

Xi, Trump Discuss Trade, Korean Peninsula over Phone

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping and his U.S. counterpart, Donald Trump, on Tuesday discussed bilateral trade and the situation on the Korean Peninsula by phone. The phone call came amid strengthening of efforts to keep China-U.S. trade relations right on track and at a time when tensions on the Korean Peninsula have shown signs of easing.

CHINA-U.S. TRADE
China-U.S. relations maintained overall stability and achieved significant progress in 2017, said Xi in the phone call. Keeping bilateral ties on a track of healthy and stable development is in the interests of both countries and both peo-



and conforms to the common aspiration of the international community, the Chinese president said.

The two sides need to maintain high-level and various levels of interactions, bring the four high-level dialogue mechanisms between them into full play, and hold the second round of dialogues at a proper time, Xi said. As economic and trade cooperation brings tangible benefits to both peoples, the two countries should adopt constructive measures to properly settle economic and trade issues of mutual concern by opening up the market to each other and "making the cake of cooperation bigger," Xi added. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

Russia and China Criticize Vancouver Meeting on North Korea

MOSCOW - The United States and Canada will host the summit on Tuesday, which will involve the foreign ministers from 20 nations; notably those who fought against North Korea during the Korean War.

Moscow has criticized the ministerial meeting, deeming it destructive. "I believe that there will be nothing productive achieved from this meeting; as long as nothing counterproductive is achieved, that would be a great result already," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at his annual press conference on Monday.

Washington suggested that while not invited, Russia and China were

generally supportive of the Vancouver meeting, which Lavrov flatly rejected as "an outright lie."

Lavrov also questioned the list of countries attending: When we found out about this meeting, we asked: 'Why do you need all those countries together?' Greece, Belgium, Colombia, Luxembourg. What do they have to do with the Korean peninsula today?"

Washington says the aim of the gathering is to increase diplomatic and financial pressure on North Korea to give up its development of nuclear missiles and to ensure the implementation of UN sanctions against the country. (Sputnik)

Syrian Opposition Calls on Trump and EU to up Pressure on Russia and Iran

LONDON - Syria's chief opposition negotiator called on U.S. President Donald Trump and European Union leaders to increase pressure on President Bashar al-Assad, Russia and Iran to return to talks aimed at ending the six-year civil war.

"It is time for President Trump, Chancellor (Angela) Merkel and (British) Prime Minister (Theresa) May to say: 'Stop,'" Nasr Hariri, the chief negotiator for Syria's main opposition, told Reuters in an interview. "It is time for Trump, Merkel and May

to increase pressure and bring the international community together to get a genuine and just political situation in Syria." Hariri said that unless the United States and EU powers increased pressure on President Assad and his big power allies in Moscow and Tehran, then the blood of Syrian civilians would continue to be spilled.

The former cardiologist said the next round of the so-called "Geneva talks" on the fate of Syria would take place in late January, probably around Jan. 24-26 in Vienna. (Reuters)

Situation in Syria Not Safe for Refugees to Return: UN Official

BEIRUT - A UN refugee official said on Monday that Syria is not safe enough for the Syrian refugees living in Lebanon to return to their homes.

Scott Craig, an official with the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), told Xinhua that the UNHCR determined that the conditions in Syria are not safe enough despite a small number of Syrian refugees had returned to Syria last year.

"We still have fighting and violence that are tak-

ing place in parts of the country and we still have displacement taking place," Craig said.

He said that despite their evaluation of the situation in Syria, the UNHCR is still expanding its operations in the war-torn country to meet the needs of the refugees who want to return.

But Craig pointed that the international community and the UNHCR are concerned if they could meet



the needs of the Syrian refugees. Lebanon's Minister of State for the Refugees Affairs MoinMerhebi confirmed at the end of 2017 that the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon dropped to below 1 million for the first time since the civil war broke out in Syria in March 2011. (Xinhua)

Russian FM Says Moscow, Beijing Work Closely on International Issues



MOSCOW - Russia and China are working closely together on a string of important international and regional issues, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday.

"We can try to enumerate for a long time the joint initiatives that Russia and China are promoting in the international arena," Lavrov said at his annual press conference.

The two countries are working actively on their joint initiative on the transition from military confrontation to a political settlement on the Korean Peninsula, one of the most serious topics on the international agenda, he said.

"If we talk about the nuclear issue, it is primarily Pyongyang and Washington, but we will also be ready to contribute to this bilateral dialogue within the framework of the so-called six-party process involving Russia, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea," he added.

The six-party talks to denuclearize the Korean peninsula, which involved South Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), China, the United States, Russia and Japan, have been suspended since late 2008. With regard to the Syrian settlement, Russia and China share the same stance in appealing for "an exclusively political settlement based on the decisions of the United Nations Security Council that presupposes a political dialogue," Lavrov said. (Xinhua)

EU Still Open to Britain Changing Mind on Brexit

STRASBOURG - Leaders of the European Union institutions weighed in on a new British debate on whether to hold a second referendum on Brexit by saying on Tuesday that Britons would be welcome to stay in the EU.

Prime Minister Theresa May and her main opponent Jeremy Corbyn have ruled out giving voters a chance to approve whatever withdrawal treaty is agreed with Brussels before Britain leaves the bloc in March 2019. However, campaigners on both sides of the debate have raised the issue again

this month. Updating the European Parliament on a summit he chaired last month at which EU leaders agreed to open talks with London on their post-Brexit future, European Council President Donald Tusk took the opportunity to support those calling for a rethink.

"Brexit will become a reality, with all its negative consequences, in March next year, unless there is a change of heart among our British friends," the former Polish premier said. "We here on the continent haven't had a change of heart. (Reuters)

Russian Pollster Stops Publishing Results on Elections

MOSCOW - Russia's main independent polling agency has stopped publishing results of opinion polls on the upcoming presidential election, fearing legal repercussions. Levada Center was listed as a foreign agent in 2016 under a new law aimed at curbing alleged foreign influence on public life in Russia. Authorities insist that the law does not aim to target critics of the Kremlin.

Levada is not a foreign company, but Russian authorities are able to list it as a foreign agent because it has received foreign funding. Levada's director, Lev Gudkov, told the Russian daily Vedomosti on Tuesday that the agency is carrying out election polling but will not publish results during the campaign because it fears that this could be viewed as election meddling and could lead to a motion to close down the pollster. Russians go to polls on March 18 to vote for their president. Incumbent Vladimir Putin is expected to win by a landslide.

Results of Levada's polls have not differed dramatically from those by the two main state-owned polling agencies in terms of support for Putin and the ruling party. But recent polls did show a difference regarding the turnout for the upcoming vote.

With his key rival, Alexei Navalny, barred from running, Putin is facing candidates who only nominally oppose him.

That raised fears of a lower turnout at the election, which would be a major embarrassment for the Kremlin.

Commenting on the pollster's announcement, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday it was "unfortunate" that Levada will not be able to publish its polls but said it was a matter of following the law. (AP)

Top Pakistani Religious Scholars Issue Decree against Extremism, Terrorism

ISLAMABAD - Senior Pakistani religious scholars from different schools of thought on Tuesday issued a unanimous religious decree rejecting extremist ideology and extremism in all its form or manifestations.

The "Fatwa," or decree in English, signed by eminent religious scholars and heads of major religious schools across Pakistan, was issued at

a gathering at the President House in Islamabad in the presence of President Mamnoon Hussain, diplomats, teachers, ministers and lawmakers.

"We unanimously reject extremist ideology and extremism in all its form or manifestations. Whenever exists, this is an evil ideology, therefore, shall be dealt with as a religious obligation through all means available i.e. ideological, kinetic and

non-kinetic," the decree said.

The decree strongly supported the military operations initiatives against terrorists to strengthen the security and stability in Pakistan.

The scholars, representing all schools of thought, unanimously declared that suicide attacks are forbidden in the light of Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. (Xinhua)

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, President of UN General Assembly Talk on Enhancing Cooperation

ABU DHABI - Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and President of the UN General Assembly talked on enhancing cooperation between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United Nations (UN) in Abu Dhabi on Monday.

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, met President of the 72nd session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, Miroslav Lajack, who is currently visiting the Gulf Arab state to attend the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) meeting, UAE state news agency WAM reported.

The two sides discussed on ways to enhance cooperation between the UAE and the UN, particularly in humanitarian and developmental fields, "through different partnership tools," said the report.

Sheikh Abdullah affirmed the UAE's keenness "to build and sustain partnerships with the organizations concerned with comprehensive development for the nations of the world," according to WAM.

Lajack expressed the international organization's appreciation of the role played by the UAE in humanitarian and development fields. (Xinhua)

Race is on for Succession to Europe's Top Economic Posts

FRANKFURT, Germany - Europe is preparing to find successors for many of its most powerful economic officials, including the influential head of the European Central Bank. Those chosen will make decisions affecting the jobs, savings and pay of 340 million people living in the 19 countries that share the euro. The starting gun in the race among countries to fill those posts went off over the weekend when Portugal's Mario Centeno took over his new role as head of the eurogroup, the finance ministers from euro countries.

The contest for the other posts, mainly at the European Central Bank, will run for almost two years before every seat is filled in late 2019 - including for the ECB presidency.

The political jousting between countries for these jobs may seem arcane, but the results will affect the lives of ordinary people through decisions interest rates and monetary stimulus.

Current ECB President Mario Draghi, for instance, pushed through a bond-market program that was credited with defusing Europe's crisis over too much debt in 2012. He also advocated a stimulus program that injected new money into the economy through bond purchases, a step that drew protests from stimulus opponents in Germany but which Draghi says helped created millions of jobs and lowered the eurozone's unemployment rate from over 12 percent to 8.7 percent.

The first post up for grabs is that of the ECB vice president, Vitor Constancio, who is leaving when his term expires in May. (AP)

Rouhani Says Palestine Issue Remains Top Priority of Islamic World after IS Crush

TEHRAN - Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said Tuesday that Palestine remains as the most important issue for the Islamic world, Press TV reported.

After the collapse of the Islamic State (IS) terror group in Iraq and Syria, the issue of Palestine has regained its importance for the Muslims, Rouhani said in the opening ceremony of the 13th Session of the Parliamentary Union of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Iran's capital Tehran.

The current instability and insecurity gripping the region stem from continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, he was quoted as saying. Rouhani urged the Islamic states to unite for

the creation of a "calm region and peaceful foreign relations," adding that Iran views no country as its "competitor" in the region. "Some countries, however, are following the wrong path and seek to widen the rifts among Muslim nations under the U.S. and Israel's influence," Rouhani said.

Rouhani criticized some Muslim states for what he called their dependence on foreign powers, saying "the experiences of modern history teach us that these powers solely think about their own interests."

Iran believes it could even engage in negotiations and cooperation with the countries with which it has differences of opinion based on mutual respect, he added. (Xinhua)

Turkmenistan Creates Working Commission on TAPI Gas Pipeline Project

ASHGABAT - President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a decree on establishment of a working commission to coordinate the implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, the Turkmen DowlatHabarlary state news agency reported Jan. 16.

The document was signed in order to improve the efficiency of implementation of projects of TAPI gas pipeline, as well as transport corridors and energy bridges along the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan route, and coordinate work.

Turkmenistan started to construct its TAPI section in December 2015. The foundation laying ceremony for the Afghan section of the TAPI gas pipeline is planned to be held in the second half of February 2018.

Earlier, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Japanese government expressed their interest in financing TAPI.

The Islamic Development Bank has already allocated a loan worth \$700 million for Turkmenistan to construct its TAPI section. (Trend)