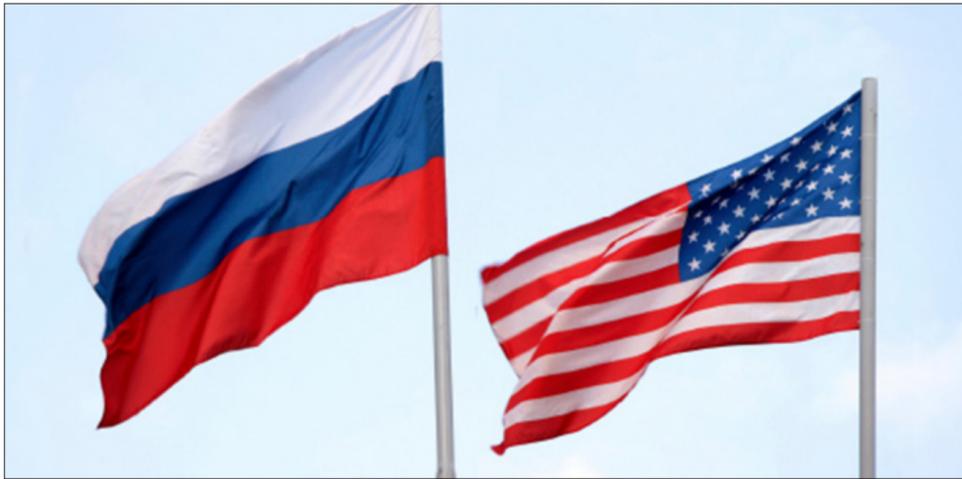


Russia Calls Worsening Ties with US a Major Disappointment

MOSCOW — The spokesman for President Vladimir Putin says the Kremlin views deteriorating relations with the United States as a major disappointment of the year.

Ties between Moscow and Washington soured to reach a post-Cold War low following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and allegations of election meddling in 2016. The two countries have been introducing tit-for-tat measures all year ranging from restrictions on embassy staff to legislation targeting state-owned media. Asked about the Kremlin's biggest disappointments of 2017, Dmitry Peskov told reporters that worsening ties with the U.S. are "certainly" on the list. Peskov reiterated the Kremlin's position that Russia seeks good relations with the U.S. based on "mutual trust and mutual respect" but said "it takes two to tango." (AP)



U.S. Recognizes "Poor" Relation with Russia, Still Seeking Cooperation on Syria

WASHINGTON — The United States, while maintaining "a poor relationship" with Russia, still needs to work with Russia in areas of mutual interests including Syria, said U.S. State Secretary Rex Tillerson on Thursday. Washington and Moscow remained widely confrontational this year amid the ongoing investigation of Russia's interference in the U.S. presidential election, the diplomatic row and the disagreements over issues including the eastern Ukraine.

Russian Foreign Minister

Sergey Lavrov has denied evidence exists of any Russian interference in the U.S. elections in 2016. The statement came after charges were filed in the U.S. against former aides of the Trump campaign. "The United States today has a poor relationship with a resurgent Russia," wrote Tillerson in a commentary published in the New York Times. "There cannot be business as usual with Russia" with absent a peaceful resolution of the Ukraine situation, the top U.S. diplomat added. (Xinhua)

Syria Aspires For Political Solution to Civil War after IS Collapse

DAMASCUS — The major achievement for Syria in 2017 was perhaps the defeat of the Islamic State (IS), a development that nourishes hopes and paves the way for a possible political solution to the nearly seven-year-old civil war in 2018, after several setbacks in the course of negotiations.

FALL OF IS

On Oct. 17, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the U.S., fully captured the northern city of Raqqa, almost three years after the terrorist group declared

the city as the capital of its self-styled caliphate in Syria. It took the SDF four months to defeat the IS in Raqqa, with the heavy backing of the U.S.-led anti-terror coalition. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor group, 3,250 people, including 1,130 civilians, were killed during the four-month intense battles in Raqqa. The London-based watchdog also said 80 percent of Raqqa was destroyed owing to the heavy bombing by both the SDF and the U.S.-led coalition.



In tandem with the SDF's attacks on Raqqa, the Russian-backed Syrian army was making strides in the battles against IS militants in the eastern province of Deir al-Zour, which boasts key oil and gas fields and was thus deemed as the economic capital of the IS. On Nov. 3, the Syrian army declared the liberation of the entire city of Deir al-Zour from the IS, after months of battles in the capital city that bears the same name with the province. (Xinhua)

Russia's Election Commission Gives Green Light to Putin's Campaign



MOSCOW — Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) has registered a group of voters who support the self-nomination of Russian President Vladimir Putin in the 2018 presidential election and

gave him permission to open a special account for the formation of the electoral fund. Thus, the commission allows him to officially launch the presidential campaign and collect sig-

natures of voters in his support, according to a video report of the CEC meeting posted on its website on Thursday. The commission registered a group of voters who support the self-nomination of Putin for the presidential race set for March 18, 2018. The initiative group of voters, which included more than 600 people, voted on Tuesday to nominate him as a candidate in the election. The commission also registered Putin's authorized representatives on financial issues and allowed him to open a special electoral ac-

count with the country's largest lender Sberbank needed to start collecting signatures of voters for registration at the elections. Under Russian legislation, the printing of subscription lists, promotion materials and all other paperwork should be paid from the electoral account. The size of its contents cannot exceed 400 million rubles (6.96 million U.S. dollars). On Wednesday, Putin submitted to the CEC documents needed to officially start his 2018 presidential campaign. (Xinhua)

Spend on Defense, Merkel's Allies Say, Widening Gap with SPD

BERLIN — Chancellor Angela Merkel's Bavarian sister party (CSU) has proposed increasing Germany's defense spending to a level that widens a policy gap with the Social Democrats (SPD) ahead of talks on forming a governing coalition. A deal between Merkel's conservative camp and the center-left (SPD) is her best chance of securing a fourth term in office but her possible coalition partners are angling for concessions before talks start in the new year.

The CSU said in a draft resolution seen by Reuters on Friday it wanted defense spending to reach NATO's target of 2 percent of national output and more money spent on the military, drones and transportation infrastructure. "Getting the best possible equipment, training and care for the soldiers as well as strengthening and modernizing the army costs money," read the draft, which urged an increase in the defense budget to achieve these goals. (Reuters)

Italy's President Dissolves Parliament, Clearing Way to Elections in 2018

ROME — Italian President Sergio Mattarella dissolved the parliament on Thursday, clearing the way towards general elections in March 2018.

The end of the legislature was expected, after Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni earlier on Thursday declared fulfillment of his cabinet's political mandate.

The dissolution of the Italian parliament — whose five-year term began in March 2013 — was a due step in order for the government to set the date for new elections.

After the announcement, the outgoing cabinet gathered in late afternoon, and set the election date on March 4, as widely expected. Holding a traditional end-year press conference in the morning, Gentiloni explained that his cabinet achieved the crucial goal of "bringing the legislature to an orderly end".

The outgoing prime minister also claimed his government — and the whole legislature, which saw three center-left cabinets coming in succession — brought about good results.

"Italy has recovered from its worst (economic) crisis since after World War II, also thanks to the efforts of Italian families and businesses," Gentiloni stressed.

"Our growth keeps now a solid pace, the double of what was expected at the beginning of the year."

"The gap between our growth rate and that of the euro-zone has more than halved in these last 5 years (since the beginning of the legislature)," he added.

Gentiloni urged all political forces and the next parliament "to not waste such efforts, nor put the achieved results at risk: the next legislature should not lack ambition, nor (the will of) reforms." (Xinhua)

First Session of New Catalan Parliament on Jan 17: Spain

MADRID — Spain's prime minister says he intends to call the first session for the new parliament of Spain's restive region of Catalonia on Jan. 17.

Mariano Rajoy made the announcement Friday, just over a week after Catalonia's regional parliamentary elections resulted in separatist parties winning most seats again.

Rajoy had ordered the elections upon firing the regional government and dissolving the previous parliament after it voted in October



to declare Catalonia an independent republic. But Rajoy saw his hopes dashed that separatists would not regain a majority.

It remains to be seen if the secessionist parties will be able to form a

government. Eight of their 70 elected deputies are either in flight from justice or in jail in Spain, including ousted former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont, who is in Brussels. (AP)

Turkey, Russia Sign Deal on Supply of S-400 Missiles

ANKARA — Turkey and Russia have signed an accord for Moscow to supply Ankara with S-400 surface-to-air missiles, CNN Turk and other media reported on Friday, finalizing a deal the two countries have been working on for more than a year.

The S-400 deal, reportedly worth about \$2.5 billion, has caused concern in the West because Turkey is a member of NATO and the system cannot be integrated into NATO's military architecture. It is the latest in a series of moves by Ankara to boost its defense capabilities as it faces threats from Kurdish and

Islamist militants at home and conflicts across its borders in Syria and Iraq. No details of the accord were available and officials were not immediately available to comment. But Sergei Chemezov, head of the Russian state conglomerate Rosstec, told the Kommersant daily on Wednesday Russia would supply Turkey with four batteries of S-400s under the deal.

He said Moscow was expected to begin the first deliveries in March 2020 and that Turkey was the first NATO member state to acquire the advanced S-400 missile system. (Reuters)

Brexit Department and Government Infighting Rages on as EU Trade Negotiations Loom

LONDON — Concerns have been raised that the Brexit Secretary David Davis is being sidelined ahead of trade talks which are set to begin next month.

It was revealed by The Times that the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, had held talks with former Brexit department official, Oliver Robbins.

Government sources suggested that Davis by playing on the tensions that already exist between him and Robbins as crucial trade talks loom.

In September, Oliver Robbins left as a senior figure in the Whitehall Brexit department to join Theresa May's team in Downing Street.

He has since formed an ever-growing team inside Number 10, as part of an attempt for Theresa May to have a more solid grasp on negotiations.

Government sources told The Times that "there are a few people in Brussels who fantasise about seeing David Davis being sidelined, but it isn't how the prime minister sees it. It isn't where Britain's national interest lies and it isn't happening."

However, the tensions between Robbins and Davis are clear. A separate source told The Times that May was taking a "more prominent" role in the ongoing talks, via Robbins. "That may mean [Davis] has had less of a role, but this process is still controlled by the politicians," the source said.

The next phase of the talks will focus on the long-term relationship between Britain and the EU. (Agencies)

Neighbor News

China Rejects Trump Accusation on N. Korea Sanction Breaches

BEIJING — China on Friday rejected accusations that it had helped Pyongyang skirt sanctions after US President Donald Trump claimed on Twitter that Beijing was turning a blind eye to oil transfers to North Korea. Trump's tweet was the latest salvo in his battle to persuade China to tighten the economic screws on Pyongyang over its missile and nuclear programme, in a campaign that has seen him heap both praise and criticism on Beijing.

"Caught RED HANDED" — very disappointed that China is allowing oil to go into North Korea," Trump wrote Thursday. "There will never be a friendly solution to the

North Korea problem if this continues to happen!" The United Nations — at the urging of the US — has imposed a series of sanctions against North Korea aimed at getting it to halt its weapons development.

China has supported the moves, but critics claim it is not rigidly enforcing the sanctions, fearful that too much pressure will cause the unpredictable regime to collapse. South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo, citing government sources in Seoul, reported earlier this week that US satellites had spotted Chinese ships selling oil to North Korean vessels at sea dozens of times since October. (AFP)

Pakistani Nation to Decide About Next Leader of Country in General Election: Asif

ISLAMABAD — Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif on Friday said that Pakistani nation would decide about the next leader of the country in general elections to be conducted in July, 2018.

The Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), government under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif had steered the country out of the crisis and resolved the energy issue, he said while talking to a private news channel.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), had pushed the country into darkness during its previous tenure, he said.

Khawaja Muhammad Asif said that Pakistan Tehrik e Insaaf (PTI), could not produce even a single mega watt electricity for Khyber Pakh-

tunkhawa areas. He said that PTI had been claiming to provide electricity even for other provinces but failed to deliver to the masses while running the government in KPK.

The Foreign Minister said that the people who were promoting the politics of sit-in, could not gain anything because the next elections would be conducted in July.

The people are the real powers who would decide the next leader of the country in 2018 general elections.

Commenting on Khurshid Shah objection regarding Nawaz Sharif visit, he said that the former Prime Minister and leader of Pakistan Muslim League-N, had good relations with Saudi Arabia. (Monitoring Desk)

Iran's Trade with ASEAN Sees Significant Growth

TEHRAN — Iran's trade with the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) has experienced a meaningful growth, reaching 2.63 billion U.S. dollars during the last eight months until Nov. 22, Financial Trib-

une reported on Thursday. Iran exported 1.28 billion dollars and imported 1.34 billion dollars of non-oil goods to and from the ASEAN nations over the same period, the report said.

The figures registered 80 percent growth in exports and 37 percent rise in imports compared with the same period in the previous year.

Thailand was Iran's largest ASEAN partner with 619 million dollars of trade exchange, accounting for 24 percent

of Iran's trade with all ASEAN states. Singapore was Iran's second largest ASEAN partner with 487 million dollars in mutual trade, a 10-percent rise compared with the year before.

Iran-Malaysia trade grew by 69 percent to 486.5 million dollars, while, Iran's trade with Indonesia and Vietnam amounted to 485 million dollars and 325 million dollars, respectively.

The major exports of Iran to the ASEAN nations included steel, pistachio, butane, propane and figs. Iran's imports from ASEAN included sugar cane, palm oil, soybean, food products, rice, home appliances, medium-density fibreboard, POS terminals, and cell phones. (Xinhua)

Uzbekistan, Russia Agree on Co-Op in Nuclear Energy Sector

TASHKENT — The governments of Uzbekistan and Russia have signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes.

From the Russian side, the document was signed by Director General of Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation Alexei Likhachev, and from the Uzbek side — by Deputy Prime Minister Nodir Otazhonov.

The agreement creates a legal basis for bilateral cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan regarding the peaceful use of atomic energy.

Promising directions include: creation of a national infrastructure and training of personnel for the nuclear energy of Uzbekistan, construction of nuclear power plants and research reactors in the country, as well as provision of support throughout the life cycle.

The agreement also covers the exploration and development of uranium deposits in Uzbekistan, reclamation of uranium mill tailings, production of radioisotopes and their application in industry, medicine and agriculture, and scientific and basic research. (Trend)