in Jordan. The extremists apparently killed two Japanese men, but failed to achieve either of their professed goals: \$200 million in ransom, and the release of a female Iraqi suicide bomber from death row in Jordan.

Their threat to kill a captive Jordanian air force pilot (and their failure to produce evidence that he was alive) did not achieve the intended effect of undermining support for Jordan's role in the international coalition bombing the Islamic State. Now even skeptical Jordanians have begun rallying around their government's position and denouncing the extremists.

That shift comes as the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has nearly run out of Western or other foreign hostages, as fewer aid workers and journalists dare to enter Syrian territory. Last August, when the American-led bombing campaign began, the group held at least 23 Western hostages; now they are believed to have four hostages viewed as prominent internationally, including two Westerners. The extremists continue to hold an untold number of Syrians.

Over the weekend, the group released a video showing the apparent beheading of the journalist Kenji Goto, who was captured when he went to Syria last October in a bid to find Haruna Yukawa, a Japanese adventurer who disappeared there in August. A video showing a still image of Mr. Yukawa beheaded was released by the group on Jan. 24.

Beginning on Jan. 20, Mr. Goto was forced by his captors to plead for his life, directing those entreaties at Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Similarly heart-rending messages were sent from his wife and mother in his final days.

In Mr. Goto's apparent last moments, the Islamic State's executioner, known as Jihadi John for his British-accented English, who appears in many of the beheading videos, taunted Mr. Abe: "This knife will not only slaughter Kenji, but will also carry on and cause carnage wherever your people are found."

Mr. Abe responded that Japan "will cooperate with the international community and make the terrorists pay the price." He added, "I'm outraged by the despicable terrorist act, and I will never forgive the terrorists."

Jordanian officials were more circumspect, as their pilot remains at the extremists' whim. Jordan's offer to trade him for the suicide bomber, Sajida al-Rishawi, remains on the table.

But Jordanian society underwent a sea change in its attitude toward the coalition last week, as the fate of the pilot, First Lt. Moaz al-Kasasbeh, transfixed the country and its powerful tribes. Even many Jordanians who at the beginning of the week said the hostage crisis showed they were involved in someone else's war seemed to change their minds, especially after the horrible images of Mr. Goto's killing emerged.

"From Day 1 of Jordan joining the coalition against ISIS, part of our people believed it's not our war," said Oraib al-Rantawi, director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies here. "Another part felt that sooner or later it will be, so it's better to fight them in the backyard of another country than in our own bedrooms."

"Moaz is in every bedroom in Jordan now," said Naif al-Amoun, a member of Jordan's Parliament who is from Lieutenant Kasasbeh's hometown, Karak. "We are not going to let anyone exploit this issue to turn us against the government."

Mr. Amoun added, "In the last couple of days, the treatment of the pilot backfired against ISIS. Instead of dividing Jordan, Jordanians are more united behind their government."

Ora Szekely, a political scientist at Clark University in Massachusetts who studies extremist groups like ISIS, said that nonstate actors like the Islamic State "are much less coherent and cohesive than they want us to think they are."

Since the extremists seemed to have no coherent strategy in how they handled the Japanese and Jordanian hostages, their most likely goal was public relations -- and it was a flop, she said. "There is a certain amount of making this up as they go along."

"Killing the second Japanese was a big mistake and they got nothing for it," said Clark McCauley, a psychology professor at Bryn Mawr College who studies political radicalization. "These people are in many ways their own worst enemies. You just have to give them time and space and their extremity will alienate their own base."

Hassan Abu Hanieh, an Amman-based political analyst who follows extreme Islamist groups, cautioned that the Islamic State still has the pilot -- assuming he is alive -- and may well use his fate to try to shift Jordanian public opinion. Jordan is one of four Arab countries participating in airstrikes against ISIS.

While ISIS cares little about public opinion in Japan -- or Britain or the United States, two other countries whose nationals have been beheaded -- Jordan is a different matter. "It has goals for expansion into Jordan, and when ISIS realized this is a losing game on their end, they stopped the game and killed the Japanese, but not Lt. Kasasbeh," Mr. Hanieh said.

Other than the Jordanian pilot, ISIS is known to be holding two Western hostages: the British journalist John Cantile, who has made a series of videotaped speeches on behalf of ISIS, and an American female aid worker, whose identity is being kept confidential. Another female aid worker from an undisclosed country is also being held. In addition, three staff workers for the International Committee of the Red Cross disappeared in October 2013, although no information has been released about their identities or who abducted them.

The Islamic State reportedly has been paid millions of dollars in ransom for its hostages, particularly in the past six months, making hostage-taking an important form of financing.

As one journalist working along the border between Turkey and Syria put it recently, "Journalists in Syria are seen as walking bags of money." Unsurprisingly, most journalists and foreign aid workers are now avoiding Syria entirely -- raising fears that the extremists would begin taking hostages elsewhere.

"The F.B.I. has recently obtained credible information indicating members of an ISIL-affiliated group are tasked with kidnapping journalists in the region and returning them to Syria," American law enforcement officials warned journalists in an October bulletin. "Members of this group might try to mask their affiliation with ISIL to gain access to journalists."

Many journalists working in the area are well aware of the risks. "ISIS has a network of agents roaming the areas that mostly attract journalists, near the border," said Zaher Said, a Syrian who works for Western journalists in the Gaziantep area of southern Turkey.

"They disguise themselves as drivers or fixers offering to help journalists work in the south of Turkey, in order to establish good ties with them for a future plan of kidnapping them to the other side of the border," said Mr. Said.

Most experienced journalists were aware of the risks in Turkey, and so far none had been kidnapped there. "It is not only ISIS and its network that poses a risk, but also self-motivated bounty hunters," he said.

--Reporting was contributed by Anne Barnard from Beirut, Lebanon; Karam Shoumali from Istanbul; Michael S. Schmidt from Washington; and Martin Fackler from Tokyo

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ASIA/PACIFIC

10. Departing From Country's Pacifism, Japanese Premier Vows Revenge for Killings

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Martin Fackler

TOKYO -- When Islamic State militants posted a video over the weekend showing the grisly killing of a Japanese journalist, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reacted with outrage, promising "to make the terrorists pay the price."

Such vows of retribution may be common in the West when leaders face extremist violence, but they have been unheard of in confrontation-averse Japan -- until now. The prime minister's call for revenge after the killings of the journalist, Kenji Goto, and another hostage, Haruna Yukawa, raised eyebrows even in the military establishment, adding to a growing awareness here that the crisis could be a watershed for this long pacifist country.

"Japan has not seen this Western-style expression in its diplomacy before," Akihisa Nagashima, a former vice minister of defense, wrote on Twitter. "Does he intend to give Japan the capability to back up his words?"

As the 12-day hostage crisis came to a grim conclusion with the killing of Mr. Goto, the world has suddenly begun to look like a much more dangerous place to a peaceful and prosperous nation that had long seen itself as immune to the sorts of violence faced by the United States and its Western allies.

Some described a level of shock not unlike that experienced by the Americans after the 2001 terrorist attacks, or the French after last month's assault on the newspaper Charlie Hebdo and the murders in a kosher supermarket.

"This is 9/11 for Japan," said Kunihiro Miyake, a former high-ranking Japanese diplomat who has advised Mr. Abe on foreign affairs. "It is time for Japan to stop daydreaming that its good will and noble intentions would be enough to shield it from the dangerous world out there. Americans have faced this harsh reality, the French have faced it, and now we are, too."

The crisis also comes at a crucial moment in Japan's modern history. Since taking office two years ago, Mr. Abe, a strong-willed conservative, has tried to push his nation into shedding the passive brand of pacifism that it repentantly embraced after defeat in World War II, and playing a more active role in world events. Analysts and former diplomats say the stark savagery of the killings will be an important test of how ready Japan really is to step onto the global stage.

The question, analysts and diplomats say, is whether the trauma of the killings will drain Japan's will to seek a higher international profile, or stiffen its resolve.

This new challenge came in the form of two videos released within a week of each other, both by the Islamic State, whose militants control large parts of Syria and Iraq. The first video, posted online last weekend, showed the decapitated body of Mr. Yukawa, 42, an adventurer who was captured last August by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. The second video, which surfaced over the weekend, showed the doomed journalist, Mr. Goto, 47, stoically kneeling as his dagger-wielding executioner criticizes Japan for joining the American-led coalition against the Islamic State.

He then menacingly warns that no Japanese are safe anywhere in the world.

"Let the nightmare for Japan begin," the masked militant proclaims before reaching down to kill Mr. Goto.

Japan reacted with an outpouring of fury and sorrow at the death of Mr. Goto, a respected journalist who was a veteran of war zones. Local television stations showed clips from his reports from places like Syria and Iraq, where he often reported on the plight of children and noncombatants. It was also noted that Japan was not even involved in the United States-led bombing campaign against the Islamic State, but its citizens were taken hostage and killed in the same cruel manner as those from other countries.

"I feel a deep despair that I've never felt before and an unfocused anger," Taku Nishimae, a filmmaker who began an online campaign to free Mr. Goto by holding up a placard saying "I am Kenji," told Kyodo News.

For now at least, such anger appears to have given Japan the resolve to reject the Islamic State's threats, and to support Mr. Abe's efforts to raise Japan's profile in the Middle East.

At the same time, many Japanese also appeared ready to adapt to this new reality by discussing ways to reduce their nation's vulnerability. On Japan's Sunday morning political debate programs, politicians seemed to compete with one another in offering proposals to increase security, by such steps as more screening of foreigners entering the country, creating an overseas spy agency or writing new legislation to give Japan's tightly constrained military more freedom to act overseas to protect the more than 1.5 million Japanese who live abroad.

"I don't see any sign of the Japanese people wanting to back down; to the contrary, they are quite angry," said Ichiro Fujisaki, a former Japanese ambassador to the United States. "It's actually surprising the extent to which people are united in standing against the terrorist group."

Other analysts agree that the Japanese public seems to be rallying around its leaders in a time of crisis. They added, however, that as the shock wears off, there will be more questioning of how Mr. Abe's government handled the crisis. In particular, they expect growing attention on how much responsibility Mr. Abe should bear for creating the crisis in the first place.

"The debate starts from now," said Fumiaki Kubo, a political expert at the University of Tokyo. "Opinions were divided before the hostage crisis, but they may prove even more divided after it."

Critics on the left are already starting to fault Mr. Abe for provoking the Islamic State two weeks ago when he offered \$200 million in nonlethal aid to countries that were confronting the group. In its initial ransom demand, the Islamic State made a point of demanding the same sum, \$200 million, and later criticizing Mr. Abe for what it called his "reckless decision to take part in an unwinnable war" waged by the United States-led coalition against the militant group.

This has already been enough to renew fears among many Japanese that Mr. Abe's efforts to raise Japan's profile could end up entangling the country in distant wars. These concerns were apparent on Sunday in interviews with citizens on their views of Japan's response to the hostage crisis.

Hiroyuki Hamada, 61, an engineer who lives in a Tokyo suburb, said he was opposed to getting any more deeply involved in the United States-led effort against the Islamic State.

"I fear we will just fall into an unending cycle of violence begetting violence," Mr. Hamada said.

But there have also been strong popular shows of support for Mr. Abe and his efforts to make Japan a more global partner of the United States, on whom it still relies for its defense. In coming weeks, Mr. Abe will seek legislative changes to expand the role of the military; for instance, by allowing it to go to the aid of a friendly nation under attack, something it cannot now legally do. But Mr. Abe has also carefully insisted that he still wants to restrict Japan to a largely nonmilitary role

"No country is completely safe from terrorism," Mr. Abe told Parliament last week. "How do we cut the influence of ISIL, and put a stop to extremism? Japan must play its part in achieving this."

He has also emphasized that the \$200 million in aid he offered two weeks ago was solely for humanitarian purposes. On Sunday, Mr. Abe proclaimed that he wanted to increase Japan's nonlethal aid to countries opposing the Islamic State.

"The cruelty of the Islamic State has made Japan see a harsh new reality," said Mr. Kubo of the University of Tokyo. "We now realize we face the same dangers as other countries do."

--*Makiko Inoue contributed reporting from Sayama, Japan*

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11. Battle for Okinawa: Islanders face off with Tokyo over bases

Reuters, Feb. 1 | Elaine Lies

NAGO, Japan - Japan's Okinawa, a chain of tropical islands more than three hours southwest of Tokyo by plane, looks and feels almost like a different country. A growing number of islanders say it should be just that.

Perennial anger over Okinawa's hosting of tens of thousands of U.S. troops has flared to a new level after the election of an anti-base governor and lawmakers late last year - victories that have been all but ignored by those in power in Tokyo.

Hawkish Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is pushing ahead with the construction of a new base near the island's northern city of Nago, meaning that Okinawans' homes will stay on the frontline of the country's defenses.

And in another blow for what is one of Japan's poorest areas, the central government has cut the prefecture's budget.

"By ignoring our wishes, the Japanese government is broadening the gulf between Okinawans and Japanese," said Masahide Ota, an 89-year-old historian and former governor. "If the government forces this issue, the idea of breaking away will really catch fire."

Abe's push to amend the pacifist constitution, giving Japan a more active military role in the region, has pushed security onto the political agenda in the run up to nationwide local elections in April.

While most agree that the idea of returning to the days when Okinawa was a proud kingdom is a dream, the anger that feeds the desire to break away could prove a major headache for Abe at the polls.

"We're sick of being deceived by the ruling party," said Yorie Arakaki, a 44-year-old housewife among protesters who clashed with police a few weeks ago as dump trucks came in the dead of night to start working at Henoko, site of a new base to replace Futenma air base in central Okinawa.

"We now see that the will of the people won't be honored."

Emotions are especially high this year, the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, which left 30 percent of the island's population dead. Residents lived under U.S. rule for the next 27 years.

Even now, Okinawa hosts nearly 75 percent of the U.S. military presence in Japan, taking up 18 percent of its land area.

THE GATEKEEPERS

Abe's push to beef up Japan's military, driven by China's growing assertiveness, has some worried in Okinawa, which sits some 1,600 km (1,000 miles) south of Tokyo. Last month, buoyed by December's re-election, his government passed a record \$42 billion defense budget.

"In the hypothetical case of a military 'situation,' Tokyo is so far away it won't feel the pain, just like 70 years ago," Nago mayor Susumu Inamine told Reuters.

"Then, Okinawa helped buy time for the home islands, and this thinking basically hasn't changed. People on the mainland want Okinawans to put up with everything so they can feel safe."

Everyone agrees that Futenma, crammed in the middle of a densely-populated residential area, must be moved. But a rising number of Okinawans now say it should be shifted from the islands altogether. Reasons include the planned deployment of the controversial Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, loathed for its noise, among other reasons.

"The vibrations make your insides go numb," said Kanako Kawakami, a 56-year-old resident of Ginowan, the site of Futenma.

Huddled among a group of 100 protesters, Kawakami was part of a round-the-clock vigil on a hillside in front of Camp Schwab, a U.S. base that abuts the Henoko site.

Dump trucks arrived in the dead of night. In January, an 80-year-old woman was hurt in clashes between protesters and riot police.

The bases have always been a devil's bargain for Japan's second-poorest prefecture, where unemployment is about 75 percent higher than the national average.

In the rundown city of Nago, Abe's vaunted economic growth policies appear to have had little impact on its 61,500 residents. Some are resigned. "Bases bring in money," said taxi driver Masatsune Naka, 65. "People have to support families."

WHAT ALTERNATIVES?

To help the prefecture, Tokyo has provided a generous development budget, insisting it is not linked to bases.

But after the election of anti-base governor Takeshi Onaga in November, and the trouncing of ruling party candidates in a December parliamentary election, the government said it was cutting the budget by 16 billion yen to 334 billion yen in the 2015/16 fiscal year.

And as the percentage of the island's GDP coming from the bases falls - from 15 percent in 1972 to 4.9 percent in 2011 - Okinawans are aware they need to be more self-reliant.

Tourism now accounts for nearly 10 percent of GDP, including a hefty number of foreigners.

Freeing up base land for local use would also allow expansion of growing industries such as information technology and call centers.

Economically, though, things would be tough. Okinawa's GDP ranks alongside that of the tiny Pacific island of Tuvalu.

"There's no way we'd ever declare independence, we couldn't feed ourselves," said Satoru Kinjo, head of the local branch of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

But islander anger, and the government's response, could pose a national danger for Abe. On Jan. 25, nearly 7,000 people gathered to protest the Henoko base in Tokyo.

"The Japanese people will be watching what happens here," Inamine, the Nago mayor, said. "People who have supported the government and LDP up to now won't be able to excuse their excesses anymore."

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12. Fresh reports circulate on China's second aircraft carrier

Reuters, Feb. 2 | Megha Rajagopalan

Fresh reports that China is building a second aircraft carrier circulated over the weekend on a city government microblog and a state-owned newspaper, as the country scrambles to modernize its military.

China wants to develop an ocean-going "blue water" navy capable of defending the growing interests of the world's second largest economy as it adopts a more assertive stance in territorial disputes with neighbors in the South China and East China seas.

A power cable maker in the eastern city of Changzhou has won a deal to provide equipment for the second aircraft carrier, according to the reports, which appeared on the official microblog of the government of Changzhou and the state-backed Changzhou Evening News, but have since been deleted.

Chinese military analysts said the reports were a tacit acknowledgement the carrier was being built.

Media reports last year cited the top party official in the northern province of Liaoning as saying that China was building the carrier, and aimed for a future fleet of at least four aircraft carriers.

But the government has consistently sought to keep news about a second aircraft carrier quiet, and the military has not formally acknowledged its development.

The country's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, a Soviet-era ship bought from Ukraine in 1998 and refitted in a Chinese shipyard, has long been a symbol of China's naval build-up.

Successfully operating the 60,000-tonne Liaoning is the first step in what state media and some military experts believe will be the deployment of domestically-built carriers by 2020.

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13. China to join Cobra Gold war games

Bangkok Post (Thailand), Feb. 2, Pg. 3 | Wassana Nanuam

China will take part in this year's Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand for the first time, a source at the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF) said Sunday.

After observing the annual military exercise for several years, China will become part of the training.

China will not participate in the combat side and instead will focus on humanitarian operations.

It will assist with disaster relief among other exercises, the source said.

News of China's addition came after the RTAF abruptly cancelled a joint press conference on the war games with US charge d'affaires W Patrick Murphy Sunday.

No reason was given for the cancellation.

Japan and South Korea joined the Cobra Gold exercise last year and took part in the humanitarian parts of the training, the source said.

China had asked to be part of the Cobra Gold training in the past and Thailand had suggested to the US that China should be allowed to take part, the source said.

The Thai military and its Chinese counterpart have undertaken a number of joint military training exercises, under the "Strikes" code-name, the source said.

Special warfare exercises were code-named Strike, a drill between the two navies was called Blue Strike, and joint-air force exercises are known as Lighting Strike, the source said.

Between Friday and Sunday, the Chinese defence minister will meet deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Gen Prawit Wongsuwon.

During the meeting, the two sides are expected to discuss possible military cooperation.

Also likely to come up for talks will be the weapons which the Chinese defence ministry has been researching, China's weapons sales to Thailand and future joint military exercises.

The Cobra Gold war games will not be scaled back, despite current diplomatic unease between Thailand and the US.

About 5,000 American soldiers, 4,000 Thai soldiers, and 10,000 from 20 other nations will participate in the two-week Cobra Gold exercise that will kick off next Monday at Armed Forces Academies Preparatory...

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14. With change in Sri Lanka, U.S. eyes deeper ties
Associated Press, Feb. 2 | Matthew Pennington

WASHINGTON — The surprise defeat of Sri Lanka's authoritarian leader and the new government's early steps to end repression have stirred U.S. hopes that the South Asian island nation can revive ties with Washington and distance itself to some degree from Beijing.

Under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, relations with China intensified, with heavy Chinese investment in the strategically located island along busy sea lanes between the Persian Gulf and East Asia. Once-robust ties with the U.S. deteriorated sharply, even as President Barack Obama pushed to engage nations across Asia and consolidate America as a Pacific power.

Washington took an important step toward rebuilding the relationship with the Monday arrival of the top diplomat for South Asia, the first visit by a senior State Department official since former Rajapaksa ally Maithripala Sirisena won Jan. 8 elections.

"Sri Lanka can count on the United States to be partner and a friend in the way forward," Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal told reporters, speaking alongside Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera. She said the new government has already taken many positive steps but "there is a lot of hard work ahead and some difficult challenges."

She also noted that no country in the world buys more Sri Lankan products than the United States.

Samaraweera is expected to visit Washington later this month.

Obama wants a deeper partnership with Sri Lanka and U.S. officials say the early signs are promising.

Within a week or so of taking office, Sirisena rolled back restrictions on the press and civil society. He also vows to reduce powers of the presidency that been inflated by Rajapaksa when his popularity ballooned during the ending of Sri Lanka's bloody civil war.

U.S.-Sri Lanka relations were strained over Rajapaksa's reluctance to investigate thousands of reported civilian deaths in the final chapter of the quarter-century conflict in 2009, when government forces crushed Tamil rebels who had been fighting for an ethnic homeland.

Sirisena has been cautious about promising action on accountability, but he did offer an early fig leaf to minority Tamils, who supported him at the polls, when he quickly replaced an unpopular ex-military governor appointed by Rajapaksa in the former battle zone in the north of the country.

The new government also says it is reviewing one of a series of major Chinese-financed infrastructure projects: a \$1.5 billion land reclamation for a "port city" in the capital, Colombo. That's a blow to Beijing's progress in winning an ally in the Indian Ocean.

But officials in Colombo are also being careful not to alienate Beijing. Rajitha Senaratne, a Cabinet spokesman, said Sri Lanka does not "need to tilt towards any side."

"China has been a historical friend of ours, India is also the same," he told The Associated Press. "Our exports go to the E.U. and U.S." The new government assured India it will not align itself to any world power.

Two recent port calls by Chinese submarines at a Chinese-built terminal in Colombo, one before a visit in September by China's leader Xi Jinping, fueled speculation that Beijing's wants a "string of pearls" or port access along sea lanes linking the energy-rich Persian Gulf and economic centers in eastern China. The submarine visits spooked India, which lies just 30 miles from Sri Lanka and shares U.S. uncertainty about Beijing's intentions as China's military power grows.

Washington has its own strategic reasons to be interested in Sri Lanka.

A 2007 agreement, sealed before relations with Rajapaksa soured, permits the U.S. and Sri Lanka to exchange nonlethal supplies and refueling during humanitarian operations and joint military exercises.

The U.S. has a significant economic stake in the nation of 20 million people. U.S. financial institutions are major investors in Sri Lankan bonds, and the U.S. is the second-largest market for Sri Lankan exports.

"The United States should keep up the pressure on human rights and reconciliation with ethnic minorities," said Bharath Gopalaswamy of the Atlantic Council think tank. "But that should not be the only thing the relationship is built on. It has to be broader engagement."

Sri Lanka also wants a better relationship with Washington. Rajapaksa's government spent liberally on U.S.-based lobbyists but with little apparent impact.

Acrimony with the U.S. and others over human rights deepened when a U.N. body last year approved an investigation into reports of civil war atrocities. The results are due in March.

Sirisena will be walking a fine line at home and abroad in how he responds. He's managing an unwieldy coalition of majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, and the government could face parliamentary elections within months.

--Associated Press writer Krishan Francis in Colombo, Sri Lanka, contributed to this report

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MIDEAST

15. Shiite militia sets deadline to unravel Yemen crisis

Agence France-Presse, Feb. 1 | Not Attributed

A Shiite militia on Sunday set a three-day deadline for political parties to resolve the power vacuum in Yemen since the president and prime minister offered to resign last month.

The Huthis and their allies urged parties "to reach a solution and fill the vacuum" within three days or "the revolutionary leadership" would "take care of the situation of the state".

No measures were specified.

The deadline was set in a statement issued at the end of a three-day meeting in a Sanaa sports hall attended by the party of ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh but boycotted by Yemen's other major political movements.

The announcement was loudly applauded by thousands who took part in the forum, including tribal chiefs and officers in military uniform.

The militia, which overran Sanaa in September, seized the presidential palace and key government buildings on January 20, plunging the country deeper into crisis and prompting President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and his premier to tender their resignations.

Opponents have staged demonstrations against the Huthis in several cities under the slogan: "Revolt until the overthrow of the coup" forces.

UN envoy Jamal Benomar has said that Hadi and his cabinet are effectively under house arrest, warning that violence could erupt at any time.

The crisis has raised fears that impoverished Yemen, which lies next to oil-rich Saudi Arabia, could become a failed state.

In unrest on Sunday, gunmen on a motorbike shot dead a Huthi official, Abu Abdullah al-Ayyani, in Ibb in central Yemen, a security source said.

In neighbouring Baida province, two soldiers were killed in an ambush and two assailants died in a firefight, a military source said.

And a local official said an Al-Qaeda leader named Abu Mussab died in a clashes between the militant network and soldiers.

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16. Explosion Kills at Least Six on Bus of Lebanese Pilgrims Visiting Shrines in Syria

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad

BEIRUT, Lebanon -- An explosion on Sunday ripped apart a bus carrying Lebanese pilgrims to Shiite shrines in Damascus, Syria, killing at least six people and wounding 27, official news channels reported.

The attack stood out for striking a specific vehicle in a tightly secured area just outside the Syrian capital's Old City, and speculation quickly rose that Hezbollah fighters could have been targeted, or that the attack was a baldly sectarian provocation.

The Nusra Front, an insurgent group linked to Al Qaeda, claimed responsibility for what it called a suicide attack. But according to Syrian state television, two bombs were planted on the waiting bus as passengers visited a shrine in the Old City. One bomb failed to detonate and was defused, the state news media said.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite group whose fighters play a growing role in thwarting the nearly four-year insurgency against Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, quickly condemned the attack. Hezbollah's Al Manar news channel listed the names of six dead, all male.

The attack came two weeks after Israel killed several Hezbollah fighters and an Iranian general in southern Syria, and four days after Hezbollah struck back by killing two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border attack from Lebanon. On

Friday, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, made it clear in a speech that the group would not back down in its fight against Israel or in Syria.

The victims in Damascus were not identified as fighters, though at least one appeared in memorial pages on social media in military-looking gear. Syria's state news agency said that at least one child, a 3-year-old boy, was in critical condition. Extremist Sunni groups among the insurgents, in addition to being sworn enemies of Hezbollah, have targeted Shiites simply for their sect.

Regardless, the attack appeared to be unusually provocative, exploding just outside the ancient fortifications of the Old City, near once-bustling tourist destinations like the Umayyad Mosque that Damascus residents still consider relatively safe and hitting Shiites as they traveled from one revered shrine to another.

The bus's next destination was to have been the Sayeda Zeinab shrine outside Damascus, particularly revered by Shiites. Protecting that shrine was one of Hezbollah's early justifications for its intervention in Syria, and the group has used it as a rallying point to recruit fighters.

The bus was part of a weekly tour named for Hussein, the early Islamic warrior whose death in battle is the central narrative of mourning in Shiite Islam, said the organizer, Fadi Kheireddine. He said all 58 passengers were Lebanese.

While the shrine's neighborhood was once a crossroads for many sects and nationalities, a visit last spring revealed that the area was half deserted, presided over by Hezbollah fighters and Syrian militia members, the surrounding streets inhabited by Shiites displaced from northern Syria. But in recent months, regular pilgrim tours have resumed from southern Beirut.

--Mohammad Ghannam contributed reporting

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17. U.S. Sees Iran Pressed To Reach A Deal

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A6 | Jay Solomon and William Mauldin

WASHINGTON -- Iran's economy is now fundamentally incapable of recovery without a nuclear accommodation with the West, increasing Washington's leverage in final negotiations with Tehran, said the Treasury Department's outgoing sanctions czar David Cohen.

"They're stuck. They can't fix this economy unless they get sanctions relief," Mr. Cohen said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal about sanctions policy around the world. "I think they are coming to the negotiations with their backs to the wall."

Mr. Cohen is leaving his post to assume the No. 2 spot at the Central Intelligence Agency, where he'll continue to spearhead U.S. efforts to contain Iran, Russia, North Korea and other American adversaries.

Mr. Cohen has been a central player over the past decade in developing targeted financial sanctions to pressure countries and extremist organizations, such as Islamic State. In Washington, many see Mr. Cohen's rise to the post of deputy CIA director as underscoring the importance the White House now assigns to financial intelligence.

"I think it would be accurate to say that the importance of financial tools in our national security toolbox has steadily increased over the past five to 10 years," Mr. Cohen said. "Had that not been the case. . . I would have never gotten on the radar screen of somebody like John Brennan," the CIA's director.

The administrations of Barack Obama and George W. Bush have both touted the U.S. financial campaign against Iran as a model. Mr. Cohen and other senior U.S. officials say they believe that Tehran's decision in 2013 to negotiate over its nuclear program resulted from damage to the economy.

The Treasury Department calculates the Western sanctions have cut Iran's oil exports by more than half in three years, while denying Tehran \$40 billion in revenues last year alone.

Recent declines in oil prices, according to Mr. Cohen, could cost Iran another \$11 billion over the next six months.

Republican and Democratic critics of the White House still accuse the U.S. of not going far enough. A bipartisan bill now being negotiated in Congress would call for new sanctions against Iran if an international agreement curbing its nuclear program isn't reached by July.

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AFRICA

18. Nigeria Coalition Repels Attack

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A7 | Drew Hinshaw

YOLA, Nigeria -- Soldiers and local vigilantes repelled a massive Boko Haram attack on the largest city of Nigeria's northeast on Sunday, dealing a rare and significant defeat to the Islamic insurgency.

Several thousand Boko Haram fighters drove into the city of Maiduguri around dawn in armored cars, tanks, motorbikes and new Toyota pickup trucks, officials and witnesses said. For hours, large explosions shook homes, mortars rained on streets and gunshots crackled in the city of about two million.

But the militants met considerable resistance. As they entered the city, hundreds of local hunters and vigilantes, armed with muskets and machetes, rushed to meet them, officials and militiamen said. The Nigerian army followed soon after, and by noon hundreds of Boko Haram fighters had died, according to a top security official and a senior member of the vigilante group. In the streets, furious residents filmed themselves mutilating the fighters' bodies.

"The soldiers, they are trying," said resident Jemima Adamu, 42 years old, who spent her morning cowering under a tree as mortars landed nearby.

Sunday's was the first attack in Nigeria with confirmed use by either side of heavy mortars. Resident Abdul Mohammed watched one crash into the street, killing three children.

"I'm still scared," he said, hours later. "What we don't know is who it's coming from."

The assault and its outcome confirmed a growing pattern: Boko Haram, emboldened by years of kidnapping and killing, has begun to take on targets that may be beyond its resources.

The group has swept through northeastern Nigeria since it moved out of Maiduguri in 2013. By the end of last year, the sect controlled a swath of Nigeria the size of Belgium. Then, in January, Boko Haram declared war on neighboring Cameroon.

That prompted Chad, which borders both Cameroon and Nigeria, to send its army after the militants. In recent days, Chad troops marched into Nigeria, capturing two border settlements. Nigerian officials said that has freed their army to chase Boko Haram into its mountain strongholds.

In the past week, Nigerian troops retook the town of Michika, which Boko Haram had seized in October. The army is now moving into Gwoza, the largest city in a mountain chain where Boko Haram has built extensive camps, one official said.

Boko Haram remains flexible and formidable. The group launched a ferocious assault on Maiduguri last weekend. As troops rushed to protect the city, Boko Haram overran a military base in the town of Monguna.

Also on Sunday, a suicide bomber struck a politician's home in the city of Potiskum, killing eight people, said police spokesman Danladi Markus.

"It's the normal Boko Haram stuff," said a security official. "There's no actual plan, just to wreak havoc -- it's terror, to stoke fear into people."

--Gbenga Akinbule in Abuja, Nigeria, contributed to this article

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19. Mali armed groups clash near Timbuktu – security sources

Reuters, Feb. 1 | Tiemoko Diallo and Adama Diarra

BAMAKO - Malian rebels fought pro-government militia in the northern village of Kano overnight, three security sources said, firing rockets and briefly kidnapping at least 20 people in the latest spike of violence between armed groups.

Two years after a French military intervention to drive out al Qaeda-linked Islamists from the desert north, sporadic attacks carried out by a medley of armed groups continue.

Tit-for-tat fighting between pro-government militia and Tuareg-led groups seeking greater freedom for a region they called Azawad has intensified in recent weeks. At least nine people, mostly rebels, were killed this week in a suicide attack near the town of Tabankort.

On Saturday, gunmen from the Tuareg separatist group MNLA and the MAA group of Malian Arabs encircled the village of Kano about 60 km (37 miles) east of Timbuktu and exchanged gunfire with pro-government fighters hiding there, according to two sources in the U.N. peacekeeping mission who asked not to be named.

They said one person was killed by a rocket fired from rebel forces. Separatist forces kidnapped at least 20 people at Kano, although they were liberated overnight after local authorities intervened.

The growing violence in the north of Mali, a former French colony, threatens to derail peace talks in neighbouring Algeria which aims to settle the decades-old question of the political status of the region.

The U.N., which is struggling to maintain order and carried out air strikes on rebel fighters at Tabankort in January, plans to hold a special meeting on northern Mali in Algiers on Feb. 5-6.

"Malian militia and agents of the state keep placing land mines and creating hate and disorder among the people of Azawad. We call on the Malian state not to sabotage the Algeria peace process," said Attay Ag Abdallah, spokesman for a pro-Azawad coalition called CMA. He confirmed the clashes but did not immediately comment on the reports of kidnappings or rocket fire.

--Additional reporting by Emma Farge

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AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

20. Training Teachers to Take Aim Against Taliban

New York Times (Peshawar Journal), Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | Ismail Khan

PESHAWAR, Pakistan -- Gunfire rang out as Fatima Bibi squeezed off three shots, hitting her target every time. Then she lowered her Glock pistol, turned to her fellow academics and smiled.

Her instructor was smiling, too.

"These ladies are better shots than some of our men," said Abdul Latif, a police firearms instructor. "They learned to handle a gun in just two days. Their confidence level is remarkable."

Dangerous times call for unusual measures in northwestern Pakistan, where the police are offering firearms instruction to schoolteachers and university lecturers since the Taliban massacred 150 people at a Peshawar school in December.

Ms. Bibi was one of eight lecturers from the Frontier College for Women, a postgraduate college, who attended a two-day firearms course at the provincial police firing range last week.

They learned to load, aim and fire weapons ranging from pistols to assault rifles; they also discussed self-defense techniques, and how to defend their students if the Taliban stormed in during class.

"The December 16 tragedy showed us that we need to learn to be able to take care of ourselves and our students," said Naheed Hussain, an assistant professor, who took the course while still wearing her black teaching robe. "We will not replace our pens with guns. But the situation could arise where we are required to serve our country."

The initiative for the gun lessons comes from the provincial government and the police authorities in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province as part of a push to increase security at schools. The province has borne the brunt of Pakistani Taliban attacks over the years.

Gun ownership is common across northwestern Pakistan, which is largely populated by ethnic Pashtuns and includes the restive tribal districts. But the advent of armed teachers has made uneasy many parents, who say it is the responsibility of the state, and not teachers, to protect schools and universities.

The notion of armed female teachers, in particular, has provoked consternation across conservative Pashtun society, raising a storm of protest that officials say could call the entire plan into doubt.

"How can we teach with a gun in one hand and a book in another?" asked Malik Khalid Khan, president of the All Primary Schools Teachers Association.

Abaseen Yusufzai, head of the Pashto department at Islamic College University, said, "This is the stupidest and most illogical thing that has happened in Pashtun society in living memory."

"Women provide moral support, food and water to our warriors," Mr. Yusufzai continued. "But never in our history have they been required to take up arms. It suggests that the men have lost their nerve, and the courage to fight."

Security experts expressed skepticism about the ability of teachers to hold back Taliban militants, who are often primed with drugs when they wage suicide assaults.

"How can you expect a woman with a 9-millimeter pistol to forestall a group of terrorists?" said Mahmood Shah, a retired army brigadier who was in charge of security for the tribal belt after 2001. "It's just nonsense."

Mr. Shah said he opposed weapons for both male and female teachers. "Two days training and 10 shots do not make an expert in firearms," he said. "This is militarizing our educational institutions and putting both teachers and children at greater risk."

But the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provincial government, which is controlled by the party of the firebrand opposition politician Imran Khan, says it has little choice but to use drastic measures.

Mushtaq Ghani, the provincial minister for education and information, said the province's 65,000 police officers were not enough to secure its 45,000 schools, colleges and universities.

"This is an extraordinary time," he told reporters last week. "We don't want teachers to take up guns, but it is necessary in the circumstances."

In addition to the possibility of armed teachers, the authorities have ordered schools to raise boundary walls and hire armed security guards -- expensive measures that many schools say they cannot afford.

But Muhammad Atif, the minister for elementary education, said the government was redirecting \$15 million in government money earmarked for school sanitary facilities and drinking water into the new security measures.

"There are 4,700 schools in this province that do not have boundary walls," he said. "So let's build walls first and think of toilets and drinking water later."

The provision for armed teachers comes with safeguards, officials say. Only teachers who are nominated by their principal and pass the normal gun licensing process will be allowed to carry a firearm in class.

The program is entirely voluntary, and teachers will not be allowed to display their guns openly.

Teachers themselves say they are conflicted -- uncomfortable at the prospect of carrying a firearm, yet haunted by memories of the bloodshed at the Army Public School in December, when seven heavily armed militants strode the corridors, flinging grenades and shooting down students.

"As I gripped the gun and opened fire I started to sweat, thinking I should have a pen in my hand and not a gun," said Akhtar Nagina, a physics lecturer at the Frontier College for Women. "But then I remembered what the terrorists had done. And I figured I should at least have a gun in my purse, for my own protection."

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POLITICS

21. Budget battle could presage 2016 election

Both parties want to boost defense. Where will money come from?

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A16 | Greg Jaffe

The battle over the budget that President Obama will submit Monday is emerging as a preview of the 2016 presidential election debate on national security, an area that for now appears to be the greatest vulnerability of Obama and the Democrats.

The president will ask Congress to break through its own spending caps - commonly referred to as "sequestration" - and allocate about \$561 billion for Pentagon expenditures, about \$38 billion more than is currently allowed under the law.

There's broad consensus in both parties that the military needs more money to modernize its forces and meet its responsibilities in a world that seems to have grown more chaotic and dangerous in the past 12 months. It's unclear, however, how Congress and the White House can come to an agreement on where to find the additional funds.

Even if both parties share the blame, a cash-strapped Pentagon could still provide an opening for Republicans - whose standing on national security issues was damaged by the Iraq war - to make an argument that they are the party best positioned to keep the country safe.

"A lot of Republicans see opportunity in an election that's a referendum on Obama's foreign policy," said Danielle Pletka, vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. A presidential election featuring Hillary Rodham Clinton, who served as Obama's secretary of state, would raise the profile of international issues.

Democrats, though, are determined to prevent the reemergence of their pre-Iraq-war reputation as being the weaker party on defense.

The impasse over the defense budget has left the Pentagon's top generals complaining that the spending caps, which have been in place since 2013, are damaging the military at a time when the country can least afford it. The list of new threats includes Islamic State fighters, who last year seized major cities in Iraq and Syria; a Russian-backed insurrection in eastern Ukraine; and the collapse of the government in Yemen.

"The global security environment is more dangerous, and sequestration is still on the books as the law," Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last week. "It's absolutely crazy for this country."

Obama has in recent months been able to cite a resurgent economy, strong job growth and a low unemployment rate as proof that his economic policies are delivering for the nation. "Because of the policies that this administration put in place, our economy has bounced back stronger than ever," White House press secretary Josh Earnest told reporters Friday.

The public perception of the president's handling of national security matters, amid the growing unrest in the Middle East and Ukraine, has not been nearly as strong. "We've had an interesting and, I would acknowledge, up-and-down year with respect to the perception of our foreign policy," said a senior administration official who was not authorized to speak publicly ahead of the formal budget announcement.

In recent years, Republicans and Democrats have been able to blunt the worst effects of the budget caps by cobbling together short-term deals that modestly increased defense and domestic spending by finding offsets - essentially, cuts to other programs or fee increases. But each year that the budget caps are in place, it gets harder to find new savings to meet the Pentagon's needs, lawmakers and White House officials said.

Republicans have shown little willingness to raise taxes to cover the costs of a bigger military budget. The White House, meanwhile, is not likely to back a budget compromise that would boost defense spending at the expense of prized domestic programs that have also been slashed in recent years.

"It looks like the administration is trying, but I don't think the fundamentals are there for a compromise," said Kathleen Hicks, who served as a top official in the Pentagon under Obama and now is a senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Republicans, long divided between deficit and defense hawks, have not made additional spending on defense a top priority in recent years. But as the economy improves and the presidential election nears, they appear to be coalescing around the need for more Pentagon spending "for no reason other than expediency," Hicks said.

"They'll have to move to the center" on defense spending, she said. "And I do think world events are pushing them in that direction."

It is unclear how hard the Obama administration is willing to fight for more military spending. Although the president's blueprint includes a big boost for the Pentagon, some in the president's party have questioned his commitment on the issue. The president did not mention the need for more military spending in his State of the Union address or in a major foreign policy speech at the U.S. Military Academy in late May- an omission that some hawkish Democrats found "worrisome," Hicks said.

White House officials, though, insist that a failure to provide relief to the Pentagon would be devastating to the country's military and its national security and that Obama will not accept a budget that carries the caps forward.

The promises of more money from Congress and the White House have yet to ease concerns in the Pentagon. The top brass have been complaining for years that the budget caps have forced them to pare back training, slash troop levels and gut their modernization programs.

Now their biggest worry is that lawmakers and the public have stopped listening to them on the issue and, absent a major crisis, will not fix the problem.

"At what point do we lose our soldiers' trust, the trust that we will provide them the right resources, the training and equipment?" said Gen. Ray Odierno, the Army chief of staff.

The military's case for more money also has been hindered by the turmoil at the top of the Defense Department.

Former defense secretary Chuck Hagel, who was essentially fired by Obama in November, had little background in Pentagon budget issues and generally seemed overwhelmed by the job, military officials said. Obama's pick to replace him, Ashton B. Carter, has not been confirmed by the Senate. He has a long background serving at top levels of the Pentagon and is expected to be a more forceful and articulate advocate for lifting the budget caps.

Meanwhile, liberal Democrats, eager to fend off the Republican critique that excessive domestic spending and government waste have caused the Pentagon's budget woes, cite the supporters of the 2003 Iraq war as the real problem.

"These are the same guys who voted for a war in Iraq and forgot how it was going to be paid for," said Sen. Bernard Sanders (I-Vt.), a possible Democratic presidential candidate. "You know how it's paid for? It's paid for on the credit card. We don't know how much it will cost by the time we take care of the last veteran . . . \$3 trillion or \$4 trillion. They weren't worried about that."

--Missy Ryan and Steven Mufson contributed to this report

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DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

22. Defense chief pick primed for confirmation

Carter's hearings for Pentagon post begin Wednesday

USA Today, Feb. 2, Pg. A3 | Tom Vanden Brook

For Ashton Carter, President Obama's nominee to lead the Pentagon, winning Senate confirmation may be the least of his worries.

He'll confront urgent concerns: automatic budget cuts slated to gouge the Pentagon's proposed \$561 billion budget, countering Islamic State militants menacing Iraq and Syria, and what Sen. John McCain has called "incessant White House micro-management" of the military.

Carter, 60, boasts a résumé of top Pentagon posts. He is widely expected to win the approval of the Armed Services Committee, which will take up his nomination Wednesday.

The panel's chairman, McCain, the Arizona Republican, hammered Chuck Hagel, the outgoing Defense secretary, at his confirmation hearing two years ago and voted against him. McCain went out of his way last month to praise Carter, whom he hailed as "highly competent, experienced, hard-working and committed."

Carter will have to rely on his extensive experience inside the military and on Capitol Hill to succeed where Hagel failed. Robert Gates, former Defense secretary, said nobody is better qualified than Carter.

Carter was the Pentagon's top weapons buyer under Gates and became deputy Defense secretary under Leon Panetta.

"I strongly support Ash's nomination," Gates told USA TODAY. "First of all, he knows the Pentagon very well. He's familiar with the people, both military and civilian, at senior levels. So there's no sort of start-up time with Ash. He's very familiar with the issues and the budgetary challenges.

"Ash also truly cares about the well-being of the troops. On every count, there isn't anybody that I think who would hold a candle to him as secretary for these next two years."

Carter and his transition team, including Army Maj. Gen. Ron Lewis, who advised Carter at the Pentagon, have been making office calls on Capitol Hill to win support. Carter left the Pentagon in 2013 as its No. 2 official.

From Day One, Carter will have to deal with the threat of sequestration, automatic cuts to the Pentagon's budget set for Oct. 1. The Joint Chiefs of Staff warned senators last week that the reductions, which affect every program but troops' compensation, could prevent the military from winning a war against a determined enemy.

"If we go back to sequestration, I think we're all in trouble, to be quite frank," Gates said. "There may be a dumber way to cut the defense budget, but I can't think of one."

Carter will also inherit an air war against Islamic State militants, tensions with Russia and the Pentagon's ongoing attempt to shift resources to the Pacific.

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ARMY

23. Interview: John McHugh

US Army Secretary

Defense News, Feb. 2, Pg. 22 | Not Attributed

The number of unforeseen missions is making for a busy time for the US Army, according to Secretary John McHugh. In an interview with reporters and editors from Army Times and Defense News in Washington, McHugh said nine of the Army's 10 divisions are deployed.

"[But] you're only capable in doing those things for which you have funding," he said. "We're now entering posture hearing season. This is going to be a critical opportunity for us to continue to press upon our congressional overseers the very real challenges and the very serious implications to our national defense strategy."

Q. Can you give us some specifics of what the impact of sequestration might be?

A. Well, of course, the first question is what does it do to our end-strength? We're currently heading toward an end-strength of 440,000 to 450,000. We think we're on track to meet that, and while that in and of itself produces

certain challenges, we feel that it is a sufficient number to meet the national defense strategic guidance and to adequately meet the missions that lie before us.

At sequestration levels, the working number is 420,000, give or take. We just don't feel we can meet that defense strategic guidance and would not have sufficient numbers to continue to meet the missions that we see before us today.

The other realities, as we've seen over the last 12 months, there are often things that arise that you didn't foresee. Our ability to respond to any emerging new crisis would be severely restricted.

The other thing that the chief [Gen. Ray Odierno] and I concern ourselves about is the fear of having to send any soldier into harm's way on any mission, whether or not sufficiently trained, whether or not sufficiently equipped. We have come some significant distance on restoring our readiness over the last two years, thanks to some relief that Congress has provided us. But at [fiscal 2016], should sequestration return, all the progress that we've made in those ratings will be lost.

You can add to that our modernization programs, our family programs —virtually, no corner of the Army would be untouched in a negative way should sequestration remain on the books.

Q. Do you believe the shift of power in Congress is going to have any positive effect on avoiding sequestration?

A. I find in talking with members on both sides now in both houses that most of the members that we deal with in our oversight committees very clearly understand the effects of sequestration. And most, in turn, want to do something about it. You have new chairmen of the Armed Services committees in both houses. We'll look to them to carry forward the message and obviously, be there to supply them any kind of information that they deem necessary. But at the end of the day, the challenge remains essentially the same: Taking that broad-based agreement on a bipartisan basis that sequestration needs to be fixed and translating it into a bill that can be passed through both houses and sent to the president.

So that doesn't change a great deal.

But through [fiscal 2017], I never started with a new year.

This, particularly, a new Congress, is a new opportunity to work on even old issues and hopefully, have some success.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about regional rotations and whether they will be increased?

A. We will take the leads from the geographic combatant commanders as they see their needs. I think the thing that worries me most are the unanticipated missions.

Where we know we're going to be required to create presence and create force structure, we have ways by which we can do that.

We're providing European partner assurance by rotating forces into that theater. From everything I can see, I would expect that would continue.

We're working very hard to maintain our presence in the Pacific theater. I understand a lot of people view that as an air and sea domain and there's a lot of air there, there's a lot of water. But there are also seven of the world's 10 largest armies. Twenty-two, I believe, of the 28 militaries in the Pacific region are headed by Army officers and that's why we're taking steps to protect funding for our Pacific Pathways initiative that [Gen. Vince Brooks, US Army Pacific commander] has put underway. That, in the proof of concept period that we're in right now, has worked very, very well and has actually, in some ways, saved us some money.

Rather than sending, for example, three units out to three separate engagements, they rotate through.

So it's a lot of balls in the air but we're meeting those missions.

And in spite of, I think, what a lot of us thought I want to say 24 months ago, this remains, as I mentioned, a very busy Army.

Q. How do you react to arguments that say the Army wants to be the Marine Corps?

A. I can answer that. No, we don't. Well, I can tell you the relationship I have with both [Commandant Gen. Joe Dunford] and [Navy Secretary Ray Mabus] is not in any way contentious. I mean, the Marines provide a very unique and very important capability. If you talk to our commanders, the things that we're trying to do are not intended in any way to challenge the Marine Corps' traditional missions and we think that in this particularly volatile security environment that we see across the world, there's more than enough room for both of the services. And indeed, as we did over the last 13 years, we are bringing infantry forces and the Army infantry forces partner very, very well. And I think a great deal of the success we've realized, whether it's in Afghanistan or Iraq, has come, in no small measure, because of that partnership.

And the extent is just beyond two infantry soldiers walking down a dirt lane. We provide much of the training for certain activities in the Marine Corps and we're happy to do that. It builds a sense of camaraderie between the two American forces. And we're obviously, as we are for the other services, one of the key logistical suppliers for not just the Marine Corps but for the other services, as well.

So this is one United States and one military and generally, what I have found is that, particularly on mission and in theaters, soldiers are less concerned about what the [uniform] looks like or who you root for in Army-Navy football and more concerned about getting the mission done and you know, they're a real tribute both to themselves, but I think [also] to the cooperative effort that exists between our services.

Q. Elements of the Army's Aviation Restructuring Initiative [ARI] are proceeding ahead of the creation of the congressional commission. Is the Army heading down an irreversible course with the pieces of the initiative that it's already implementing? Or could it reverse course if this commission suggests that it do so?

A. Well, the congressional commission, I assume, will help guide Congress. So we follow the law and if Congress tells us to take one direction or another, we will do that. And speaking of law, when it comes to ARI, we are fully in compliance with existing law, including 2015 NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act]. We have gone to divest out of the active component and pursuant to the requirements placed by the NDAA, won't begin to take any proactive steps in that regard out of Guard units until 2016.

So we are in compliance of law, we will continue to be in compliance of law. And while we have, I think, a very compelling analysis and support of what we propose, obviously, Congress as our overseers has the final say. And there, too, it's our job to help them clearly understand the entirety of the initiative including the very valuable plus-up of the [Black Hawk helicopters], which have far more applicability to Title 32 missions than Apaches do. So that we can come out of the best place possible.

Now, this has been programmed into our budgets and into our [program objective memorandum]. So if Congress says don't do it, that's a \$12 billion bill over the program. That's a lot of money. And so as I said, I think it's just important for both houses of Congress to understand the totality of this, both in terms of what the program's trying to achieve but also, the physical impact.

Q. The Guard and the active component are being portrayed as being at loggerheads or on a collision course.

What do you think is going to happen there?

A. We are taking a whole Army approach. One thing we learned, without question, over the last 13 years is that the Guard and reserve components are absolutely essential to our ability to go out and meet particularly long-term missions as we've been dealing with over the last 13 years. A vast majority of very important parts of our capabilities are in the reserve component. And we not only don't want to go to war without them, frankly, we can't go to war without them. We have spent, I think rightfully so, a lot of Army resources in increasing their mission, their equipment on hand, and to increasing their training opportunities. And as we look to construct future budgets, we will continue that initiative, making them as much of an operationalized reserve as we possibly can.

The other thing we've done is that remember, we didn't take any force structure or reductions in the Guard in the first year of our efficiency retrenchment. So that was my directive to the chief and to our budget people that the overwhelming amount of efficiencies and cuts across the board have to come out of the active component and we've done that. Again, and what I believe is clear recognition of the invaluable support they provide.

So I have every confidence we'll work through this and continue to be a great Army.

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NAVY

24. Building 197: Navy Yard workers begin returning to the scene of a deadly rampage

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A1 | DeNeen L. Brown

They begin returning Monday to the place where they hid beneath desks, barricaded themselves behind office doors and fled down corridors as 12 colleagues were shot to death at the Washington Navy Yard.

Some Navy Yard workers are looking forward to going back to Building 197 and regaining a sense of normalcy 17 months after the shooting rampage.

Others are so traumatized that they can't bring themselves to reenter their old workplace, where contractor Aaron Alexis stalked cubicles, hallways and stairwells with a sawed-off Remington shotgun on Sept. 16, 2013.

Beth Ann Cordova lost two co-workers that day: Michael Arnold and Richard "Mike" Ridgell. A third person she is close to, Jennifer Bennett, was badly wounded.

Cordova, a 55-year-old executive assistant and data manager, said she will steel herself to head to her new desk inside the renovated building. But there are certain parts of Building 197 that she would rather avoid, even after a tour several weeks ago designed to ease her fears.

"I did not wish to go anywhere near where Jennifer had been shot, and I still don't," Cordova said. "He hurt my friend. I could have lost her."

Cordova knows a group of people who refuse to go back to Building 197, the headquarters of the Naval Sea Systems Command. The Navy has accommodated their wishes by transferring them to other jobs in other buildings, said Vice Adm. William Hilarides, who leads NAVSEA.

Dozens of other workers have retired rather than return, even as the Navy has completed a \$6.4 million renovation of the building to erase the worst memories of the mentally ill Alexis, 34, who was killed that day by police.

The overhaul of the building includes new offices, doors, windows, carpet and paint. Even the entrance, where Ridgell, a 52-year-old security guard, was killed, has been moved. Outside, there are concrete steps, benches and windows where the entrance used to be.

"In fact, you can't find vestiges of it," Hilarides said. "Several of our folks dragged Mike out after he had been shot and tried to save him in the parking garage. So there is a lot of emotion about that."

About 2,800 workers are expected to return to the sprawling building Monday. Inside the entry area, there is a space dedicated to the 12 people who died in the shooting: Ridgell, Arnold, Martin Bodrog, Arthur Daniels Sr., Sylvia Frasier, Kathleen Nark Gaarde, John Roger Johnson, Mary Frances DeLorenzo Knight, Frank Kohler, Vishnu Pandit, Kenneth Bernard Proctor Sr. and Gerald Read. The memorial was unveiled Sunday to the victims' families.

The building's redesign includes soothing new paint colors - daffodil yellow, freshwater blue, parakeet apple green. There is a new cafeteria and visitors' center near a Starbucks kiosk. Soundproof glass walls enclose a former atrium to help reduce noise.

The building has been renamed in honor of Joshua Humphreys, who designed the first Navy frigates. Hilarides said a new name was an important reminder of NAVSEA's resilience.

A task force of NAVSEA employees oversaw the renovation of the historic brick building, which had been used during World War II to assemble guns for battleships.

During the renovation, Building 197's workers were relocated to a former Coast Guard facility at Buzzard Point in Southwest Washington.

On Saturday, movers began carrying in files and installing computers for the first wave of returning workers, said Rory O'Connor, a NAVSEA spokesman. Other workers will return on a staggered weekly move-in schedule over the next nine weeks.

Hilarides acknowledged that some workers are struggling with the return. To help, NAVSEA organized groups of workers to tour the building in small groups in recent weeks.

"We didn't want anyone to say, 'The first day I go back in the building is the first day I go back to work,' " he said.

Cordova said her tour was extremely helpful. "I was on the 'Who's going to have a problem?' tour, " said Cordova, who was reassured by all the changes she found. "It looked different, and I thought, 'I can deal with this.' "

But not everyone came to that conclusion. One woman on a different tour started having an anxiety attack a quarter of the way through the first floor and had to leave, according to someone who was with her. She isn't scheduled to move into the building until March and will try to visit again.

Accommodations are being made for those too traumatized to return, Hilarides said.

"The people who knew themselves well enough and said, 'I could never go back' have found a new path," Hilarides said. "Many have retired."

O'Connor said that 132 employees retired between Sept. 15, 2013, and Dec. 31, 2014 - but officials could not break out how many were prompted by the shooting. Some had been offered early retirements to help with budget cuts.

Some workers said they were eager for the return, which would provide them with a sense of closure.

"I'm fine with returning to the building," said Marine Col. Dave Thompson. "I'm looking forward to being back in a more stable and permanent setting."

Nidak Sumrean, director of cost engineering and industrial analysis for NAVSEA, said he, too, would welcome a new normal. "For me," Sumrean said, "getting people back into the building will allow us to finally come to closure after this bad situation."

Paul Anderson, a Navy commander and chaplain, said support teams, including chaplains and employee assistance personnel, will help people "reinhabit" the building.

"The Navy has done a wonderful job of re-creating that space so that it won't be haunted by memories and by the unresolved emotions of people who were there that day," Anderson said. "They have done a herculean effort at reclaiming and rededicating that space. There may be people so traumatized they don't feel comfortable about being back in there. Some will have to figure out ways to expunge their fear. But the institution has done as much as they can to make the building a safe place."

Many NAVSEA employees have healed by sharing stories from the day of the shooting, said Hilarides, who was locked down in his office with 12 people for more than two tense hours.

"There was a feeling of powerlessness," he recalled. "I'm in command of 60,000 people, and I can do nothing. I'm locked down with my phone."

Ultimately, Hilarides said, the shooting has made NAVSEA a more resilient organization. "To make very, very strong steel, you put it in the fire. You bang it with a hammer," he said. "I see this event as tragic. It has forged us into a family."

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NATO

25. NATO sees resilience as key issue in AWACS replacement

Reuters, Feb. 1 | Andrea Shalal

WASHINGTON - Resilience, innovation and advances in technology will be key factors as NATO maps out a multibillion-dollar effort to replace its aging fleet of 17 Boeing Co E-3 Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, a top NATO official told Reuters.

French General Jean-Paul Palomeros, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, said NATO was starting to map out its requirements for the next-generation of weapons to detect air and surface threats, which will be needed between 2030 and 2035.

Growing threats and greater ability to share information pointed to a so-called "system of systems" approach, rather than a straight one-for-one replacement of a few, highly visible aircraft that would be vulnerable to attack.

"This a very crucial project for NATO for the next two decades," Palomeros told Reuters last week at a conference in Washington hosted by the Center for a New American Security.

Rapid weapons development by Russia and other potential foes meant the next-generation weapons system would have to be more resilient to attacks, Palomeros said. Officials were also looking potential other uses for the aircraft, and whether intelligence analysts would be stationed on board, he said.

Boeing, Europe's Airbus, and other big weapons makers are keeping a close eye on NATO's emerging plans to buy new early-warning capabilities, one of the few larger acquisition programs in sight.

Palomeros said the program would be a test case for many NATO priorities, including a push for more innovation, expanded partnerships among members, and a drive to better balance spending among NATO members.

"The replacement for AWACS is a perfect project for trans-Atlantic cooperation. It opens a lot of doors," he said, adding officials had begun early conceptual work to shape the requirements for the new program.

France, Britain, the United States and other countries have their own early-warning systems, which could translate into more demand for the new weapons system in the future.

He said it would be crucial for NATO to carefully define what was expected from the new system, or it could result in a "very complex, unaffordable system" that would carry risk in development, production and even operations.

Palomeros acknowledged problems with some past multinational weapons development programs, like the Airbus A400M military transport plane.

But he said the success of the NATO Air Command and Control System, developed by a joint venture of France's Thales and U.S. weapons maker Raytheon Co, had proven that cooperative development programs could work.

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NOTABLE COMMENTARY

26. Mr. Putin Resumes His War in Ukraine

New York Times, Feb. 2, Pg. A18 | Editorial

The fighting in eastern Ukraine has flared up again, putting an end to any myth about the cease-fire that was supposed to be in force since September.

Though the Russian economy is staggering under the twinned onslaught of low oil prices and sanctions — or, conceivably, as a result of that onslaught — President Vladimir Putin has sharply cranked up his direct support for the rebels in the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, while continuing to baldly deny it and to blame all the violence on the United States.

Meanwhile, Ukraine is broke, and without the military means to move against the Russian-backed rebels. Most of the victims are civilians who struggle with hunger and dislocation in the rubble of the combat zones and die in the constant exchanges of shells and rockets.

The eruption of fighting in recent weeks, which was not supposed to happen until spring, has given new force to pleas to the Obama administration to give Ukraine the means to resist Mr. Putin — in money and in arms.

Certainly the United States and Europe should increase their aid to Ukraine and explore ways to expand existing sanctions against Russia. NATO's commander, Gen. Philip Breedlove, is said to support providing weapons and equipment to Kiev. And Secretary of State John Kerry is said to be open to discussing the idea. But lethal assistance could open a dangerous new chapter in the struggle — a chapter Mr. Putin would quite possibly welcome, as it would "confirm" his propaganda claims of Western aggression.

So far, President Obama has cautiously pledged to help Ukraine in every way "short of military confrontation." Yet with sanctions and diplomacy making no headway against Russian aggression, it is imperative that the United States and its allies take a new look at what would bring Russia to a serious negotiation.

The first question is, to negotiate what? Along with denying the direct involvement of his troops in eastern Ukraine, Mr. Putin has not made clear what he is trying to achieve. Russian officials have suggested that Moscow has no interest in annexing eastern Ukraine, the way it grabbed Crimea, but rather seeks a Ukrainian federation in which the pro-Russian provinces would have relative autonomy, along with assurances that Ukraine will not move to join NATO.

There is definitely potential for negotiations there. Yet the latest rebel attacks have focused on Mariupol, an important port on the Black Sea, and on expanding the rebels' control to areas that would give their self-proclaimed "republics" greater military and economic cohesion. And that speaks to long-term rebel occupation.

Tempting as it is to focus on punishing Mr. Putin, the greater objective must be to end the fighting so that Ukraine can finally undertake the arduous task of reforming and reviving its economy. Toward that end, the West must

make clear to Mr. Putin that if a federation is his goal, the United States and its allies will actively use their good offices with Kiev to seek a workable arrangement.

But if the evidence continues to accumulate that Mr. Putin and the rebels are carving out a permanent rebel-held enclave in eastern Ukraine, à la Transnistria, Abkhazia or South Ossetia, he must know that the United States and Europe will be compelled to increase the cost.

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27. Six Ways to Help Ukraine Resist Russia's Latest Invasion

Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, Pg. A13 | David Kramer

European Union foreign ministers failed to agree Thursday on new sanctions in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine—including recent rocket attacks on the city of Mariupol that killed 30 civilians. The ministers lamely extended by six months existing sanctions against individuals and companies in Russia and their cronies in eastern Ukraine.

In a Jan. 25 statement, President Obama said that the separatists in Ukraine who broke a cease fire had “Russian backing, Russian equipment, Russian financing, Russian training and Russian troops,” and that he will “look at all additional options that are available to us short of military confrontation and try to address this issue.” All talk, as was Mr. Obama's bragging in his State of the Union address that “we're upholding the principle that bigger nations can't bully the small—by opposing Russian aggression, and supporting Ukraine's democracy,” and standing “strong and united with our allies, while Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters.”

The president's boast was followed by a major increase in Russian aggression against Ukraine. As former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk—and current president of the European Union—tweeted after the Mariupol attack: “Once again, appeasement encourages the aggressor to greater acts of violence. Time to step up our policy based on cold facts, not illusions.”

There is no question that the current sanctions, combined with the significant decline in the price of oil, are hurting Russia's economy. But they have not changed Russian President Vladimir Putin's calculus toward Ukraine. Citizens in the embattled cities of Donetsk and Luhansk have also experienced an uptick in fighting between Ukrainian and Russian forces. On Jan. 23 the United Nations put the death toll from fighting at close to 5,100 since mid-April, 262 in the past two weeks alone.

The West needs to respond immediately to prevent the situation from getting worse. Here are six recommendations, some the U.S. can do alone and others with its European and other allies:

- Mr. Obama should reverse his single-biggest mistake in this crisis: his refusal to provide Ukraine with military help. Rejecting requests for antitank and anti-aircraft weapons and other defensive systems has abandoned Ukrainians in their time of greatest need. It has also telegraphed to Mr. Putin American limits to helping Kiev. Had the U.S. provided such help months ago, Russian forces would have paid an even steeper price for aggression and might not be ramping up their assault now. We also need to provide much more intelligence so Ukrainian forces can better prepare for the next attack.
- NATO and the U.S. need to release publicly much more evidence about the Russian forces who are inside Ukraine and attacking it from outside. The failure to provide hard evidence allows Russian officials to deny

their presence and prompts journalists, in their misguided pursuit of “balance,” to cite Russian denials. The U.S. has satellites and other means to expose Russia's invasion—and it needs to declassify and release this proof.

- Gazprom, the Russian energy company, and its head Alexei Miller, should be added to the sanctions list. The Europeans may hesitate because of their reliance on Russian gas, but the U.S. should move ahead, even unilaterally. Gazprom cut off gas to Ukraine last summer—and while the taps have been reopened, they could be switched off again in a minute. Listing Gazprom would end its ability to strike new deals with Turkey and other countries.
- Russia should be excluded from the global system to process payments—known as Swift. This would cripple Russian banking and finance.
- Russian officials at the highest levels should be added to the Western visa ban and asset-freeze lists. This should start with Mr. Putin, who has a fortune in the tens of billions, according to a New York Times report in April last year citing officials who had seen a secret CIA assessment in 2007 of the Russian leader's wealth. Mr. Putin needs to be treated like the pariah he is. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov should be included; there is no value to engaging with him because nothing he says is true nor has he any influence with Mr. Putin's inner circle. Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu should also be added, since many of Russia's forces in Ukraine fall under his command.
- Mr. Putin's latest moves in Ukraine should end careless talk about easing sanctions against his regime. A paper leaked from the European Foreign Affairs Council in January suggested ways to resume broader contacts with Russia even though Mr. Putin had failed to abide by a Sept. 5 cease-fire agreement. Talk of a return to business as usual tells Mr. Putin he can wait out the West. Fortunately, even before Russia's most-recent aggression brought some EU members to their senses, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the leaders of Poland, the Baltic states and U.K. have held firm against such softening.

Calls for financial assistance to Ukraine are vital and should not be forgotten. But much more urgent is the need to help Ukraine defend itself against the Russian military threat and invasion. Vladimir Putin may be leading Russia over an economic cliff, but we must make sure he does not take Ukraine with it.

--Mr. Kramer is senior director for human rights and democracy at the McCain Institute, in Washington, D.C

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28. Hamas girds for war

As Gazans suffer, a chance to break a tragic cycle is lost

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A14 | Editorial

The Post's William Booth witnessed a chilling event in the Gaza Strip on Thursday: thousands of youths lined up "in crisp military fashion" for a "graduation ceremony" after a week of training by the armed wing of the Hamas movement. Even as thousands of Gazan families struggle to survive amid the rubble of last summer's war with Israel, and children are reported to be dying from exposure, Hamas is once again investing its resources in preparing for another unwinnable battle.

That this is happening is yet another indictment of this Islamic terrorist movement, which has started three wars with Israel in six years while depriving the 1.8 million people on its devastated territory any hope of peaceful development. But it is also shameful evidence of the failure by other parties - from the Palestinian Authority and Israel to Egypt and the United States - to take steps to lift Gaza out of its tragic cycle of bloodshed and blockade.

Last year's war, which killed more than 2,000 Gazans and damaged or destroyed 124,000 homes, could have been a turning point. Israel pressed for Hamas's disarmament as part of a cease-fire; though that proved impossible, the United States and Egypt pressed a formula under which the Palestinian Authority would take over responsibility for security on the territory's border, allowing for an expansion of trade and humanitarian relief.

The deal never took hold. Hamas refused to give up its checkpoints on the border, while Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas chose to focus his energies on another empty diplomatic offensive at the United Nations rather than the more difficult work of restoring order in Gaza. The predictable result was that Egypt, ruled by a regime deeply hostile to Hamas, sealed its border and redoubled its effort to prevent smuggling, while Israel, worried about Hamas's rearmament, allowed only a fraction of the imports the United Nations says are needed for reconstruction.

International donors - above all, the Arab states - have meanwhile held back the reconstruction funding they pledged. The result was that the U.N. refugee relief agency in Gaza was forced to suspend payments to families last week. Its director, Robert Turner, issued a statement saying that "people are desperate and the international community cannot even provide the bare minimum - for example a repaired home in winter - let alone a lifting of the blockade, access to markets or freedom of movement."

U.N. officials, like much of the rest of the world, are quick to blame Israel for this horrific situation, even though Egypt's border "blockade" is tighter. It's certainly striking that while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is said to consider the danger of Iran so serious that it justifies his violation of diplomatic protocol to address a joint meeting of Congress, he appears to have no policy for Gaza - the source of the most lethal attacks on Israelis in recent years.

Israel, however, can hardly be expected to facilitate Hamas's relentless preparations for more war, to which concrete and other reconstruction materials have been diverted in the past. An Israeli official told Mr. Booth that Gazan workshops were "assembling new rockets as fast as they can" and that the strip's militias would be fully rearmed and trained within months. Sadly, that is likely to be the next time the world pays heed to Gaza - when war with Israel again erupts.

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29. The Case for Security Cooperation Abroad

"International-security dynamics and declining budgets make security cooperation more necessary than ever"

National Interest Online, Feb. 2 | Melissa G. Dalton

When legions of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants poured across eastern Syria into western Iraq last summer, the Iraqi army evaporated, despite over \$20 billion in U.S. training and equipment spent to build it over eleven years. Doubts have been raised about whether the U.S.-trained Afghan National Security Forces will effectively provide stability following the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan. With such a questionable track record, why should the United States continue to invest in security cooperation with foreign militaries?

The United States pursues security cooperation in 148 countries around the world to develop partner nations' capabilities, build relationships and interoperability and secure peacetime and contingency access to critical air,

land and sea nodes to protect U.S. national-security interests. Security cooperation can take the form of delivering training and equipment, conducting joint exercises and exchanges and advising ministries of defense. In terms of scale, it can range from building a military from scratch to providing niche capabilities to advising partners engaged in a war fight.

Even on the low end of the spectrum, security cooperation can be difficult and imperfect; the complexity only grows with the greater scale of engagement—the U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan were the largest security cooperation undertakings of the last seventy years. Frank dialogue between the United States and its security partners helps balance asymmetries of information and expectations, but gaps will remain and should be acknowledged. Some partners express frustrations with the pace of U.S. equipment deliveries. Some political leaders fear the risk of empowering their militaries beyond elite units that they can personally control. Moreover, institutional corruption and lack of prioritization of training and sustainment within partner nations can slow their development of capable forces through security-cooperation programs.

The United States and its partners often have difficulty synchronizing security-cooperation activities with political objectives, relying on security cooperation as a panacea or as a quick solution at the onset of a crisis, rather than addressing institutional or political problems that underlie the crisis. Whereas the United States views security cooperation as a tool to achieve broader U.S. objectives, a partner may view security cooperation as an entitlement. The United States may invest considerably in a partner military, but it may not yield leverage to influence partner behavior to achieve broader U.S. foreign-policy objectives. For example, \$1.3 billion in annual security assistance and cash flow—financing to Egypt has not enabled Washington to prevent Cairo from doubling down on authoritarianism in the last four years.

U.S. security cooperation works best when there is shared recognition of the problem and the partner owns the solution, and the partner is able to absorb and retain the material and training provided. While challenges certainly remain, the United States largely achieved its security objectives in “Plan Colombia,” a program specifically designed to combat narco-trafficking through training, advising and equipping Colombian security forces, in large part because the Colombian government took ownership and drove the initiative to improve the security situation. U.S. security cooperation enabled the Colombian security forces to grow, modernize and professionalize, combat armed insurgents and expand the government’s territorial control.

The United States has a particularly mixed record of using security cooperation to attempt to stabilize fragile states. It makes these investments based on the premise that it will not have to fight as many wars if it builds the capabilities and capacity of indigenous security forces.

However, recent analysis suggests security cooperation does more to stabilize countries where there are already relatively strong state institutions and capacity; security-cooperation investments may go further in reducing state fragility in Latin America, the Asia Pacific and Europe than they do in the Middle East and Africa, because the former have relatively more robust state institutions and capacity. With weak state institutions, Yemen’s government collapsed this month, despite an injection of \$343 million in U.S. security assistance in fiscal years 2011-2014. The same study contends that education, law-enforcement, counterterrorism and counternarcotics assistance may do more to reduce state fragility than influxes of equipment under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program—the latter designed more for improving capabilities for external defense and interoperability and ensuring access to a country. Such analysis underscores the importance of connecting different types of security-cooperation resources to the appropriate strategic objectives. Enacting the security-sector reform called for in Presidential Policy Directive 23 will strengthen the linkage between U.S. strategic priorities and security-

cooperation investments. Developing an effective assessment, monitoring and evaluation method for security cooperation resources could also help the United States achieve stronger alignment with its strategic objectives.

For all the problems security cooperation can present, why does the United States continue to invest in it? The answer is rooted in a fundamental principle of the post-WWII international system—that working with allies and partners toward common security goals enhances an individual state’s security, as well as U.S. security. Only the United States has the resources and demonstrated will to lead a security-cooperation effort with key allies and partners to reduce the risk of a security vacuum, the consequences of which we are seeing in Iraq and Syria today. Moreover, declining defense budgets have heightened the urgency of the United States and its security partners leveraging and synthesizing military capabilities where possible in support of shared interests, such as counterterrorism and the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The reality is, beyond building partnership capacity and capabilities in foreign militaries, security cooperation can advance U.S. national-security objectives. U.S. security cooperation in Northeast Asia has largely deterred North Korea and assured allies in that region for seven decades, though not without incident. U.S. security partnerships in the Gulf and Israel have on balance deterred Iranian aggression and prevented Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon to date, though Iran continues to foment instability in the region. Of course, none of these security-cooperation efforts work in isolation. Indeed, they have worked best when coupled with U.S. and international diplomatic and economic levers, and when the United States and its partner countries have strong political alignment on desired outcomes.

Security cooperation can yield force enabling and multiplying benefits through deepening relationships with allies and partners. It unlocks posture and access possibilities for U.S. forces in the event of crises and contingencies. Seven decades of security cooperation with Japan enabled the United States and Japan to respond to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011, given U.S. investments in Japan’s humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, lift and logistics capabilities. Security cooperation allows the United States to obtain intelligence and operational insights that would not otherwise be available, such as in the African Sahel. Perhaps most importantly, common security approaches build standards of trust and mutual responsibility in the international system. Trust and relationships solidified in the International Security Assistance Force coalition in Afghanistan enabled the United States to quickly rally and lead a coalition of allies and partners keen to combat ISIL’s brutality.

Finally, security cooperation is a relatively cost-effective tool in the U.S. force posture kit.

Because U.S. forces based overseas can combine their own training and activities with security cooperation with allies and partners, security cooperation incurs few costs to U.S. forces operating abroad. Under budgetary constraints, Department of Defense leaders have stressed the need to reprioritize limited assets and develop innovative ways of maintaining a forward presence to project power as the U.S. military rebuilds its readiness. As the United States considers how to right-size its global posture, security cooperation through periodic and strategically targeted joint exercises with allies and partners could provide a low-cost alternative to continued forward deployment of U.S. forces.

Inherently imperfect and difficult to execute, security cooperation can still advance U.S. national-security objectives. International-security dynamics and declining budgets make security cooperation more necessary than ever. The United States can certainly do far more to improve its strategic planning for security-cooperation investments, and it should be wary of the common trap of misaligned objectives and expectations with its security

partners. Yet, if on balance the United States enhances its own security through cooperation with foreign militaries, then the investments are worth the price.

--Melissa G. Dalton is a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow and a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

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30. A Democratic split over foreign policy

Washington Post, Feb. 2, Pg. A15 | Jackson Diehl

For more than two years, a breach has been opening between President Obama and the foreign policy establishment of the Democratic Party. Last week, as Russia pressed a new offensive in Ukraine and the Senate debated sanctions on Iran, it cracked open a little wider.

First came the introduction in the Senate, and lopsided passage by the Banking Committee, of a bill that would place new sanctions on Iran if no agreement limits its nuclear program by June. Though fiercely opposed by Obama, the measure, co-sponsored by Sen. Robert Menendez (N.J.), the senior Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, had won the express support of 13 other Democratic senators by the end of the week. A letter signed by Menendez plus nine of them pledged to delay a final floor vote until March 24, the deadline set by the administration for finalizing the framework of a bargain.

While that postponement avoided an immediate confrontation with Obama, the larger message of the senators was clear: They are "deeply skeptical," said the letter, that Obama will obtain adequate concessions from Tehran - despite what has been an increasingly single-minded diplomatic push.

At week's end came another de facto vote of no confidence: a report by eight foreign policy luminaries, due to be formally released today Monday, saying the president should "immediately change" his policy of refusing to supply Ukraine with weapons to defend its besieged eastern provinces. "Washington," it said bluntly, has "not devoted sufficient attention to the threat posed by Russia and its implications for Western security. This must change."

This rebuke was signed by Michèle Flournoy, the deputy defense secretary in Obama's first term; Ivo Daalder, his first-term NATO ambassador; and Strobe Talbott, a former deputy secretary of state who is president of the deep-blue Brookings Institution. It expanded on legislation calling for arms sales to Ukraine that passed Congress last month with sponsors that included Menendez and seven other Senate Democrats, including Carl Levin (Mich.), the ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, and Richard Durbin (Ill.), the second-ranking Senate Democrat.

The Democratic rebellion against Obama's policies began with Syria and Obama's refusal to provide support to rebels battling the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Obama's rejection in 2012 of a proposal by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then-CIA Director David Petraeus to train and arm the rebels alienated a wide swath of the Democratic foreign policy mainstream - including Levin, who has campaigned for creating a no-fly zone in northern Syria, and Rep. Adam Smith (Wash.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee. Smith called for a formal Pentagon training program for Syrian rebels a year before Obama finally agreed to it.

The dissension now encompasses Ukraine, where Obama is seen as having been too slow and limited in his response to Russia's gross violation of international treaties guaranteeing European borders, and, even more so, Iran

- where a growing number of Democrats worry that Obama is offering too-generous terms while failing to challenge Iran's conventional aggression in the Middle East, at the expense of Israel and traditional U.S. Arab allies.

The rift is not particularly ideological; this is not a case of Clinton and center-right allies facing off against Obama and the party's more liberal wing, as during the 2008 presidential primaries. Levin was a staunch opponent of the Iraq war, as was Daalder. Smith has been a strong Obama supporter. One of the co-sponsors of the arms-for-Ukraine legislation was Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), one of the most liberal members of the caucus.

Rather, it has more to do with Obama's extreme caution in responding to international challenges, as in Syria and Ukraine; and his radical faith that longstanding U.S. adversaries can be converted into strategic partners. Obama's reaction to the Iraq war, which has been to avoid even indirect U.S. military engagement in all other international conflicts, has had the effect of creating common cause between anti-Iraq doves like Levin and Daalder and relative hawks such as Clinton.

Similarly, Obama's belief that Iran, if granted its nuclear infrastructure and what it regards as its rightful place in the Middle East, will play a constructive role in ending the wars in Syria and Iraq looks scary not just to senators like Menendez but also to longtime Obama allies like Virginia's Tim Kaine, who said in a recent Senate hearing that he had "a series of very significant concerns" about the emerging deal with Tehran.

So far, there's little sign that the Democratic criticism has had much effect on Obama. He's still balking at significant intervention in Syria, still refusing even defensive weapons for Ukraine, still intently focused on cutting a deal with Iran. If and when that comes, the showdown with his own party may begin.

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