

Russia Suspends INF Treaty in 'Mirror Response' to US Halting the Agreement

MOSCOW - President Vladimir Putin says Moscow is halting its participation in the Cold War-era INF nuclear agreement after Washington's decision to suspend it. Russia will develop missiles previously forbidden under its terms. "Ours will be a mirror response. Our US partners say that they are ceasing their participation in the treaty, and we are doing the same," the Russian president said in Moscow on Saturday in reference to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). "They say that they are doing research and testing [on new weapons] and we will do the same thing," Putin said during a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu.



The Russian leader emphasized that while Moscow's offers on modernizing the 1987 treaty and making it more transparent "are

still on the table," no more talks should be initiated with the Americans to try and save it.

"Let's wait until our partners mature sufficiently to hold a level, meaningful conversation on this topic, which is extremely important for us, them, and the entire world," Putin said.

In December, the Trump administration threatened to quit the agreement, which limits nuclear and conventional land-launched missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500km within 60 days, unless Russia stopped allegedly violating it with its 9M729 missile, which Washington claims exceeds the permitted range.

Moscow denied that it had broken the treaty, and offered additional mutual inspections during failed talks in Geneva last month. (RT)

Sydney Lights Up for Lunar New Year Celebrations

SYDNEY - Rain clouds did not dampen the spirit of celebration surrounding Sydney Harbor on Friday night, with fireworks and cultural displays marking the launch of Lunar New Year events.

Australia's most recognizable landmarks, the Sydney Opera House and Harbor Bridge provided a breathtaking setting for the celebration, with the bridge's arches glowing red and pink, and spectacular art installations outside the Opera House marking the year

of the pig.

"Of course it's the year of the pig, so we have our hero pig at the Opera House," Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore told Xinhua.

"We love this event. We are a very multicultural community, 45 percent of our population was born outside Australia, predominantly from Asia, and we celebrate that. We have the oldest living culture with our aboriginal people and now we have a wonderful multicultural community," Moore said. (Xinhua)

WASHINGTON - In a move that could harden Washington's posture toward Beijing for years, the US intelligence community has characterized relations with China as a global ideological showdown that will not be doused by trade deals or commercial theft crackdowns.

US spy chiefs abruptly shifted their view of the superpower rivalry this week to something much deeper than a contest over markets, technology and geopolitics.

The annual Worldwide

Threat Assessment released by Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats instead said China is seeking to propagate "authoritarian capitalism" to counter Western liberal democracy, in an echo of the decades-long Cold War.

"Chinese leaders will increasingly seek to assert China's model of authoritarian capitalism as an alternative -- and implicitly superior -- development path abroad, exacerbating great-power competition that could threaten international



support for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law," it said.

It added the "coming ideological battle" will be marked by "a period of increased Chinese foreign policy activism

and a Chinese worldview that links China's domestic vision to its international vision," including the idea that market-oriented authoritarian regimes are superior. (AFP)

US Spies Elevate China Rivalry to War of Ideologies

Neighbor News

Iran Unveils Long-Range Cruise Missile on Revolution Anniversary

DUBAI - Iran unveiled a new cruise missile with a range of 1,300 km (800 miles) on Saturday during celebrations marking the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, state television reported.

"This cruise missile needs a very short time for its preparedness and can fly at a low altitude," Defence Minister Amir Hatami said during the unveiling ceremony.

Hatami said the surface-to-surface missile, named Hoveizeh, was from the Soumar family of cruise missiles, which were unveiled in 2015.

Western experts say Iran often exaggerates its weapons capabilities, although there

are concerns about its long-range ballistic missiles.

Amirali Hajizadeh, head of the Revolutionary Guards' aerospace division, said at the event Iran had overcome initial problems in producing jet engines for cruise missiles and could now manufacture a full range of the weapons. Iran said in January its bid to launch a satellite failed after Tehran ignored U.S. warnings to avoid such activity.

Washington warned Tehran last month against undertaking three planned rocket launches that it said would violate a U.N. Security Council resolution because they use ballistic missile technology. (Reuters)

US Wants Peaceful Pakistan: Envoy

KARACHI - United States Consul General to Karachi JoAnne Wagner said that the USA wanted to see Pakistan a prosperous, proud, and peaceful country.

She stated that during a meeting with Sindh Governor Imran Ismail at the Governor's House here on Friday, along with a five-member US delegation. She assured possible cooperation in this regard and added that scores of American companies were working in Pakistan.

During the meeting both sides exchanged

views on two countries' bilateral relations, including trade, CPEC and importance of Karachi in international economy.

The governor told the delegates that Pakistan and the USA relations were very crucial for the interest of region as the bilateral diplomacy had brought bright prospects to the strengthening relations between the two countries. He praised the USA economic cooperation in the fields of education, health, energy, environment and social sector. (Agencies)

Trade Turnover Between China, Uzbekistan Breaks Record

TASHKENT - The trade turnover between China and Uzbekistan set a new record by passing the mark of \$6.4 billion last year, Trend reports via Podrobno.uz.

Jin Yulong, advisor on trade and economic issues of the Embassy of China in Uzbekistan, spoke about new realities of economic cooperation between two countries.

She said that Uzbekistan has every chance of becoming the main supplier of agricultural products to China.

Chinese consumers increasingly prefer vegetables and fruits from Uzbekistan which are characterized by excellent taste and rich in trace elements, she added. Development

of cooperation with the regions of Uzbekistan is among the priority. For instance, a number of promising projects have been implemented in the Fergana region with companies from many provinces of China. There are 38 joint ventures and 24 foreign enterprises with the participation of Chinese capital in this region.

Yulong underlined that one of the important areas of joint investment agreements between Uzbekistan and China is the construction of small and medium-sized hydropower plants. Agreements on the construction of alternative energy sources were reached during the visit of Uzbek President to China. (Trend)

Turkmenistan, EU Discuss Transit Corridor Via Azerbaijan to Europe

ASHGABAT - A meeting with the Special Representative of the European Union for Central Asia, Peter Burian, was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Trend reports referring to the Turkmen foreign ministry.

The parties discussed the initiatives of Turkmenistan and Romania on the construction of the "Caspian Sea-Black Sea" transport-transit corridor through the "Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Romania" route, the report states.

Romania presides over the Council of the European Union for the first half of 2019.

Earlier, it was reported that Ashgabat and Bucharest had agreed on intensifying political and diplomatic efforts for potentially inking a political declaration on the creation of a transport and transit corridor connecting the Caspian to the Black Sea.

It is expected that Constanta may become a transshipment point of goods transported from the Turkmen port of Turkmenbashi to the EU, as well as from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the context of ensuring the access of goods from Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries to European markets. (Trend)

Mexican President Unleashes Labor Unrest at Border Plants



MEXICO CITY - A mass strike at 48 "maquiladora," or manufacturer, plants in Mexico's border city of Matamoros is heading for victory, bringing pay raises for laborers who make less

than \$1 an hour, or about 100 pesos a day, assembling auto components and TV sets for export to the United States -- and causing jitters for the business community. The labor battle broke

out in mid-January after President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador decreed a doubling of the minimum wage in Mexico's border zones, apparently unaware that some union contracts at the maquiladora plants are indexed to minimum wage increases. The decree sparked a wave of walkouts involving about 25,000 workers.

The maquiladoras claim the strikes threaten the very existence of their industry, which has attracted over 5,000 mostly foreign-owned plants

and 2 million jobs by paying very low wages. Union leaders say those worries are overblown, noting that workers at the border plants still earn far less than their counterparts in the United States. Less than a week after the strike broke out, a majority of the export plants in Matamoros -- 29 companies with a total of about 34 factories -- have agreed to the union demands, a rare victory that owes a lot to something the president probably didn't intend to happen. (AP)

Three Women Who could be Modi's Biggest Nightmare in India's Election

NEW DELHI - Three powerful women politicians, each from a very different section of Indian society, may pose a big threat to the chances of Prime Minister Narendra Modi winning a second term in a general election due by May.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, part of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has ruled India for much of the time since its independence from the British in 1947, joined the struggle in January, when the opposition

Congress party made her its face in the nation's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh.

Two other senior female politicians - the firebrand chief minister of West Bengal state, Mamata Banerjee, and Mayawati, a former Uttar Pradesh chief minister - are also plotting to unseat Modi's ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition by forming big opposition groupings, though there is no firm agreement between them as yet. (Reuters)

Red Cross Talks to US About Risks of Sending Venezuela Aid

WASHINGTON - The International Committee of the Red Cross has talked to the United States about the risks of delivering humanitarian aid to Venezuela without the approval of security forces loyal to President Nicolas Maduro, an official with the agency said Friday. Opposition leader Juan Guaido has said he will defy Maduro's refusal to allow aid by asking neighboring nations to help send in large convoys of medicine and food. Guaido has declared himself interim president of the country. The Trump administration has announced it is ready to deliver aid to Venezuela whenever and however is decided by Guaido. (AP)

Rival Rallies Set Up Tense Standoff in Venezuela

CARACAS - Tens of thousands of protesters were set to pour onto the streets of Caracas on Saturday to back opposition leader Juan Guaido's calls for early elections as international pressure increased on President Nicolas Maduro to step down.

Major European countries have set a Sunday deadline for Maduro to call snap presidential elections. Failing that, they will join the United States in recognizing National Assembly speaker Guaido as Venezuela's interim president.

"Maduro's tyranny must end and must end now," US Vice President Mike Pence told a rally of exiled Venezuelans in Miami on the eve of the protest. Guaido's call for a massive show of popular support coincides with a huge pro-Maduro demonstration. (AFP)

Plan to Pull Nearly \$1B in Gold Out of Venezuela Reportedly Halted

CARACAS - Plans by Venezuelan officials to ship 20 tons of gold overseas have reportedly been halted as the embattled presidency of Nicolas Maduro faces international pressure to cede power to a transitional government and protect the country's hard assets. The gold bars, worth around \$850 million, were weighed and separated in the central bank but won't be leaving the country anytime soon, according to reports. On Tuesday, reports emerged that the gold was ready to be loaded onto a Russian airliner that arrived in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas a day earlier.



A cargo plane operated by Moscow-based E-cargo reportedly landed in Caracas on Wednesday, raising speculation that it would transport the gold. The plane reportedly left the country Friday afternoon.

Russia is a major financial backer of Maduro's presidency, along with

Turkey and China. The destination of the bars -- which represent 20 percent of the country's gold supply -- was unknown. The blocking of the shipment comes a week after the Bank of England denied Maduro's request to withdraw \$1.2 billion of gold stored there. (Fox News)

Man Arrested over Brisbane Airport 'Bomb Threat'

BRISBANE - A man who reportedly claimed to be carrying a bomb has been arrested by police at Brisbane International Airport. Officers said the airport was evacuated over an "emergency situation."

The man was threatening people with a knife and claiming to have explosives, eyewitnesses told the Courier Mail. Several witness reports online also claim a man was seen brandishing

a knife and making bomb threats.

At around 9pm local time Saturday, Queensland Police announced the airport's evacuation and closure due to "an emergency situation." Train services have also been suspended.

Police later sent an update saying that one man was taken into custody without any "reported injuries to any members of the public or police." Searches of the airport are ongoing. (RT)

UAE's Tolerance Embraces Faiths, Runs Up against Politics

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates - The United Arab Emirates has branded a bridge, a new ministry, a family day at the park and even the entire year of 2019 under the banner theme of "tolerance," an elaborate effort that's in overdrive as the country prepares to host Pope Francis starting Sunday in the first-ever papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula.

The state's tolerance-themed project, however, has hard limits. While allowing churches and other places of worship to exist, and marking holidays like Christmas, the Hindu Diwali and Chinese New Year with festivals and celebrations, the government has simultaneously stomped out critical political expression in the name of national security. Human rights activists and Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers have been imprisoned, academic research deemed sensitive has been curtailed and human rights groups have been barred entry. Political parties are banned and local media are censored.

And while the law prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees the freedom to exercise religious worship, the state's official religion of Islam is tightly monitored and controlled.

A permit is required to hold a Quran memorization circle or lecture, collect donations or distribute books or audio in mosques. The law also prohibits mosque employees from preaching and teaching religious lessons outside of mosques. (AP)