

Russia, Pakistan form Anti-Terror Military Cooperation Commission

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN — Russia and Pakistan plan to establish a commission on military cooperation to counter the Islamic State threat in the region, accusing the United States of downplaying the terrorist group's dangerous "proliferation" in Afghanistan.

"We have confirmed Russia's readiness to continue boosting Pakistan's counterterrorism capacity, which is in the entire region's interests," Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Tuesday in Moscow. Speaking to reporters along with his Pakistani counterpart, Khawaja Asif, the Russian official said fighting terrorism is one of the priority



areas of cooperation between the two countries. He said joint military exercises between Russian and Pakistani special forces, which began in 2016, will continue this year.

Lavrov raised Moscow's "very serious suspicions" about efforts the NATO-led coalition is undertaking in Afghanistan to curb the threat. According to Russian and Pakistani data, he said, thousands of IS terrorists are present in northern and eastern Afghan border regions and they continue to grow in number. This is increasing the risk of the "terrorists' penetration" into Central Asia and Russia. (VOA)

New Zealand Says Pacific Trade Deal Will Boost GDP 1 Percent

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand estimates a Pacific trade deal would boost its economy by up to 1 percent as exporters would face reduced tariffs on goods like kiwifruit, wine and beef. The analysis Wednesday came as details of the trade pact between 11 countries around the Pacific Rim were released. The countries, which include Japan, Canada and Australia, intend to sign the deal in March. But it won't come into force until it's ratified by individual nations.

President Donald Trump

fulfilled a campaign promise by pulling the U.S. out of an earlier version of the deal, previously called the Trans-Pacific Partnership. New Zealand estimates the deal would expand its economy by up to 4 billion New Zealand dollars (\$2.9 billion) a year, according to the analysis released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The analysis concluded that not signing the deal would slightly shrink GDP as the nation lost ground to competitors who had signed up. (AP)

Japan Says China Illegally Transferred Cargo to North Korea

JAPAN — says its military has witnessed a cargo transfer between China and North Korea on the high seas that it suspects violates United Nations economic sanctions on Pyongyang.

The foreign ministry said Tuesday a maritime surveillance plane and an escort ship spotted a North Korean-flagged tanker, identified as the Yu Jong 2, floating alongside a small ship last Friday about 250 kilometers



off the Chinese city of Shanghai in the East China Sea.

The nationality of the other ship is unknown, but the ministry said the words "Min Ning

De You 078" were written in Chinese on the ship's bow, which translates as an oil ship from Ningde city in China's coastal Fujian province.

The ministry says it has reported the suspected transfer to the U.N. Security Council. This is the third such incident reported by Tokyo this year. (VOA)

India Drops 'Retaliation' Mode to Buy More Iran Oil



NEW DELHI — State-owned Indian refiners are set to raise their oil purchases from Iran amid unconfirmed reports that the Iranian Ministry of Pe-

roleum had offered 100 percent discount on its freights. President Hassan Rouhani's visit to India this week gave a new impetus to enhancing bilateral relations

which are under the shadow of US threats to reimpose draconian sanctions on the Islamic Republic. India was one of the countries which maintained trade with Iran including oil purchases when Tehran came under intensified Western sanctions in 2012, but that came with generous discounts. Since the lifting of sanctions on Iran in 2016, Tehran had reportedly cut down on its freight discount but Iranian

officials offered last week to raise it if Indian companies purchased more oil from the country. For 2018, Tehran had reportedly reduced the discount to 62 percent of the Platts freight assessment from 80 percent, apparently in response to the Indian government's orders to refiners to import less oil from Iran. Those orders have been interpreted as New Delhi's retaliation for Tehran's refusal to grant development of the offshore Farzad B gas field in the Persian Gulf to Indians at steeply concessionary terms. (PressTv)

Australian Leader Off to US for Talks with Trump, Governors

CANBERRA, Australia — Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull heads to the United States on Wednesday, accompanied by the largest Australian political and business delegation ever to visit the U.S. President Donald Trump's softening opposition to joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership will be up for discussion when he meets Turnbull at the White House on Friday. The trade deal among 11 countries includes Australia, which also has a bilateral free trade partnership with the United States. Turnbull, a wealthy

63-year-old former Goldman Sachs partner, sees himself as having a lot in common with Trump, as they are both successful businessmen who entered politics relatively late in life. Security risks in the Asia-Pacific region created by a more assertive China and North Korea's nuclear ambitions will also be on the agenda. Turnbull will be seeking a clear picture from Trump on how he expects the North Korean crisis to unfold, said Kim Beazley, a former Australian defense minister who was ambassador to Washington until 2016. (AP)

French Government Unveils Bill with New Asylum Procedure

PARIS — French President Emmanuel Macron's government is presenting its first big immigration bill, which human rights organizations criticize as repressive toward asylum-seekers. The government says the bill, to be presented at a Cabinet meeting Wednesday, aims at accelerating expulsion of people who don't qualify for asylum and offering better conditions for those who are allowed to stay in the country. The plan will reduce the period of application for asylum to six months maximum, down from about one year including appeal. Human rights activists say the quicker process will make it more difficult for asylum-seekers to defend their rights. Official figures show that more than 100,000 people applied for asylum in France in 2017, up 17 percent on the year before. (AP)

Netanyahu Confidant to Testify Against Him

JERUSALEM — Israeli media reported Wednesday that one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's closest confidants has turned state witness and will incriminate him in corruption allegations, the latest in a dizzying series of developments that threaten to topple the beleaguered Israeli leader. Police would not confirm whether longtime aide Shlomo Filber would testify against Netanyahu, but all the major Israeli media outlets said a deal to do so had been reached.

Filber, the former director of the Communications Ministry under Netanyahu, is under arrest on suspicion of promoting regulation worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Israel's Bezeq telecom company. In return, Bezeq's popular news site, Walla, allegedly provided favorable coverage of Netanyahu and his family. (AP)

US Women Win 1st Olympic Cross-Country Medal

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea — As she headed up the steepest, most grueling hill of her life in third place, Jessica Diggins thought to herself just winning an Olympic medal was no longer good enough. She wanted more. She wanted gold. Diggins dug deep, remembering all the years of training she had put in, and of all her teammates waiting for her at the finish line to bring home the United States' first medal ever in women's cross-country skiing — and then she let loose. Diggins reached the peak of the hill in third



place but sped past Norway's Maiken Caspersen Falla on the last big, winding downhill. She rounded the final corner and took dead aim at Sweden's Stina Nilsson on the final 100-meter homestretch. The crowd in the grandstand was on its feet

sensing history, and at that moment Diggins said she felt "unstoppable." "Around that final corner I felt like I was uncoiling a spring and letting it go," Diggins said. "Giving it everything I had, digging as deep as I could and putting it all out there. (AP)

Trudeau 'Assures' India Canada won't Support Sikh Separatists

NEW DELHI — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau traveled to the holiest site of Sikhism in northern India on Wednesday where government leaders said he assured them his country won't support anyone trying to revive a separatist movement in India. Canada is home to an influential Sikh community and Indian leaders say there are some fringe groups there that are still sympathetic to the cause of an independent Sikh state called Khalistan, carved out of India. Trudeau visited the Golden Temple in

Amritsar, the holiest Sikh shrine, and later met Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and addressed the concerns of his hosts, the state leader said. "I am very impressed with my meeting with the prime minister. I raised the issue of Khalistan, because that is our primary issue," Singh said, adding he had received a categorical assurance from Trudeau. "His words are a big relief to all of us here in India and we look forward to his government's support in tackling fringe separatist elements," he said in a Tweet. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Pakistan Looks to Avoid Being Added to Terror Financing List

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan says it has been given three months to prove it is doing enough to stay off an international watch list for countries that fail to curb the financing of terror groups. Pakistan has been scrambling to stay off the list compiled by the Financial Action Task Force, which is currently meeting in Paris. The group declined Wednesday to confirm a tweet from Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif

announcing the deadline. The group said it would not comment until it concludes its meeting on Friday. In recent weeks Pakistan has begun confiscating the assets of a charity headed by India's most wanted man, Hafiz Saeed, who is also wanted by the United States. Saeed is the founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group accused of carrying out the 2008 Mumbai attacks. (AP)

Iran, Spain Pledge Cooperation on Solving Mideast Issues

TEHRAN — A senior Iranian official has underlined the need for global cooperation to tackle the conflicts gripping the Middle East, stressing that people in the region should determine their own future free from any foreign meddling. Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on international affairs, made the remarks in a meeting with Spanish Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis in Tehran on Wednesday.

"The sensitive Middle East region needs a type of global international partnership and protection to resolve important issues," he said. "Those who are not familiar with the sensitivity of the Middle East cause more damage to themselves than to the region," Velayati added. Several years of foreign interference have only

worked to the detriment of the region, he said, noting that "everyone has now come to the conclusion that the solution to regional problems is political, not military, and that the region's fate should be decided by the people and foreign meddling should be prevented." The Iranian official also warned that chaos in the Middle East affects the entire Europe, including Spain. He further called for the enhancement of Tehran-Madrid ties and joint cooperation between the two sides aimed at bringing peace to the Western Asia region. Dastis, for his part, said that he agreed with Velayati on the need to increase cooperation and contacts in order to provide security and stability to the region and the world. He also said that the good relations between Iran and Spain need to be promoted. (PressTv)

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan to Create Business Council

DUSHANBE — Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will set up a joint business council, Chairman of the Uzbek Chamber of Commerce and Industry Adhaml kramov told media. He said that the first meeting of the Uzbek-Tajik business council will be held within the framework of the state visit of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Tajikistan. He noted that Uzbekistan put forward the initiative to create a business council between the two countries. The council will include 15 people on each side - en-

trepreneurs, representatives of ministries, departments, government bodies and chambers of commerce and industry. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan intend to sign export-import contracts worth about \$15 million within the framework of the business council. Previously it was reported that President Mirziyoyev will visit Tajikistan in March 2018. The sides are expected to mull a number of issues, including cancel of the visa regime between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which was introduced in 2001. (Trend)

Azerbaijan's IT Company to Export Tech Solutions to Uzbekistan

TASHKENT — Azerbaijan's Neuron Technologies IT company prepares to implement an education-related project in Uzbekistan, head of the company Ismayil Alakbarov told Trend. According to Alakbarov, the project provides for implementation of Unibook online education management platform in Uzbek Education Ministry. Talks on project implementation were held recently with Deputy Education Minister of Uzbekistan Uzokboy Begimkulov. "The deputy minister was informed that the company built a unified platform for Azerbaijan's Education Ministry around Unibook system. According to the agreement reached

Neuron Technologies will implement the system in Uzbek ministry," Alakbarov said. According to Alakbarov, consultations with experts will be held to modify the Unibook platform for the needs of Uzbek education system. The sides have also agreed to hold a webinar with an online presentation of the system and training in Baku for 84 educational facilities of Uzbekistan. Neuron Technologies company also plans to open a representative office in Tashkent, allowing to export home-grown technological solutions to Uzbek market under the "Made in Azerbaijan" label. (Trend)

UK Unemployment Edges Up to 4.4%

LONDON — Britain's unemployment rate has risen for the first time in 16 months, official data showed Wednesday, in a sign that Brexit uncertainty is feeding into the wider economy. The jobless rate -- or the proportion of the workforce that is unemployed -- stood at 4.4 percent in the three months to the end of December, the Office for National Statistics said in a statement.

That was up from 4.3 percent in the quarter to November 2017, which had been the lowest level in 42 years. Analysts said that Wednesday's data reduced the likelihood that the Bank of England would raise its main interest rate in May, as had been widely expected by markets. "The latest labour market data aren't a decisive blow to the chances of a May rate hike -- two more (jobless) reports will be published before then -- but they do reduce the odds," said Samuel Tombs, economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics. Prior to the data, markets had widely expected the Bank of England to raise its key lending rate in May, by a quarter-point to 0.75 percent, following a small hike last year. "While stubbornly high inflation and signs of higher wage growth have increased the perceived likelihood of rates rising again, it's clear that policymakers will tread a cautious line amid the heightened uncertainty facing the UK economy as Brexit worries dominate," said IHS Markit economist, Chris Williamson. (AFP)