

## Russia Says Will Host Putin-Erdogan-Rouhani Summit Early 2019

MOSCOW - Moscow will early next year host the leaders of Russia, Iran and Turkey to discuss the Syrian conflict, Russia's deputy foreign minister said Friday, after the United States announced it was withdrawing troops from the country.

"It's our turn to host the summit... around the first week of the year. This will depend on the schedules of the presidents," Mikhail Bogdanov was cited as saying by Interfax news agency. The meeting will be the latest step in the Astana peace process - set up in early 2017 by Russia and Iran, who support President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and opposition backer Turkey.

The Astana process was launched after Russia's military intervention in Syria tipped the



balance in the Damascus regime's favour. It has gradually eclipsed an earlier UN-sponsored negotiations framework known as the Geneva process. A Turkish delegation comprising foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and defence

minister Hulusi Akar is due in Moscow on Saturday to discuss the pullout of 2,000 US troops from Syria announced last week by President Donald Trump. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday refused to comment

on the move saying he was "waiting for actions to follow words."

"The Americans don't always do what they promise, far from that," he said. "Washington clearly wants to pass on the responsibilities on the ground to its partners in the coalition."

The last meeting between Russia's Vladimir Putin, Iran's Hassan Rouhani and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan took place in Iran in September with the fate of the rebel-held Idlib province dominating the agenda.

Trump in a shock announcement recently said he was pulling out some 2,000 American soldiers from Syria, claiming the Islamic State jihadists had been defeated. (AFP)

## Trump Has 'Black and White' World View: UK Foreign Minister

LONDON - British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt on Friday criticised Donald Trump's view of the world after the US president's announcement of a withdrawal of American troops from the fight against the Islamic State group in Syria.

"President Trump makes a speciality of talking in very black and white terms about what's happening in the world," Hunt told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

"We have made massive progress in the war against Daesh (Arabic acronym for IS), but it's not over and, although they have lost nearly all the territory they held, they still hold some territory and there is still some real risk," he said. "We have to continue to be vigilant," he added. Trump announced the pull-out last week, stunning allies including Britain and France who warned that the fight against jihadists in Syria was not finished. (AFP)

## China to Renovate Myanmar's Hospital in Central Region

NATMAUK - China will renovate and donate a township hospital in Natmauk, Myanmar's Magway region where national hero General Aung San was born. The renovation project of the township hospital in Natmauk will be jointly conducted by the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar and Myanmar-China Exchange and Co-operation Association. A new emergency patient ward will also be constructed along with the renovation project which will be completed

in next May. The hospital upgrade not only improves public health of the people in the region but also promotes friendship between China and Myanmar, Dr. Aung Moe Nyo, chief minister of Magway region said at the project launching ceremony on Friday. The hospital renovation project significantly represents a symbol of bilateral friendship of the two countries, and is the second of its kind after Daw Khin Kyi Women Hospital



in Yangon, also known as China-Myanmar Friendship Hospital, was upgraded by China in December last year, Chinese Ambassador Hong Liang said. Founded in 1982, the

Natmauk hospital was previously upgraded to be a 50-bed hospital in 2015. It has been providing health care services to about 350,000 local people since then. (Xinhua)

## Syria Military Says It Entered Flash-Point Kurdish-Led Town



BEIRUT - Syria's military announced Friday it entered the flash-point Kurdish-held town of Manbij and

raised the national flag there, where Turkey has threatened an offensive. A Kurdish official said the government troops

arrived only at the front lines. Ilham Ahmed, the senior Kurdish official, said the U.S. troops who patrol the town and the tense front line with Turkey-backed fighters have not withdrawn from Manbij. She said an agreement is being worked out with the Russians and the Syrian government that in case of a full U.S. withdrawal, the government would take over. "The aim is to ward off a Turkish offensive," Ahmed said. "If the

Turks' excuse is the (Kurdish militia), they will leave their posts to the government." There was no immediate comment from Turkey or the U.S., whose troops have been patrolling the town and the tense front line between Manbij and adjacent towns where Turkey-backed fighters were based. A resident of Manbij who spoke to The Associated Press from the town on condition of anonymity said there was no sign of government troops. (Fox News)

## Modi's Clampdown On E-Commerce in India May Not Win Back Votes of Small Retailers

NEW DELHI - India's new curbs on e-commerce companies may not be enough to win over small store owners and traders in next year's general election, with the key voting bloc still seething over what it sees as broken promises by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. From Feb. 1, e-commerce firms such as Amazon.com and Walmart-owned Flipkart Group will not be able to sell products from companies in which they have

an equity interest or form exclusive agreements with sellers. Intended to prevent predatory pricing and deep discounting, the curbs follow intense lobbying by India's many millions of small shopkeepers and the middlemen who serve them, particularly after Walmart this year spent \$16 billion to acquire Flipkart. The sector, which includes an estimated 25 million small store owners, largely supported Modi in the 2014 general election. (Reuters)

## Italy PM Backs Halting Arms Sales to Saudis

ROME - Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said on Friday his government was in favor of halting arms sales to Saudi Arabia and it intended to take a formal position on the matter. "We are not in favor of the sale of these weapons and so now it is only a question of formalizing this position and acting accordingly," Conte told reporters at the prime minister's traditional end-year news conference. He was answering a question on Italy's ongoing arms exports to Saudi Arabia in the light of its involvement in the conflict in Yemen and the murder of journalist Jamal Kashoggi. (Reuters)

## Germany, France Press Russia to Free Ukrainian Sailors

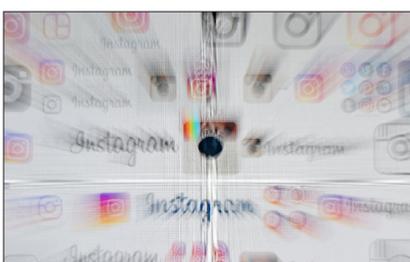
BERLIN - The leaders of Germany and France are pressing Russia to release Ukrainian sailors captured over a month ago in time for the new year and Orthodox Christmas.

In a joint statement Friday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron also vowed to keep up pressure to implement a 2015 peace deal for eastern Ukraine. The long-simmering conflict between Russia and Ukraine that started with Russia's annexation of Crimea escalated Nov. 25 when the Russian coast guard fired upon and seized three Ukrainian naval vessels and their crews. In Friday's statement, Merkel and Macron renewed calls for the "safe, free and unhindered passage of all ships" through the Kerch Strait that separates Crimea from mainland Russia and urged the "immediate and unconditional release of all illegally detained Ukrainian sailors." (AP)

## Instagram Blames 'Bug' for Design Change That Prompted Backlash

WASHINGTON - Instagram said Thursday it accidentally rolled out a design change to a large number of users and quickly ended the test after complaints from users of the Facebook-owned social network. The redesign required users to swipe horizontally instead of the normal vertical scroll to see their feed, befuddling many members of the photo- and video-sharing application, which has over one billion users worldwide.

The move ignited complaints on Twitter where the hashtag #InstagramUpdate became a top trending issue. Twitter user Jeffrey Star lamented "this #instagramupdate almost ruined



my morning!" while journalist Alex Heath of the online service Cheddar remarked that it "seems maybe intended to reduce mindless vertical scrolling?" Adam Mosseri, who heads Instagram for Facebook, tweeted that the new design was "a test that went to a few orders of magnitude more people than intended." "Sorry about that."

Instagram said a short time later that it had rolled back the redesign to the normal vertical scroll. "Due to a bug, some users saw a change to the way their feed appears today," said an Instagram message posted on Twitter. "We quickly fixed the issue and feed is back to normal. We apologize for any confusion." (AFP)

## UAE Reopens Damascus Embassy after Seven Years

DAMASCUS - The United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy in Damascus Thursday, the latest sign of efforts to bring the Syrian government back into the Arab fold.

The UAE broke ties with Syria in February 2012, as the repression of nationwide protests demanding regime change was escalating into

a devastating war.

Nearly seven years later, the Emirati flag was raised again during a ceremony attended by diplomats and journalists.

An acting charge d'affaires has already started working, an Emirati statement said, stressing that the UAE was "keen to put relations back on their normal track". (AFP)

## Neighbor News

### Pakistan to Launch Panda Bond in Yuan Currency

ISLAMABAD - For the first time in the country's history, Pakistan on Thursday approved launching of Panda Bond in Chinese-denominated Yuan currency with possible transaction size equivalent to \$500 million in two different tranches in order to finance its yawning trade deficit with Beijing. \$300 million for Pakistan's struggling economy. Pakistan's trade deficit with China stood at around 12 billion dollars per annum and Islamabad is asking for Asean level tariff reduction on its exportable items. China has recently granted market access during the premier's visit, helping Islamabad to boost its exports to China. The Ministry of Finance Adviser and official

spokesman, Dr Khaqan Najeeb, when contacted, said the government is successfully continuing its multi-pronged approach for bridging foreign financing needs and building foreign exchange reserves. He said Panda Bond's approval by the cabinet is a part of this strategy. He said this is a well-thought-out decision after several rounds of discussions with Chinese banks, investment groups, regulatory authorities in China and stock exchange and traditional financial advisers. The Panda bonds, he said, will help the government diversify investor base of capital market issuance and provide a source of raising Renminbi. (The News)

### Iran: President Trump's 'Sneak Trip' A Disrespect to Iraq

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi says a "sneak trip" by US President Donald Trump to Iraq Thursday was "outside diplomatic norms and a disrespect of the country's national sovereignty." "Despite countless interventions and thousands of billions of dollars the US has wasted on its illegitimate presence in the region and in particular in Iraq, Trump still has to visit a regional country in a total secret, or so to speak, sneaky way amid the tightest security measures," he said Friday. The visit, he said, was strongly opposed by the Iraqi people and widely criticized by experts. Trump made an unannounced three-hour visit to the al-Asad Air Base near Baghdad on

Thursday, sparking a wave of condemnation from Iraqi political and military leaders, with some of them demanding the expulsion of US forces. Qassemi strongly criticized Trump's "meddlesome and opportunist" remarks in Iraq and said "regional governments and nations will never allow aggressive and despicable outsiders to sow division among them." "It was the vigilant nations of the region - not the greedy US and its staunch support of terrorism - which managed to uproot terrorist groups created, equipped and financed by the US and the Zionists," he said. Qassemi said the regional nations routed terrorists by their timely understanding and synergizing of their material and spiritual powers. (Press TV)

### Turkmen, Uzbek Presidents Discuss Priorities of Economic Co-Op

ASHGABAT - Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and his Uzbek counterpart Shavkat Mirziyoyev discussed priority areas of bilateral relations between the countries by phone, Trend reports with reference to the Turkmen TV channel Altyn Asyr.

The heads of state noted the presence of solid potential for building up partnership in fuel and energy, industrial sector, transport and communications, agro-industry and implementation of large-scale joint projects. The parties exchanged views on topical issues

of the regional and global agenda. In this regard, the continued commitment of the two countries to co-ordinated interaction and mutual support within the UN, the CIS and other international organizations for ensuring global peace, security and sustainable development was emphasized. Trade between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan amounted to \$177.3 million in 2017, according to statistics. In April, the two countries signed contracts and memorandums providing for joint projects worth over \$250 million. (Trend)

### 2019 Declared 'Year of Active Investments and Social Development' in Uzbekistan

TASHKENT - In Uzbekistan, 2019 has been declared the "Year of Active Investments and Social Development", Trend reports with reference to the Uzbek media.

The announcement was made in the message of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Parliament. He noted that everyone should work to attract investment in the country and improve the investment climate. It should be noted that 2018 was declared the

"Year of Supporting Active Entrepreneurship, Innovative Ideas and Technologies" in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev said that in 2019 the country plans to utilize investments in the amount of 138 trillion soums, which is 16 percent more than in 2018. Moreover, the volume of foreign direct investments is expected at \$4.2 billion, which is 1.5 times more than in 2018. Also, Uzbekistan intends to put into operation 142 modern enterprises in 2019. (Trend)