

Debate on Future of Europe Gets Momentum

BRUSSELS - When the European Union (EU) is preparing for the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, from which the whole integration process stemmed, the future of Europe aroused hot discussions inside the bloc.

Giles Merritt, founder and chairman of Friends of Europe think tank and author of "Slippery Slope Europe's Troubled Future," said EU "still has much worth" but argued that poor productivity is Europe's greatest weakness, and it is going to be exacerbated by aging and youth unemployment.

He said, "European productivity growth used to outstrip America's. But now Europe's rate is half that of the United



States. It's time for the Commission to identify the backsliders, the greatest threat to prosperity."

According to Emma Marcegaglia, president of BusinessEurope, the Brussels-based representative body for Europe's business community, industrial policy, trade and investment are "key" for growth, competitiveness and job creation in Europe and to take the European project forward.

Ulrike Trebesius, a centre right German European parliamentarian, believed that past hopes in Europe and the eurozone have fallen victim to "centralism and delusions of grandeur", adding, "The EU should... (More on P4)...(19)

Russia, Turkey, Iran to Press Ahead with Syria Talks: Kazakhstan

ASTANA - Russia, Turkey and Iran are pressing ahead with a fresh round of Syria talks in Kazakhstan, Kazakh Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov said on Monday, despite a request from Syrian rebels to delay the meeting.

A Syrian government delegation arrived in Astana later on Monday to attend the talks, Syrian state media reported.

"We are awaiting confirmations from the other parties to the meeting," Abdrakhmanov told par-

liament, adding that delegations had already started arriving in the Kazakh capital, Astana. Syrian rebel groups called last week for the postponement of the talks and said further meetings would depend on whether the government and its allies adhered to a newly declared March 7-20 ceasefire.

The third round of Astana talks is due to take place on March 14-15. The previous meetings aimed to shore up a widely violated... (More on P4)...(20)

Syrian War Monitor Says 465,000 Killed in Six Years of Fighting

BEIRUT - The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said on Monday there are so far about 465,000 people killed and missing in Syria's civil war.

The war began six years ago on Wednesday with protests against President Bashar al-Assad's government. It has since dragged in global and regional powers, allowed Islamic State to grab huge tracts of territory and caused the biggest refugee crisis since the second world war.

The Observatory said

it had documented the deaths of more than 321,000 people since the start of the war and more than 145,000 others had been reported as missing. Among those killed are more than 96,000 civilians, said the Observatory, which has used a network of contacts across the country to maintain a count of casualties since near the start of the conflict.

It said government forces and their allies had killed more than 83,500 civilians, including more than 27,500 in air strikes and



14,600 under torture in air strikes by the U.S.-led coalition have killed more than 7,000 civilians, the Observatory said. The Islamic State jihadist group has killed more than 3,700 civilians, it added. (Reuters)

Russia Impatient for Improved Dialogue with US: Kremlin

WASHINGTON - A Russian government spokesman expressed impatience on Sunday that bilateral relations with the United States have not improved more quickly since US President Donald Trump took office.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said his country's government is eager for improved US-Russian relations, calling it "unpardonable not to be in dialogue," as Moscow presses the new US leader to make good on vows to improve ties.

"We certainly would ex-

pect our contacts to be more frequent, more in-depth, in order to sit and then talk to each other... because we had quite a significant pause in our bilateral relations," Peskov said in an interview that aired on Sunday on CNN's "GPS" programme.

"For countries like Russia and the United States, it's unpardonable not to be in dialogue, especially against this amount of regional and global problems that we have." Earlier this year, Trump... (More on P4)...(21)

Defense Spending by European NATO Allies Inches up in 2016

BRUSSELS - Defense spending by European NATO states inched up for the first time in seven years in 2016, the military alliance said on Monday, but still remained below the threshold the new U.S. President Donald Trump said was crucial to achieve. Trump made NATO states in Europe nervous when he criticized the alliance as "obsolete" during election campaign and then went on to suggest he could make U.S. commitment to their security conditional on them meeting the alliance's target of defense

spending at two percent of their economic output. Trump has since reaffirmed support for NATO but insisted Europeans must "pay their fair share." His aides have said Trump wants to see progress on that by the end of this year and that Washington could otherwise "moderate" its support.

NATO said the U.S. defense spending last year stood at 3.61 percent of its Gross Domestic Product, compared to 3.58 percent in 2015. That compares to 1.47 percent for NATO's European allies last year



and 1.44 percent the year before. NATO's overall figure for 2016 stood at 2.43 percent versus 2.40 percent in 2015. "There has been progress but the job is far from done, we still

have no fair burden-sharing within our alliance," NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said. "It is realistic that all allies reach the goal of two percent." (Reuters)

U.S. VP Pence to Tour Asia Next Month Amid Security Crises

JAKARTA - U.S. Vice President Mike Pence will visit Japan and Indonesia as part of an Asian tour next month, sources said on Monday, amid concerns the Trump administration is rolling back Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia."

U.S. President Donald Trump has already withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, which was seen as an economic pillar of the strategy.

A Trump administration official told Reuters: "The vice president is going to Asia next month I believe."



The tour will include South Korea and Australia, the Nikkei Asian Review reported, with North Korea's missile and nuclear programs and South Korea's political crisis likely topics

for discussion. China has been infuriated by South Korea's plan to deploy a U.S. missile defense system targeted at the North Korean threat. ... (More on P4)...(22)

Scottish Leader Demands New Independence Vote before Brexit

EDINBURGH - Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on Monday demanded a new independence referendum in late 2018 or early 2019, once the terms of Britain's exit from the European Union have become clearer.

A vote that could rip apart the United Kingdom just months before Brexit would deepen the uncertainty surrounding the two-year process of leaving the EU after more than four decades.

"If Scotland is to have a real choice - when the terms of Brexit are known but before it is too late to choose our own course - then that choice must be offered between the autumn of next year, 2018, and the spring of 2019," Sturgeon told reporters. Her demand comes just as British Prime Minister Theresa May is poised to launch the Brexit process, ... (More on P4)...(23)

Europe Should Build Business Bridges with China: Bulgarian Entrepreneur

SOFIA - Europe should build business bridges with China, especially in the high-tech sector, and benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative, a Bulgarian entrepreneur has said.

Plamen Russev, an investor in tech companies, said in a recent interview with Xinhua that Europe needed to build a very strong and clear relationship with China.

Europe perceives China as a strategic partner and they need to build better relations, work more on the Belt and Road Initiative, and create value for both sides, said Russev, who is the founder and executive chairman of Global Webit Series. "Seven years ago, Europe produced 32 percent of the global GDP. Currently, Europe produces 23 percent of the global GDP," Russev said. "We are talking about an over 30-percent decrease in the role of Europe in the world."

According to Russev, the Belt and Road Initiative is an amazing opportunity, both for China and for Central-Eastern Europe and particularly Bulgaria, to build a closer and better understanding for each other, and develop a very clear vision of how both sides can benefit.

Proposed by China in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to become a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along ancient trade routes.

So far, more than 100 countries and international organizations have joined the initiative and over 40 of them have cooperation agreements with China. (Xinhua)

Japan, U.S. Hold Joint Military Exercise with Osprey, First Joint Drill since Dec. Crash

TOKYO - Four controversial Osprey aircraft took part in a joint drill between Japan and the United States in Niigata Prefecture on Monday, in the largest such exercise to be held by the aircraft so far in Japan.

As many as six MV-22 Ospreys, which can take off and land like a helicopter and fly like a regular fixed-winged plane, will join the drills from a U.S. base in Okinawa, local media reported.

The joint exercise between Japan and the U.S., which began on March 6 and will conclude on Friday in Niigata, involves a contingent of 750 troops. ... (More on P4)...(24)

EU Warns Erdogan as Turkey-Netherlands Crisis Deepens

ISTANBUL - The European Union on Monday warned President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to avoid inflammatory rhetoric as a diplomatic crisis between Turkey and the Netherlands deepened over the blocking of Turkish ministers from holding rallies to win support for plans to expand his powers.

Erdogan at the weekend twice accused NATO ally Netherlands of acting like the Nazis, comments that sparked outrage in a country bombed and occupied by German forces in World War II.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who faces a major challenge from the far-right in a key general election Wednes-

day, said Erdogan's comments were unacceptable and it was Ankara that should apologise. In an escalating standoff that risks damaging Turkey's already deteriorating relations with the European Union ahead of the April 16 referendum on constitutional change, Brussels sternly warned Ankara to avoid making the situation worse.

In apparent reference to Erdogan's comments, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn called on Turkey to "refrain from excessive statements and actions that risk further exacerbating the situation. (AFP)

Nieghbor News

NCPC Holds Consultative Meeting on Senior Political Advisor Election

BEIJING - The Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee held a consultative meeting to solicit opinions on a candidate list for the election of a new senior political advisor.

The CPC Central Committee said in a statement on Monday that the meeting was held on February 22. Entrusted by the CPC Central Committee, Yu Zhengsheng, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, presided over the meeting.

Yu, also chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee, delivered a report on the election of a

new senior official of the CPPCC National Committee to representatives of non-Communist parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, and those without party affiliation.

Praising these consultative meetings as a good tradition of the CPC, Yu encouraged participants to fully express their opinions and give suggestions.

Leaders of non-Communist parties and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, as well as representatives of people without party affiliation, agreed that the candidate list was made with careful consideration and expressed support for it. (Xinhua)

Sharif, Senior Civil and Military Officials Discuss Security Concerns

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chaired a high-level security meeting to review the progress of Operation Raddul Fasaad at Prime Minister House, Islamabad on Monday.

During the meeting, Sharif expressed satisfaction on the progress made by the army and other law enforcement agencies and gave directions for the pace of the operation to be expedited further.

Laws governing anti-terrorism efforts were also reviewed in the meeting and ways to make these laws more effective were discussed.

It was decided that the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP)

would be expedited and made more effective by both the federal and provincial governments. Recent initiatives on the management of the Pak-Afghan border were also reviewed in detail.

Participants of the meeting included Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Chief of Army Staff Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, Adviser to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz, National Security Adviser Lieutenant General (ret'd) Nasir Khan Janjua and DG ISI Lt Gen Naveed, as well as other senior civil and military officials. (Monitoring Desk)

Iran Political Camps Jockey for Position Ahead of Presidential Election

TEHRAN - Iran's rival Reformist and Principlist political camps have taken more definite steps towards contesting the country's 2017 presidential election.

The country of 80 million people will hold its 12th presidential election in May under the supervision of the Guardian Council which is tasked with vetting the candidates. Mohammad-Reza Aref, who competed in the previous polls and heads the Reformist Supreme Policymaking Council, on Monday officially announced support for incumbent President Hassan Rouhani's candi-

dacy. Hossein-Ali Amiri, the Iranian vice president for parliamentary affairs, announced Rouhani's intention to join the competition late last month.

The Principlists have also launched into determined campaigning to make up for the camp's defeat in the previous round. The Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces, which includes Principlist personalities, had its Central Council hold a plenary session recently. On Monday, the Council produced a list of 14 of its "best candidates" following the plenum but fell short of naming its main contestant. (Prestv)

Uzbekistan Seeks to Provide Political Asylum for Refugees

TASKENT - President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has adopted order on further improvement of activities of the Presidential Administration of Uzbekistan, where he ordered to develop a mechanism on providing a political shelter.

According to the document, the structure of the Presidential Administration will include a service on political and legal matters, which should develop the relevant document regulating the procedure of providing a political asylum within 2 months. (AKI)

Turkmenistan Foreign Ministry and ICRC Discuss Humanitarian Issues

ASHGABAT - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Turkmenistan held the meeting with Head of the Regional Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for Central Asia, Mr. Jean-Jerome Casabiánka on March 9, reports the press service of the Turkmen foreign

ministry. Parties discussed issues on cooperation of Turkmenistan with the ICRC according to the plan of cooperation for 2017. Both sides highlighted the importance of international humanitarian law and activities aimed at development of humanitarian sphere. (AKI)