

## 'Challenging' Russia in the Arctic: Political Posturing or A War in the Making?

MOSCOW - As Russia bolsters its efforts to secure and tap the Arctic, both the UK and the US have been vowing to meet its "challenge" - a premise that could lead to war, experts say, if their naval powers could muster the capabilities. "It's nobody's lake," said US Admiral James Foggo in a recent interview with US media - the latest in a string of American warnings against Russia's northward push. His concern is primarily for "Arctic Council nations - of which we are a member," and which are not interested in the Northern Sea Route being exploited by adversary powers like Russia and China.

UK Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson recently joined the chorus of warnings, say-



ing Britain would "stay vigilant to new challenges" by "sharpening our skills in sub-zero conditions, learning from longstanding

allies like Norway or monitoring submarine threats with our Poseidon aircraft." But Russia is better positioned both legally

and physically to oversee the Arctic and, while still dangerous, the bellicose statements carry little weight for the reality on the ice, experts have told RT.

Williamson's promise to defend NATO's northern flank from Russia must be viewed "in the context of current UK domestic politics," believes security analyst and former UK army officer Charles Shoebridge. With Brexit just around the corner, Williamson is drumming up the Russia and China threats so that other European nations aren't "tempted to turn to the EU for its security, but must continue to rely on the US and UK through NATO."

Ultimately, he could be aiming just for political gain. (RT)

### Nigeria Votes for a New President after Delay

DAURA (Nigeria) - Nigerians voted for a new president on Saturday after a week-long delay that has raised political tempers, sparked conspiracy claims and stoked fears of violence. Some 120,000 polling stations opened from 0700 GMT, although there were delays in the delivery of some materials and deployment of staff. Results are expected from early next week, with the winner gaining control of Africa's most populous nation and leading oil producer for four years. President Muhammadu

Buhari was one of the first to vote, and emerged from the polling booth in his home town of Daura, in the northwest state of Katsina, to say he was confident of victory. "So far, so good," he told reporters. "I will congratulate myself. I'm going to be the winner." His main challenger, Atiku Abubakar, 72, said he was impressed by the turn-out after voting in Yola, in the northeastern state of Adamawa. Asked if he would accept the result, he said only: "I'm a democrat." (AFP)

### Vietnam Threatens to Deport Kim & Trump Lookalikes, Bans Public Stunts ahead of US-N. Korea Talks

HANOI - A Kim Jong-un lookalike who recently wandered around Hanoi with a Trump impersonator says Vietnam has demanded that he stop performing stunts that may cause "disturbances" ahead of an upcoming US-North Korea summit. Tensions are running high in the Vietnamese capital, where this year's first meeting of the US and North Korean leaders is set to take place next week. To lighten the mood ahead of the much-anticipated

event, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un impersonators have descended on Hanoi to the delight of local media and onlookers. However, not everyone was impressed by the doppelgangers' appearance in the city. Australian Howard X, who impersonates Kim, told his Facebook fans that he and Trump impersona-



tor Russell White were interrogated by Vietnamese police officers on Friday, just after their interview with a local TV station. The pair were interviewed separately, with officers asking for their IDs and visas. (RT)

### 'Toxic Mixture' of Trump, Pence & Bolton Endangers Europe's Security - Top German MP



BERLIN - Donald Trump, Mike Pence and John Bolton - best known for their "erratic and aggressive" traits - are a "toxic mix-

ture" that leaves Europe less secure, a reputable German MP has warned. Chancellor Angela Merkel's government hoped

that it could quietly wait for the Trump administration to end, but that was "a bitter illusion," Jurgen Trittin, formerly minister for

the environment and now a prominent Green Party MP, argued in an op-ed for Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper. The German politician proceeded to up the ante: "This is a toxic mixture, it endangers Europe's security." In support of his claim, Trittin listed a number of important accords that were derailed or abandoned by the US, including the Paris climate change agreement, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and - most recently - the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). (RT)

### Moldova Parliamentary Ballot: What's at Stake?

CHISINAU, Moldova - More than three million Moldovans are eligible to vote in parliamentary elections Sunday in this former Soviet republic wedged between Romania and Ukraine. They will choose representatives for the next four-year term of the 101-seat legislature. No outright winner is expected and the ballot will likely deepen a rift between pro-Western and pro-Russian forces, amid concerns about endemic corruption and crumbling democracy. REJIGGED VOTING SYSTEM The voting system has been changed in what critics say is a ploy to help the two main parties - the broadly pro-Russian Socialists and the nominally pro-European Democratic Party - carve up influence. Democratic leader Vladimir Plahotniuc, one of the country's wealthiest men, is the country's de-facto leader as the Democrats are the main party in the ruling coalition. (AP)

### Sudan Opposition to Keep up Protests Despite Emergency

KHARTOUM - Sudan's main opposition party on Saturday dismissed President Omar al-Bashir's declaration of a state of emergency, saying protesters would keep up their campaign until his three-decade rule was ended.

On Friday, Bashir imposed a nationwide state of emergency and dissolved the federal and provincial governments in a bid to quell two months of almost daily demonstrations that have rocked his iron-fisted regime.

"Dissolving the government and imposing a state of emergency is nothing but a repetition of this regime's failures," the opposition National Umma Party said in a statement. (AFP)

### Yellow Vest Protesters Try to Keep up Momentum on Week 15

PARIS - French yellow vest protest organizers are trying to tamp down violence and anti-Semitism in the movement's ranks as they launch a 15th straight weekend of demonstrations. Hundreds of people gathered Saturday at the Arc de Triomphe monument for a march through well-off neighborhoods to protest government policies they see as favoring the rich. It was among multiple actions planned Saturday around Paris and in other cities.

Support for the movement has ebbed in recent weeks as it has splintered and outbreaks of violence continue. Online announcements for Saturday's marches appealed for peaceful action, and one of the weekend protests aims to stand up against anti-Semitism. (AP)

### Japan's Crown Prince Says Thoughts of Future 'Make Me Solemn'

TOKYO - Japan's crown prince Naruhito, who is set to ascend the Chrysanthemum throne in two months, turned 59 on Saturday and said the thought of the future made him solemn but he intended to pattern his reign after that of his father.

Emperor Akihito, 85, who has had heart surgery and treatment for prostate cancer, hinted in a 2016 television address that he wanted to step down because he feared age might make it hard for him to fulfill his duties, setting the stage for the first ab-



dications by a Japanese monarch in roughly two centuries. Akihito's father, Hirohito, was considered a living god until he renounced his divinity after Japan's World War Two defeat, and the current emperor has devoted himself to drawing the imperial family closer to the people - a course Naruhito said he would continue. Akihito will abdicate on April 30, with Naruhito taking the throne a day later. (Reuters)

### Stony Deserts Turning Green in SW China

GUIYANG - Stony desert areas continued to see faster decline with increased forest coverage during the past few years in southwest China's Guizhou Province, latest data showed. From 2011 to 2016, the area of stony deserts was reduced by 18.31 percent, faster than the 8.82 percent drop in the previous five-year period, Zhang Fujie, deputy head of the Guizhou Provincial Forestry Department, told a press conference Friday. At the end of 2016, stony deserts stood at 2,470,100 hectares, Zhang said. "Guizhou's stony deserts are

shrinking at a faster pace as the spread of desertification was effectively contained."

The environmental improvement was mostly attributed to the restoration of forests and grass, which contributed 67.75 percent of reversing desertification, said Zhang, adding that Guizhou has raised its forest coverage rate to over 57 percent by the end of 2018. The Karst formations in Guizhou, famous for its splendid landscapes, make the province's ecosystem fragile due to soil erosion. (Xinhua)

### NASA Greenlights SpaceX Crew Capsule Test to ISS

WASHINGTON - NASA on Friday gave SpaceX the green light to test a new crew capsule by first sending an unmanned craft with a life-sized mannequin to the International Space Station.

"We're go for launch, we're go for docking," said William Gerstenmaier, the associate administrator with NASA Human Exploration and Operations.

A Falcon 9 rocket from the private US-based SpaceX is scheduled to lift off, weather permitting, on March 2 to take the Crew Dragon test capsule to the ISS.

NASA signed contracts in 2014 with SpaceX and Boeing for the companies to shuttle US astronauts to the ISS. This will be the first time the US space agency lets a private-sector company transport their astronauts. NASA ended its space-shuttle program in 2011 and since then has relied on buying spots on Russian Soyuz rockets to send US astronauts to the orbiting ISS.

"This is an absolutely critical first step that we do as we move towards returning the crewed launch capability back here to the US," said Gerstenmaier, speaking at a press conference in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

The March 2 flight will be identical to a flight that is set to take two astronauts to the ISS later in the year, possibly in July. The Crew Dragon capsule has seven seats. It should dock with the ISS on March 3, then detach and return to Earth on March 8. (AFP)

## Neighbor News

### EFTA Signs Free Trade Agreement with Pakistan

ISLAMABAD - The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) - a regional trade organisation and free trade area consisting of four European states Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland - has shown interest to sign Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Pakistan, Pakistan Today has learnt.

According to sources, EFTA has asked to start negotiations on FTA as they want to enhance trade relations with Pakistan. Pakistani officials in Geneva are in touch with the four countries block representatives in this connection.

The value of EFTA-Pakistan merchandise trade, imports plus exports, amounted to \$573

million in 2017. Pakistan's export volume is \$218m to the four-country block while the exports are worth \$355m. The four countries import products worth \$360 billion on yearly basis; however, Pakistan's share is just 0.7 per cent of the total import. Its exports consist mainly of textiles and apparel whereas, top imports include pharmaceutical products, machinery, watches, and precious stones.

Earlier in 2012, the EFTA States and Pakistan had signed a Joint Declaration on Cooperation.

Sources said that Pakistan can get a huge market, especially in Norway, as nearly 40,000 people live over there. (Press TV)

### Representative of US State Department to Visit Uzbekistan

TASHKENT - Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells will arrive in Uzbekistan on February 25, Trend reports with reference to Uzbek Foreign Ministry.

Wells will lead the American delegation, which will visit Tashkent. The program of visit includes holding a regular round of bilateral consultations and meetings and negotiations in the ministries and departments of Uzbekistan.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev received the head of Central Command of the US Armed Forces, General Joseph Votel, Trend

reports with reference to the presidential press service. The US delegation arrived in country to attend the conference of chiefs of the general staffs of Central and South Asia countries.

Special attention was paid to the expansion of Uzbek-US military cooperation and interaction in the field of security at the meeting.

Earlier Votel, while speaking in the Senate of Congress, announced the desire of the United States to ensure that Central Asian countries refused military procurement from Russia and switched to contracts with The US. (Trend)

### Turkmenistan Studies Spanish Experience in Desalination

ASHGABAT - The delegation of Turkmenistan was on a working visit to Spain from February 19-21, Trend reports referring to the Turkmen Foreign Ministry. Several meetings took place, including a meeting at the Ministry for the Ecological Transition of Spain.

The "Toray", "Torishima", "Arflu", "Bel", "Protec Arisawa", "Eleusis", "Rufepa" and "Hermisan" companies presented their products at the event, including pumps, valves and desalination vessels, as well as equipment for the production of hydroponic feed for livestock, greenhouses and drip irrigation. The delegation also got acquainted

with the activities of the "Torrevieja" desalination plant in Alicante, and held talks with representatives of the "Talgo", "Italmatch" and "Termomecanica Pompe" companies. There was also an exchange of views on the production and supply of the required pumps when visiting the "Flowerserve" plant at Calle de Tierra de Barros. Turkmenistan borders Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Afghanistan and uses water resources coming in accordance with agreed quotas from four trans-boundary rivers, namely, Amu Darya, Tejen (known as Hari in Afghanistan), Atrik and Murghab. (Trend)

### M16 Chief Makes Secret Israel Visit to Discuss Iran Nuclear Program: Report

TEHRAN - The head of Britain's foreign spy agency M16 has reportedly made a secret visit to Tel Aviv and exchanged interviews with Israeli intelligence officials on Iran's nuclear activities.

Israel's Channel 13 news reported on Friday that M16 chief Alex Younger traveled to Israel on Monday and met with Mossad head Yossi Cohen and other Israeli intelligence chiefs.

The TV report claimed that Iran has recently renewed its production of centrifuges, "and is gearing up for the renewal of uranium enrichment" within the provisions of the 2015 nuclear deal, officially named the Joint

Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Tehran, the report further claimed, is currently "preparing the infrastructure" for nuclear activity "in an accelerated fashion."

The report came hours after the UN nuclear agency confirmed that the Islamic Republic is continuing to comply with the JCPOA.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a confidential quarterly report that Iran remained within caps on the level to which it can enrich uranium and its stock of enriched uranium in accordance with the nuclear agreement. (Press TV)