

'Now We're Switching It Up': US Carrier Enters Persian Gulf for 1st Time Since Iran Deal Withdrawal

WASHINGTON - As the two nations exchange open threats, the Pentagon has sent an aircraft carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf, while Iran stages "massive" naval drills in the region, with its fleet surveilling US ships.

The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS 'John C. Stennis,' belonging to the Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, arrived in the Persian Gulf on Friday. It became the first American warship of its type to cross the Strait of Hormuz and sail in the waters off the Iranian coast since US President Donald Trump pulled the nation out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program in May.

"We are trying to be more operationally unpredictable," said the fleet's spokesperson, Lieutenant Chloe Morgan, according to AP.



Noting the months-long absence of a US carrier group in the region, she hinted that this might change.

Reporters on board of the carrier said the ship was closely trailed by around 30 Iranian Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps vessels. AP said that the personnel of the boats "could be clearly seen" filming the US ship, and a drone was launched to surveil USS 'John C. Stennis.'

Israeli media reported that at some point an

Iranian ship fired missiles "at a distance" from the American strike group. It is unclear how far from the US ships the alleged shots happened. Tehran's Navy didn't respond to these reports, and the Pentagon didn't comment on whether the Iranian ships had engaged in threatening activities that day.

Washington's maneuvers are taking place simultaneously with Tehran's 'Great Prophet 12' naval drill. Described as 'massive' by Iranian media, the eight-day military exercise involves various ground and naval units operating in the Gulf and in southern Iran. The main phase of the wargame kicked off near Qeshm Island on Saturday, with troops practicing breaching an enemies' coastal defense. (Russia Today)

Russia Warns of Global Conflict over Nuclear Pact Collapse

MOSCOW - Russia said on Saturday that the scrapping of a Cold War era nuclear pact may lead to an arms race and direct confrontation between several global regions, after a proposal by Moscow was rejected in a United Nations vote. Moscow had put forward a resolution in support of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) which bans Moscow and Washington from stationing short- and intermediate-range, land-based missiles in

Europe. Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement that the UN had failed to vote in favor of the proposal. "A new blow has been dealt on the global architecture of security and stability. Now, with the collapse of the INF treaty, several global regions could be plunged into the arms race or even into a direct confrontation," it said. Washington has threatened to pull out of the accord, saying Moscow failed to comply with it. (Reuters)

OTTAWA - Allegations against China of cyber attacks reported by Canadian media were fabricated stories, which have seriously misled the public, the Chinese embassy in Ottawa said Friday in a statement.

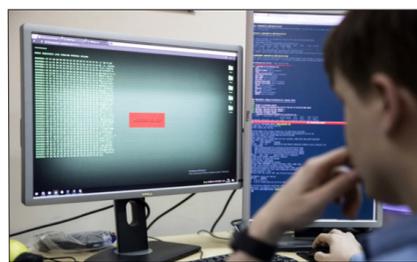
The Canadian media reported recently that U.S. authorities had indicted two Chinese nationals on the grounds of "cyber stealing." The reports also accused China of cyber

Chinese Embassy Rebuts "Cyber Attacks"- Report

attacks against Canada and alleged that China violated its pledge to stop state-sponsored cyber attacks to steal trade secrets and proprietary technologies from Canada's private sector.

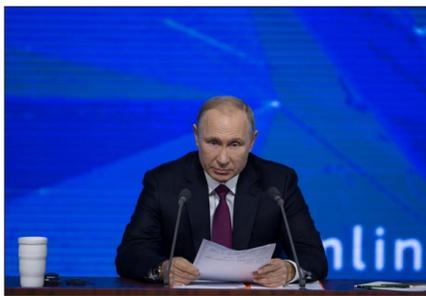
"China never conducted state-sponsored cyber attacks against Canada, let alone did it pledge that it would stop the relevant activities. One can not pledge to stop what he didn't do," the statement read.

On cyber-security is-



sue, China and Canada agreed that neither country's government would conduct or knowingly support cyber-enabled theft of intellectual property, including trade secrets or other confidential business information, with the intent of providing competitive advantages to companies or commercial sectors, it read. (Xinhua)

Putin Calls for Dialogue with Trump amid Worsening Russia-U.S. Relations



MOSCOW - Amid ongoing tense frictions between Moscow and Washington, Russian President Vladimir Putin appeals to his U.S.

counterpart Donald Trump to resume direct talks so as to discuss urgent issues on bilateral and international agendas.

Noting that the two countries "have reached the bottom of our relations" at his annual press conference Thursday, Putin reconfirmed his readiness for dialogue and said it is time for both sides to think with a clear head and start mending bilateral ties. Despite Putin's bona fide gesture, experts say it is difficult to restart bilateral high-level meetings, as Russia-U.S. relations will see a "gradual deterioration" in the foreseeable

future. "I have said many times that we are ready, and we believe that there are issues we must discuss together," Putin said. "Whatever happens, we have to build up bilateral relations and we are ready for it. We will start doing it as soon as the opposite party is ready," he added. As someone who got stood up twice in one month, Putin's agitation and eagerness are understandable. (Xinhua)

Turkey Says Nearly 300,000 Syrians Return Home after Military Operations

ISTANBUL - Nearly 300,000 Syrians have returned to their country after Turkey's two cross-border operations in northern Syria, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu was quoted as saying on Saturday. Turkey has carried out two operations, dubbed "Euphrates Shield" and "Olive Branch", against Kurdish YPG militia and Islamic State in northern Syria. Ankara regards the U.S.-backed YPG as a terrorist organization. Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refu-

gees who have fled the conflict in their homeland. Some Turks view them as an economic burden and a threat to jobs.

"The number of Syrians that returned to their country after the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations is 291,790," Soylu was quoted by state-owned Anadolu news agency as saying. The Turkish military pushed into Syria northwest in two offensives, carving out a de facto buffer zone. (Reuters)

UN Council Votes to Send Observers to Yemen

UNITED NATIONS (United States) - The UN Security Council on Friday unanimously approved a resolution that authorizes the deployment of observers to war-torn Yemen to oversee a fragile truce in the strategic Red Sea port of Hodeida. The draft, which was submitted by Britain, had been the subject of tough negotiations among the 15 council members, and was amended several times before the vote. It also endorses the results of UN-brokered peace negotiations in Sweden last week. (AFP)

Romanian Premier Looks to Support Serbia in EU Bid

BELGRADE, Serbia - Romania's Prime Minister Viorica Dancila says her country supports Serbia's bid join the European Union. Dancila was speaking after meeting with other Balkan leaders from Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia in the Serbian capital of Belgrade Saturday as part of a regular regional initiative to foster cooperation. Of the four, Serbia is looking to join the others in the EU. Romania takes over the EU's rotating presidency on Jan. 1, for six months and has leeway in setting the agenda. Officials say the meeting also focused on creating better transport links and cooperation on issues such as migration and energy. Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic also said agreement was reached to form a commission to prepare a joint bid to host soccer's European Championship in 2028 or the World Cup in 2030. (AP)

Japanese Navy Ship Visits India to Enhance Interoperability

NEW DELHI - Japan Navy Ship JMSDF (Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force) "Samidare" is on a visit to India to enhance the interoperability and friendship between the two countries' navies, said official sources of the Indian Navy (IN).

The Japanese ship visited the port city of Kochi in the southern state of Kerala.

During the stay at Kochi, various activities such as visit of IN specialists onboard JMSDF "Samidare" and professional interaction between the



two navies were conducted. The visiting foreign ship's crews were also given a guided tour of certain professional schools and the Naval Maritime Museum to familiarise them with IN's

method of imparting training to its personnel and preserving its naval heritage. The Japanese ship planned to depart for Bahrain on Saturday to participate in anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden. (Xinhua)

US to Give Ukraine Extra \$10mn for Naval Buildup in Response to Kerch Strait Incident

WASHINGTON - The US will provide \$10 million extra in military aid to help Ukraine beef up its naval capabilities, the State Department has announced, days after a Senate resolution called for such aid in response to the Kerch Strait incident.

Russia was ordered to "immediately return to Ukraine the seized vessels and detained Ukrainian crews" involved in last month's naval provocation and to allow Ukrainian ships to freely navigate the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov in Friday's statement from deputy State Department spokesperson Robert Pal-

ladino. The financial decision was made "in solidarity with" Lithuania and the UK, which also plan to step up their funding of the Ukrainian military, he added.

The State Department's announcement follows hints from Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council head Alexander Turchinov that the country might send more ships through the Kerch Strait soon, despite the tension. If Ukraine doesn't flex its muscles in the Azov, Turchinov told the BBC, Russia might "legitimize the occupation of Crimea." (Russia Today)

Neighbor News

Iran Executes Corrupt Businessman Dubbed 'Sultan of Bitumen'

TEHRAN - Iran has executed a corrupt businessman for appropriating more than 10 trillion rials (\$100 million) mainly by defrauding banks and a major oil refining firm. Hamid-Reza Baqeri-Dermani, nicknamed "the Sultan of Bitumen," was hanged on Saturday after conviction on the charge of "corruption on earth," which carries capital punishment.

The conviction had been issued by Tehran's Public and Revolution Court, which had studied the 25,000-page case concerning Dermani and his associates. The court found the sum through fraudulent activity, including form-

ing a fraud network, mass-scale smuggling, bribery, and setting up front and cardboard firms. The activities would enable him to value properties at far higher than their actual price before leasing them.

On one occasion, he secured a staggering bank loan using forged documents. The case had been lodged by a group comprising Jey Oil Refining Corporation, Meli and Tourism Banks, and two major exchanges. His lawyer had appealed the case, prompting a review by Branch 15 of the capital's Islamic Revolution Court, which upholder the verdict. (Press TV)

S&P Global Ratings Assigns Credit Ratings to Uzbekistan

TASHKENT - S&P Global Ratings assigned its 'BB-/B' long- and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings to Uzbekistan. The outlook is stable. The transfer and convertibility (T&C) assessment is 'BB-'.

The stable outlook reflects the agency's expectation that, over the next year, Uzbekistan's fiscal and external net asset positions will remain strong, albeit decline slightly, due to expected future current account deficits and government borrowing.

"We could raise the ratings if monetary policy effectiveness were to improve, for example through a decline in dollarization of the economy. Further diversification of the government's

revenue base or the composition of the economy's exports would also be supportive of the ratings," the agency said.

"We could lower the ratings if the fiscal or external positions deteriorated, for example if fiscal deficits increased beyond our base-case scenario or if higher-than-expected current account deficits led to an increase in external financing needs. We could also lower the ratings if we observed increasing weakness in key state-owned enterprises (SOEs), leading to growing contingent liabilities for the government," S&P Global Ratings said. "Our ratings on Uzbekistan are supported by the government's strong fiscal and external positions. (Trend)

Turkmenistan Supports Initiative to Create Modal Highway for Central Asia with Access to Turkey

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan supports the initiative of the International Road Transport Union to create the Modal Highway for Central Asia with access to Turkey, and is ready to provide the most effective support for the implementation of this project, Trend reports with reference to the Neutral Turkmenistan newspaper.

Ashgabat also calls for activating, within the framework of the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the discussion of various aspects of cre-

ating the Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey transport corridor.

At the same time, Turkmenistan is ready to act as an active partner and participant of the TRACECA program, since the formation of the western transport corridor from Central Asia plays a huge role in the context of the implementation of the goals to revive the Great Silk Road and connect the two economic poles of Eurasia on qualitatively new criteria. Turkmenistan has repeatedly become the host of major forums on the above topics. (Trend)

Pakistan Plans to Relax Visa Policy in Bid to Revive Tourism

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan is planning to ease visa restrictions for visitors from 55 countries, including most European nations, in a bid to revive tourism that was devastated by Islamist violence in the fallout from the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

"We are reviewing our visa policies. We are trying to bring 55 countries into a visa-free region, which includes most of the European countries," Pakistan's information minister, Fawad Chaudhry, told Reuters. That comes after Portugal this month declared Pakistan safe for travel, while France has also relaxed its advisory on travel to the South Asian nation. Potentially restarting tourism has

been one of the most talked about parts of new Prime Minister Imran Khan's push to create an Islamic welfare state in Pakistan, but visitors to the country often complain of an arduous visa process. Former Real Madrid soccer stars Kaka of Brazil and Portuguese playmaker Luis Figo were recently denied visas to the country for a promotional visit, Chaudhry said, highlighting the nation's laborious visa process. "We refused a visa to Kaka and Figo. Can you believe that? I called the section officer and he never heard of ... Kaka," Chaudhry said, laughing. "I spoke to the interior secretary yesterday and gave him a piece of my mind." (Reuters)

Respite in Paris as Yellow Vest Movement Abates

PARIS - The yellow vest protests, which have brought particular chaos to Paris over the past few weeks, abated Saturday, though one small gathering around the presidential palace did lead to police firing tear gas and using batons.

The number of protesters demonstrating on Paris' Champs Elysees, which has been a focal point, was down sharply on recent weeks as an appeal for a sixth straight Saturday of protests across France appeared to fall on deaf ears.

In stark contrast to the chaos of previous weekends, tourists strolled down the avenue near the Arc de Triomphe, shoppers were out in force and the grandest of Parisian boulevards remained open for traffic.

Protesters appeared disorganized, with scattered groups walking randomly across the capital city. A few hundred protesters cordoned by police forces marched toward the Madeleine Church near the Elysee Palace but were stopped in a small adjacent street as some shop owners closed down early. Tempers frayed and police with batons fired tear gas to repel a few demonstrators trying to break through the officers' line.

Despite the more benign backdrop, the protests are still having a knock-on effect. The palace of Versailles just outside Paris, for example, has been shut for the day after yellow vest protesters said they will hold a demonstration at the famous chateau that was home to succession of French kings until the French Revolution in 1789. (AP)