

## 'Allies Should be Reliable': Macron 'Regrets' Trump's Decision to Pull out of Syria

PARIS - French President Emmanuel Macron has bemoaned the decision by his US counterpart to withdraw troops from Syria. Such a move is unbecoming of any "ally," since they should be "reliable" and "fight shoulder to shoulder," he said.

"I very deeply regret the decision made on Syria," Macron said on Sunday, speaking at a news conference during his visit to Chad.

Earlier this week, Donald Trump announced his move to withdraw US troops from the country, citing the "defeat" of Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS). While the US president had promised to do this previously, the actual decision apparently caught many by surprise.

"To be allies is to fight shoulder



to shoulder. It's the most important thing for a head of state and head of the military,"

Macron stated. "An ally should be reliable." While berating Trump, the French president

also praised the outgoing US Secretary of Defense James Mattis and his resignation letter, in which he wrote about the importance of allies.

"I want here to pay tribute to General Mattis and the comments that accompanied his decision, for a year we have seen how he was a reliable partner," Macron said.

Paris will continue its operations in Syria, the president stated, reaffirming French support for the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia. French troops, believed to be quite low in number, remain in Syria without any mandate - just like the American ones - and are effectively occupying territories of a sovereign state. (Russia Today)

### South Korea Denies Radar Lock on Japanese Plane as Diplomats Meet

SEOUL - South Korea denied on Monday that one of its warships had locked its targeting radar on a Japanese patrol plane, which drew a strong protest from Tokyo amid increasingly frosty relations between the regional neighbors.

Last week's alleged radar incident joined a list of issues discussed by diplomats from the two countries at a meeting in South Korea's capital Seoul on Monday. Relations between the two U.S. allies have soured since South Korea's top court ruled in

October that a Japanese steel firm must compensate four South Koreans for their forced labor during World War Two. Japan denounced the ruling. On Friday, Japan's defense minister said a South Korean destroyer had locked its targeting radar on a Japanese patrol plane, calling the action extremely dangerous. South Korea's defense ministry, which said last week the destroyer was performing routine operations, on Monday provided more details of the vessel's actions. (Reuters)

### Thousands Evacuated Near Sydney High-Rise after Cracking Noises Spur Fears of Collapse

SYDNEY - Thousands of people living near Sydney's Olympic Park are facing an uncertain Christmas Eve after residents of a newly opened apartment building reported unsettling noises, generating fears of a possible collapse and prompting evacuations Monday. Emergency responders were called to the city's west side across the street from the site of the 2000 Sydney Olympics after residents reported hearing "cracking noises" during the morning, New

South Wales Police said in a statement.

A resident of the Opal Tower told the Nine News network he heard a "big bang" as if something in the building had "snapped."

Another resident told ABC News there were cracks on the building's 12th and 13th floors.

"I'm concerned, of course," he said. "A few days ago the doors looked different, like they couldn't close properly. And you do feel (movement) sometimes when there's strong wind."



Firefighters and engineers were expected to enter complex late Monday to examine what caused the reported cracks on its 10th floor and to determine whether the building is in danger of collapse. "It's not going to be done in minutes. Hopefully, it won't take longer than hours," Fire and Rescue Acting Inspector Greg Wright told reporters. (Fox News)

### London Airport Open, But Location of Drone Culprit Up in Air



LONDON - London's Gatwick Airport operated without problems Sunday, but the fugitive drone operators who brought incoming and outgoing

flights to a standstill over multiple days remained at large - and a potential threat - after police cleared two local residents who were arrested as sus-

pects. Sussex Police were hopeful they had halted the disruptive and costly drone incursions during one of the heaviest travel periods of the year with Friday's arrests of a couple who live near the airport. But they were released Sunday, and police said they were no longer suspects.

Tens of thousands of passengers suffered through long flight delays or were stranded by cancellations after two drones were reported seen above the airfield at Gatwick

on Wednesday night, prompting an immediate suspension of all air traffic.

Sussex Chief Detective Jason Tingley said Sunday he could not rule out new drone activity at Gatwick or other U.K. airports. He also said it was possible that witnesses who reported sightings after the first ones aroused alarm were mistaken.

"Of course, that's a possibility. We are working with human beings saying they have seen something," Tingley told the BBC. (AP)

### Lebanon's Berri Says Some Parties Do Not Want Government Formed

BEIRUT - Lebanon's parliament speaker said there are parties that do not want a new government, a newspaper reported on Monday, highlighting the obstacles that have derailed its formation after an agreement had seemed close. More than seven months since its last election, Lebanon, heavily indebted and suffering low economic growth, is in dire need of an administration to enact long-stalled reforms and put public debt on a sustainable footing.

Separately voicing his frustration at the crisis, Lebanon's Maronite patriarch said in his Christmas address that politicians were "masters in creating problems and obstacles" and did not care about losses suffered by the state and people.

Prime Minister-designate Saad al-Hariri has been seeking to finalize a deal on a government that splits portfolios among rival groups according to a sectarian power sharing system. (Reuters)

### Pilgrims Gather at Jesus's Traditional Birthplace for Christmas

BETHLEHEM (Palestinian Territories) - Pilgrims from across the world gathered in Bethlehem on Monday for Christmas Eve, taking in a parade and queueing to see the grotto where Jesus is believed to have been born. The Palestinian scouts and a bagpipe band paraded in Manger Square across from the Church of the Nativity, built at the traditional site of Jesus's birth. Crowds, some wearing Santa hats or holding balloons, looked on at the square decked out with a giant Christmas tree and a manger as carols in Arabic played through speakers.

The Catholic archbishop for the Holy Land, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, was due to arrive in the afternoon and will later lead midnight mass. (AFP)

### China's Legislature Takes Up Law to Ban Forced Tech Transfer

BEIJING - China's legislature is considering a law to ban local governments from forcing foreign companies to hand over technology, an issue that helped to spark Washington's tariff war with Beijing. Beijing rejects complaints companies are required to trade technology for market access. But officials including Premier Li Keqiang promised this year to crack down as tensions with Washington heated up.

A proposed foreign investment law taken up Sunday by the legislature would make clear officials cannot "force the transfer of technology" as a condition of ventures, the official Xinhua News Agency said. (AP)

### Asian Shares Mixed on US Partial Shutdown, Wall Street Slump

SINGAPORE - Asian stocks were mostly lower with light trading on Monday as a Wall Street slump and a partial U.S. government shutdown stemmed holiday cheer.

KEEPING SCORE: South Korea's Kospi dropped 0.2 percent to 2,058.19 while the Shanghai Composite index rose 0.1 percent to 2,519.71. Hong Kong's Hang Seng lost 0.7 percent to 25,572.50. Australia's S&P ASX 200 added 0.2 percent to 5,475.90. Stocks fell in Taiwan and Singapore. Markets in Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines were closed.



WALL STREET: The U.S. market ended its worst week in more than seven years on Friday, with major indexes plunging 7 percent. They've given up more than 12 percent in December. Sentiment was dampened by a range of factors,

including expectations for slower U.S. growth and the country's long-running trade dispute with China. The S&P 500 index slipped 2.1 percent to 2,416.62 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average was down 1.8 percent to 22,445.37. (AP)

### Santa Gets Pushed out as China's Leaders Emphasize Tradition

SHANGHAI - It took less than 24 hours for all the Christmas trees, lights and bells to disappear from a 27-story shopping and office complex in the Chinese city of Nanyang. Even the giant teddy bear at the mall entrance wasn't spared, said Ma Jun, who works at a tutoring company in the building. "Everything is gone and cleaned," she said. Christmas continues to be a shopping festival across most of China, with huge trees adorning shopping malls in Shanghai and Beijing, but a growing emphasis on traditional culture by the ruling Communist Party and the sys-

tematic suppression of religion under President Xi Jinping are imperiling Santa Claus's position. At least four Chinese cities and one county have ordered restrictions on Christmas celebrations this year, according to official notices and interviews. Students, teachers and parents from 10 schools around China told The Associated Press that Christmas celebrations have been curtailed. "The ongoing local reaction against Christmas is part of the wider sentiment since Xi took power," said Zi Yang, a China expert at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. (AP)

## Neighbor News

### No Threat, But Ready to Respond: Presence of US Carrier in The Persian Gulf 'Insignificant'

TEHRAN - Tehran views the recent arrival of the USS John C. Stennis in the Persian Gulf as non-threatening. Yet, Iran vowed to respond to any US action in the area as tensions remain high between the two adversaries.

"The presence of this warship is insignificant to us," Iran's deputy army chief for coordination affairs, Habibollah Sayyari said. He promised that the military won't allow the Nimitz-class warship to come near Iranian territorial waters in the Persian Gulf.

The high-ranking official explained that the US

navy was allowed to sail in international waters near the Islamic Republic, just as the Iranian navy could sail in the Atlantic Ocean near the US.

Yet, Iran is ready to repel any action the US Navy might be planning. "They do not have the courage or ability to take any measures against us. We have enough capabilities to stand against their actions and we have fully rehearsed for that," he added.

Sayyari's statement comes three days after the USS John C. Stennis arrived in the Persian Gulf on Friday. (Russia Today)

### Pakistani Ex-PM Nawaz Sharif Gets 7-Year Jail Term in Corruption Case: Lawyers

ISLAMABAD - An anti-graft court in Pakistan on Monday sentenced former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to seven years in prison on corruption charges related to owning a steel mills abroad, lawyers said.

The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) court in the capital Islamabad announced the verdict. Sharif, the three-time prime minister, was inside the accountability court when Judge Arshad Malik delivered the verdict. The police took him into custody after the judge announced the decision, defense lawyers in the court said.

Sharif requested the judge to keep him imprisoned in Lahore, the capital city of Punjab province, instead of the city of Rawalpindi near Islamabad. Legal experts say Sha-

arif has the right to challenge the conviction in the high court.

The case, known as the Al-Azizia Steel Mills references, relates to building a steel mills in Saudi Arabia, and the court ruled that Sharif had failed to provide money trail of the investment.

The mills had been established by Sharif's father Mian Muhammad Sharif in Saudi Arabia in 2001 and Sharif's son Hussain Nawaz was running the mills. Sharif family insisted that they had received investment from the Saudi government. The anti-graft body, however, claimed that Sharif family had illegally transferred the money to Saudi Arabia and that Nawaz Sharif was the real owner as he had received huge money from his sons. (Xinhua)

### Tajik Authorities Discuss Issues Related to Performance of Hajj 2019

DUSHANBE - Meeting to discuss issues related to performance of Hajj 2019 took place in Dushanbe at the end of last week, an official source in the Tajik government told Asia-Plus in an interview. Trend reports referring to news.tj.

Presided over by Deputy Prime Minister, Azim Ibrohim, the meeting reportedly brought together senior representatives of relevant ministries and agencies. Speaking at the meeting, Ibrohim noted that the main task of organizers of Hajj was in creating all necessary conditions for Tajik Haj pilgrims.

He reportedly ordered relevant government

bodies jointly with local authorities to inspect living and financial conditions of persons who want to perform the Hajj next year.

Ibrohim, in particular, noted that they last year received complaints from pilgrims about cases of untimely provision of medical aid and poor training of heads of groups. More than 6,200 Tajik nationals reportedly performed the Hajj this year. Recall, Tajik authorities in 2016 introduced new age restrictions for those who want to perform the Hajj. Citizens under the age of 40 are no longer allowed to perform the Hajj. (Trend)

### Europe Interested in Receiving Turkmen Gas: CIFAL Head

ASHGABAT - Europe is interested in receiving Turkmen gas, Jurgen Krahn, director general of French company CIFAL SA, said in an interview with Turkmenportal, Trend reports.

"This is an interesting project," he said. "After the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, the process of ratification of this treaty is underway in all the Caspian countries."

He noted that the agreement makes it possible to talk about the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline. "I think that if Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan can quickly agree, this process may begin," he said, adding that a new pe-

riod is beginning, which allows the EU and Turkmenistan to negotiate a new document.

"I think the signing of this framework agreement may take place next year," he noted. "In any case, the EU has great interest in this. As far as I know, a delegation of Turkmenistan recently visited Brussels, where it held talks. In Germany, as far as I know, there is also great interest in helping Turkmenistan." The project to lay a 300-kilometer gas pipeline along the bottom of the Caspian Sea to the shores of Azerbaijan is optimal for the delivery of Turkmen gas to the European market. (Trend)