

China Says Silk Road Not Geopolitical Tool, Understands Concerns

BEIJING - China's Belt and Road project is not a "geopolitical tool" or a debt crisis for participating nations, but Beijing welcomes constructive suggestions on how to address concerns over the initiative, the government's top diplomat said on Friday.

Beijing will host a Belt and Road summit next week which 37 foreign leaders will attend, including some of China's closest allies, though the United States which has been critical of the project is only sending low level representatives.

The Belt and Road Initiative, as it is formally called, is a key initiative of President Xi Jinping, and envisions rebuilding the old Silk Road to connect China with Asia, Europe and



beyond with massive infrastructure spending. But it has proved controversial in many

Western capitals, particularly Washington, which views it as merely a means to spread Chinese influence abroad and saddle coun-

tries with unsustainable debt through nontransparent projects.

The United States has been particularly critical of Italy's decision to sign up to the plan last month, during Xi's visit to Rome, the first for a G7 nation. Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi, the government's top diplomat, told reporters that the Belt and Road scheme had brought real benefits to participating countries.

"This partnership relationship is not a geopolitical tool, but a platform for cooperation," he said.

"You can't put hats like 'debt crises' onto the head of the Belt and Road, and this is not something any participating country would recognize," Wang added. (Reuters)

Japan Using Emperor, First Lady's Birthday to Court Trump

TOKYO - Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is scheduling a rushed visit to Washington to meet with President Donald Trump and celebrate first lady Melania Trump's birthday, and then is inviting him to be first foreign leader to meet Japan's new emperor, the two countries announced Friday.

Without close friends in Asia, Abe is seen as using every opportunity, even the emperor's accession, to court Trump. Tokyo and Washington said Friday that Trump and the first lady will

make a state visit to Japan at the end of May, just weeks after Crown Prince Naruhito ascends Japan's Chrysanthemum throne. Naruhito's 85-year-old father, Emperor Akihito, is ending his three-decade reign on April 30 by abdicating. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said receiving Trump as the first state guest of the new imperial era would "symbolize the unshakable bond of the Japan-U.S. alliance."

Japanese officials are also... (More on P4)... (14)

Putin, Kim to Discuss Bilateral Ties, Korean Denuclearization: Kremlin

MOSCOW - Russian President Vladimir Putin and top leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Jong Un will discuss bilateral relations, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and regional cooperation, the Kremlin said Friday. "The baggage for discussion is very extensive. Here we must still remember first of all that we are talking about negotiations of the heads of neighboring states with an extensive joint border,"

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"There is no doubt that Russia will be ready to do everything to promote the process of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula to the best of its abilities," he added.

On Thursday, the Kremlin said that Kim will meet Putin before the end of April.

It will be the first official meeting between Kim and Putin.

Peskov said that the non-disclosure of infor-



mation about the place and exact date of the meeting between the two leaders is related to security concerns. But he said that the meeting will take place in Russia. Speculation has grown that the meeting could take place in the Russian Far East city of Vladivostok. (Xinhua)

Investigators Think Electrical Short-Circuit Most Likely Caused Notre Dame Fire – French Official



PARIS - Investigators believe that an electrical short-circuit likely caused the fire that partially destroyed Paris' iconic Notre Dame Ca-

thedral, a French official has said. An earlier investigation too found no evidence of foul play.

Speaking to the Associated Press, the judicial

police official said that investigators are still unable to search through rubble inside the cathedral for safety reasons. The devastating blaze ravaged the centuries-old building on Monday, gutting the cathedral's insides, completely destroying the spire and large sections of the roof. A preliminary investigation of the scene on Tuesday found no immediate signs of arson, the city's public prosecutor said. More than 50 people are still investigating the fire, which broke

out while the landmark cathedral was under reconstruction.

French President Emmanuel Macron has pledged to rebuild Notre Dame within five years "even more beautiful than before." Donations towards the church's reconstruction have flowed in from the private sector too. French businessman Francois-Henri Pinault has pledged €100 million and fellow billionaire Bernard Arnault offered €200 million towards the restoration. (RT)

Brunei Ranked 7 in ASEAN for Broadband Speed

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN - Brunei was ranked seventh among Southeast Asian countries for fixed broadband speed for March this year. Speedtest.net released their monthly Global Index for mobile and fixed broadband speeds on Friday which showed that Brunei experienced download speeds of 19.03 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 12.01 Mbps for March. The global average for the month was 57.91 Mbps and 28.68 Mbps

respectively.

The figure sees Brunei jump six places from February to 103rd globally out of 178 countries.

It also places the sultanate behind Singapore (199.62 Mbps), Thailand (76.72 Mbps), Malaysia (67.15 Mbps), Vietnam (27.60 Mbps), Laos (22.92 Mbps) and the Philippines (19.03 Mbps) in the region.

The index ranks Singapore as the country with the fastest internet speeds in the world.

Brunei's mobile download... (More on P4)... (15)

Neighbor News

Research in IT Pivotal for Socioeconomic Uplift, Poverty Alleviation: President

ISLAMABAD - President Dr Arif Alvi Friday said research in the field of Information Technology (IT) was pivotal for socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation in the country.

He said this during a briefing by Prime Minister's Task Force on IT and Telecom, at Aiwan-e-Sadr.

Federal Minister for Information Technology and Telecommunication, Dr Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, was also present. The president underscored that the government was cognizant of the potential and significance of IT sector and had made it a national priority.

He said the 4th Industrial Revolution was changing the way that we lived and worked. Emphasizing that new technologies were powerful agents of good, he underlined the need for new ideas and initiatives to meet the requirements of these new technologies. The president said the basic objective of the Task Force was to reduce poverty and expand business by reviewing the existing IT and Telecom structure and making recommendations for its improvement. He assured the Task Force of every possible support in fulfilling its mandate. (Monitoring Desk)

Iran, Oman Sign Mou to Broaden Military Ties

TEHRAN - Iranian and Omani officials signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Friday to expand their military cooperation.

The Iranian high-ranking delegation headed by Deputy Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Brigadier-General Ghadir Nezami had a trip to Muscat to attend Iran-Oman annual military friendship committee.

During its stay in Oman,

Iranian delegation held talks with Brigadier Hamad bin Rashid al Balushi, Assistant SAF Chief of Staff for Operations and Planning of Omani General Staff, Omni deputy foreign minister, commanders of air and ground forces and Chairman of Consultative Assembly of Oman Khalid Al Mawali on developing all-out ties between armed forces. (IRNA)

S. Korea to Help Turkmenistan with Commercialization of 5G Mobile Communication

ASHGABAT - The Republic of Korea will help Turkmenistan with the commercialization of 5G mobile communications, Trend reports referring to a joint statement by the presidents of the two countries.

South Korean President Moon Jae-is who is on a state visit in Turkmenistan on April 16-18, held talks with his Turkmen counterpart Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.

The parties expressed their wish that, with the Republic of Korea sharing the world's first experience in commercialization of 5G mobile communications, the parties may successfully respond to the challenges arising from the fourth industrial revolution use of the opportunity for inclusive innovation growth in the long run, the document says.

It was remarked that science, technology and information and communication technologies are the key driving force for economic and social pro-

gress, and for the development of innovations in both countries. The parties also highlighted the need for a joint response to the new technologies' on people, industry and society.

As was reported earlier, Turkmenistan's national mobile operator Allyn Asyr (IM CELL) purchased 100 base stations with its own funds for deploying mobile communications in the territory of Ahal, Balkan and Dashoguz regions of Turkmenistan. This year, the base stations will be purchased using a credit line allocated by the Islamic Development Bank (IDB). Within the framework of the large-scale "Development of telecommunication networks of Turkmenistan" project, Allyn Asyr plans to ensure widespread introduction of this type of communication in Turkmenistan including 3G, 4G and, in the near future, 5G-speed Internet and other services. (Trend)

Belarus' Lukashenko: Presidential Election Will Take Place in 2020

MINSK - Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Friday that the country's presidential elections would be held in 2020 as planned.

Speaking at his state-of-the-nation address, Lukashenko said parliamentary elections would be held later this year. (Reuters)

Thai King Confers Awards on Two Australian Divers for Rescue of Cave Boys

BANGKOK - Two Australian cave divers who were instrumental in the rescue last year of 12 Thai boys and their soccer coach from a flooded cave received on Friday a royal honor from King Maha Vajiralongkorn in a ceremony in Bangkok.

The "Wild Boars" soccer team, aged between 11 and 16, and their 25-year-old coach became trapped on June 23 while exploring the cave complex in the northern province of Chiang Rai when a rainy season downpour flooded the tunnels.

A 17-day effort to rescue them gripped the world with experts from various countries volunteering to help.

Richard Harris and Craig Challen were members of the main rescue team, made up of 13 foreign divers and five Thai navy divers, that brought the boys and their coach out to safety.

They received the Most Admirable Order of the Direkgunabhorn at Bangkok's Government House before meeting Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha in their first trip back to Thailand since the rescue. ... (More on P4)... (16)

North Korea Nuclear Impasse Looms over US-Japan Talks

WASHINGTON - Stalled negotiations over dismantling North Korea's nuclear program are looming over high-level talks between the U.S. and Japan.

Just a day after North Korea called for Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to be removed as President Donald Trump's top negotiator, he and acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan were meeting at the State Department Friday with their Japanese counterparts to plot a way forward.

U.S. officials say they



remain open to resuming the talks with North Korea but Pompeo has not yet reacted to the North Korean demand, which followed what it said was a test of a new tactical weapon.

The nuclear talks have been at an impasse since Trump's second summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un failed to reach an agreement in Vietnam in late February. (AP)

Ecuador Turns to Interpol to Arrest Former Foreign Minister & Assange Supporter Patino

QUITO - The former foreign minister of Ecuador will be placed on Interpol's Red Notice list, after fleeing the country for fear of prosecution, as the government of Lenin Moreno continues to crack down on Julian Assange's supporters.

"The attorney general's office began a criminal process against Ricardo Patino for the alleged crime of investigation," the office said in a statement on Thursday. "[Patino] had given a speech in which he instigated people to take over public institutions and

close roads."

Besides his alleged anti-government activities, Patino is also being sought for his supposed links to Swedish software developer Ola Bini, who was arrested last week on suspicions of 'hacking' for WikiLeaks.

While authorities conduct their investigation, the judge ordered Patino to be held in pre-trial detention. Patino, however, is nowhere to be found, after reportedly fleeing Ecuador to Peru on Wednesday night. Ecuador requested... (More on P4)... (13)

Ukraine Election Reality TV: Puppets and Chopped-Off Hands in Final Debate Warm-Up

KIEV - As the pre-election debate in the surreal Ukrainian presidential race draws close, comedian Volodymyr Zelensky and incumbent Petro Poroshenko are warming up before a final debate, cranking up the levels of absurdity.

Friday evening is gearing up to become the most spectacular political performance in Ukraine's modern history. For the past 20 days, Ukrainians have been treated to a show, which hasn't disappointed, up to its upcoming climax.

'Not sure he'll have a hand to shake' In a big, and otherwise mostly serious, interview on Thursday, Zelensky couldn't help but fire off one last sick burn. Asked whether he was ready to shake Poroshenko's hand after the debate, the joker recalled a bold promise Poroshenko made in 2017.

Rampant corruption under Poroshenko's post-Maidan rule is one of the main grievances that now has Zelensky massively ahead in the polls - estimates give him 73 percent against Poroshenko's 27.

So, who is whose puppet?

Accusing an opponent of being an oligarch's puppet is one of the top tropes of Ukraine's pre-election circus. Poroshenko maintains that billionaire Igor Kolomoysky is pulling Zelensky's strings, while Zelensky joked Poroshenko is in the pocket of businessman Oleg Svinarchuk (Gladkovsky). Kolomoysky... (More on P4)... (17)

French Airbus to Provide Uzbekistan with 34 New Helicopters

TASHKENT - French aircraft manufacturer Airbus will provide 34 helicopters to Uzbekistan, Trend reports via Uzbek media.

Yesterday the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov from France led by the co-chairman of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation and Secretary of State to the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Baptiste Lemoine.

"These are helicopters will help strengthening the sovereignty of Uzbekistan and also allow equipping services with transport, for example, for medical evacuation," Lemoine said. The helicopters will be

of Écureuil ("Squirrel") model. This helicopter is adapted for operation in high mountains and hot climate.

The helicopter, according to the manufacturer, is used for a wide range of tasks, including fire suppression, power line monitoring, cargo lifting, crop pollination, aerial video shooting, parachuting and geological prospecting.

The cost and delivery time of the helicopters has not yet been announced.

Moreover, Lemoine said that with the support of France, a project to develop an integrated hydropower plant management strategy will be implemented at the Charvak hydroelectric station in the Tashkent region. (Trend)