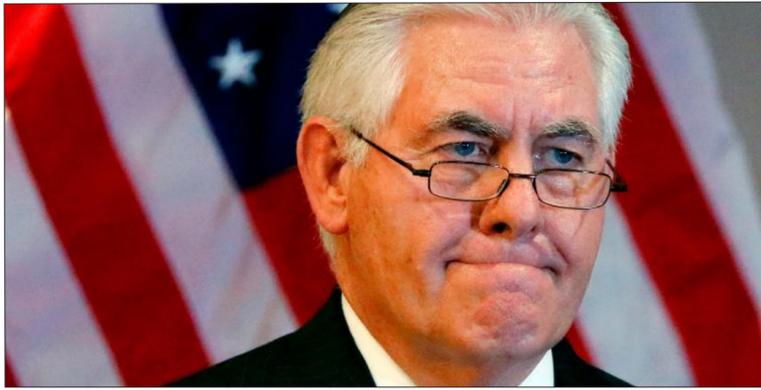


Trump fires Tillerson, taps Pompeo as next secretary of state

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Donald Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Tuesday after a series of public rifts over policy on North Korea, Russia and Iran, replacing his chief diplomat with loyalist CIA Director Mike Pompeo.

The biggest shakeup of Trump's Cabinet since he took office in January 2017 was announced by the president on Twitter as his administration works toward an unprecedented meeting with the leader of North Korea.

Trump tapped the CIA's deputy director, Gina Haspel, to replace Pompeo at the intelligence agency. Tillerson's departure capped months of friction between



the Republican president and the 65-year-old former Exxon Mobil chief executive, who had no diplomatic or political experience before becoming secretary of state. The tensions peaked last fall amid reports Tillerson had called Trump a "moron" and

considered resigning.

"We got along actually quite well but we disagreed on things," Trump said on the White House lawn on Tuesday. "When you look at the Iran deal: I think it's terrible, I guess he thinks it was OK. I wanted

to break it or do something and he felt a little bit differently. So we were not thinking the same."

Trump said he and Pompeo have "a similar thought process." Pompeo, a former Army officer who represented a Kansas district in Congress before Trump chose him to lead the CIA, is seen as a Trump loyalist who has enjoyed a less hostile relationship with career spies than Tillerson had with career diplomats.

There had been reports in recent months that Tillerson could be replaced but senior State Department officials said he did not know why Trump pushed him out and that he had intended to stay in the job. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Uzbekistan to Discuss Conference on Afghanistan in UAE, Saudi Arabia

TASHKENT - Special representative of the Uzbek president on Afghanistan Ismatulla Irgashev commenced an official visit to the UAE and Saudi Arabia on March 12, the press office of the Uzbek Foreign Ministry announced. According to the information, the sides are going to discuss actual topics of bilateral relations, as well as some practical aspects of preparation to the high-level international conference on Afghanistan "Peace Process, Cooperation in

Security and Regional Interaction" in Tashkent on March 26-27. The conference participants are expected to express a consolidated position at regional and global levels on necessity of starting direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban movement without any preconditions as soon as possible. The conference will be summed up by Tashkent Declaration, which will reflect the main points of the discussion. (Trend)

UN Supports

Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan Transit Corridor Project

ASHGABAT - A resolution has been unanimously adopted on supporting international efforts to assist Afghanistan at the next meeting of the UN Security Council, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov said in his message on this issue.

In this document the UN Security Council, a special role is assigned to the measures being implemented to revive the socio-economic infrastructure of Afghanistan.

The Security Council, on the basis of the initiatives put forward, supported the efforts to strengthen economic cooperation in the region and urged all countries to undertake the necessary work in this direction. The Agreement on the establishment of the transit, trade and transport corridor Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey (Lapis

Lazuli) is among these initiatives.

In November 2017, the Turkmen parliament ratified this agreement, which had been signed in Ashgabat by foreign ministry officials of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

It is expected that the railways and motorways will connect the city of Turgundi in the Afghan province of Herat with Ashgabat, and then with the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi. The corridor will run until Baku, then through Tbilisi to Ankara with branches to Poti and Batumi, and further from Ankara to Istanbul. The project's budget, which is aimed at facilitating transit logistics and simplifying customs procedures, is estimated at \$2 billion. The project is designed to increase the economic integration of the region and the volume of trade. (Trend)

Russia Says 'Not Guilty' Of Ex-Spy Poisoning As UK Deadline Looms

LONDON - Moscow on Tuesday denied it was behind the poisoning of a former double agent in Britain as a midnight deadline loomed to explain how a Russian-made nerve agent was used in the attack.

"Russia is not guilty", said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in an English city on March 4.

The United States, NATO and the European Union have all backed Britain in the deepening diplomatic crisis. Lavrov added that Russia was "ready to cooperate", but said Britain

had rejected its requests for "access" to the nerve agent samples.

British Prime Minister Theresa May told parliament it was "highly likely" Russia was behind the poisoning, giving Moscow until the end of Tuesday to answer the accusations.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said the attack was the "first use of nerve agent on the continent of Europe since the end of the Second World War". He vowed that Britain's response if it concludes Russia was responsible would be "commensurate". (AFP)

House Panel's Initial Report Says No Collusion with Russia

WASHINGTON - Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee have completed a draft report concluding there was no collusion or coordination between Donald Trump's presidential campaign and Russia, a finding that pleased the White House but enraged Democrats who had not yet seen the document.

After a yearlong investigation, Texas Rep. Mike Conaway announced Monday that the committee has finished inter-

viewing witnesses and will share the report with Democrats for the first time Tuesday. Conaway is the Republican leading the House probe, one of several investigations on Russian meddling in the 2016 elections.

"We found no evidence of collusion," Conaway told reporters, suggesting that those who believe there was collusion are reading too many spy novels. "We found perhaps some bad judgment, inappropriate meetings, inappropriate judgment



in taking meetings. But only Tom Clancy or Vince Flynn or someone else like that could take this series of inadvertent

contacts with each other, or meetings or whatever, and weave that into sort of a fiction page-turner, spy thriller." (AP)

UK's Johnson Says Britain Encouraged By 'Friends' Support over Russian Spy Poisoning



LONDON - Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said Britain had been encouraged by the "willingness of friends" to show support and solidarity following the poisoning of

a Russian double agent, Britain's Press Association reported on Tuesday.

British Prime Minister Theresa May has given Russia a midnight dead-

line to explain how former spy Sergei Skripal, who passed secrets to British intelligence, and his daughter Yulia were poisoned with a nerve agent developed by the

Soviet Union.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the European Union are among those to have said they would stand by Britain after the attack. (Reuters)

Watchdog Warns Trade Tariffs Would Slow World Growth Upswing

PARIS - As the U.S. prepares to impose tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, a world economic watchdog warned Tuesday that such barriers will hurt economic growth globally.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, a policy adviser to developed economies, said that while the global economy is improving, "trade protectionism remains a key risk that would negatively affect confidence, investment and jobs."

"Governments should avoid escalation," it said in an update to its fore-

casts. The statement was a veiled reference to U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to impose tariffs without resorting to international arbitration.

The OECD expects world economic growth to accelerate to 3.9 percent this year and next, from 3.7 percent in 2017. It expects the U.S. to accelerate thanks to lower taxes, and sees a pick-up also in several developing countries. By contrast, it predicts a gradual slowdown in the 19-country eurozone, Britain, China and Japan. (AP)

Turkish Parliament Passes Controversial Voting Law, As Brawl Ensues

ANKARA - Turkey's parliament passed a law revamping electoral regulations on Tuesday, backing controversial legislation the opposition has said could open the door to fraud and jeopardize the fairness of 2019 polls.

After parliament's Deputy Speaker Aysenur Bahcekapili announced the voting result, a brawl erupted between nationalist lawmakers and those from the main opposition. Several parliamentarians traded punches and shoved and chased each other in the chamber.

The legislation formally allows for the creation of electoral alliances, paving the way for a tie-up between President Tayyip Erdogan's ruling AK Party and their nationalist allies. It was widely expected to pass, given the combined support of the AKP and the nationalist MHP. But government critics have sounded alarm over the law. (Reuters)

China Focus: Mobile Internet Enhances Judicial Efficiency, Transparency

GUANGZHOU - As a hearing on a securities fraud case was about to open in the intermediate people's court of Guangzhou in south China, the plaintiff's attorney, Ye Fapan, was accompanying his pregnant wife in their hometown in Anhui Province, over 1,000 km away. However, the lawyer did not miss the hearing. He opened a mini-program embedded in messaging app WeChat, named "Guangzhou Micro Court," on his mobile phone and completed an identification process. Seconds later, his face appeared on the LED screen in the courtroom. This was the first time the court allowed an attorney to join a proceeding via mobile internet.

Some 753 million Chinese have access to mobile internet services, which transform their lives in almost every aspect, including public services and legal practices. (Xinhua)

Japan Cautious While South Korea Upbeat after North Korea Talks In Tokyo

TOKYO - Differences between Japan and South Korea on how to handle North Korea emerged on Tuesday with South Korea upbeat on prospects but a more cautious Japan demanding that North Korea account for Japanese people it says North Korea abducted decades ago. Signs of easing tension with North Korea began during the Winter Olympics last month, when the North sent a high-level delegation to the South for the Games, after more than a year of rising alarm over the North's nuclear weapon and missile tests. Japan has been more guarded about the prospect of talks between the two Koreas, and between North Korea and the



United States. Japan has warned that "talks for the sake of talks" would be unacceptable. South Korean officials have been briefing neighbours and allies, including Japan, on a South Korean delegation's visit to North Korea last week, which included talks with leader Kim JongUn and agreements on summits with both

South Korea and the United States. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Tuesday met South Korean National Intelligence Service chief SuhHoon. Suh, a member of the South Korean team that visited North Korea, held talks on Monday with Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Kono. (Reuters)

Indian Court Extends March 31 Deadline for Linking Of Biometric Ids

NEW DELHI - India's Supreme Court on Tuesday extended the end-March deadline for linking of the country's biometric ID program or Aadhaar to a range of services. The top court, which is weighing petitions on the legitimacy of the federal government's demand to make Aadhaar manda-

tory for services such as bank accounts and mobile phones, set no new deadline until it had given judgment in the case. "The government cannot insist on mandatory Aadhaar," said the five-judge Constitution Bench headed by the Chief Justice of India, DipakMisra. (Reuters)

U.S. Scholar Sees Obstacles to Success of Meeting between U.S, DPRK's Leader

NEW YORK - A U.S. scholar on Sunday pointed out the fundamental challenges lying ahead of the coming face-to-face meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

"The chances that this opening, as unprecedented as it is, will lead to a final resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis are slim," Patricia Kim said in a published analysis on Washington Post. "To lay down its nuclear weapons, Kim must be genuinely convinced that the United States will not harm his regime. This won't be easy, given Washington's track record of taking out dictators, most recently in Iraq and Libya," she said.

The DPRK will also face struggles to prove its trustworthiness, given a track record of violating deal after deal in the past, added Kim, a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank and publisher. The DPRK is most likely expecting the United States to refrain from imposing additional sanctions or engaging in other punitive measures during negotiations, while Washington's position at the time was that the sanctions were justified, said the scholar. On Tuesday, when news broke that the DPRK was willing to talk, the U.S. State Department announced new sanctions on the Asian country after formally determining it used chemical weapons last year to assassinate Kim Jong Un's half brother, Kim Jong Nam, she added. (Xinhua)

Iran Signs Industrial Cooperation Deal with Nordic States

TEHRAN - Iran has signed an agreement with Sweden, Denmark and Finland to cooperate over joint industrial projects.

The agreement was signed between the ambassadors of the three countries and the head of the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization of Iran (IDRO). Finland's Ambassador to Iran Keijo Norvanto in a Twitter message said the agreement was meant to promote collaboration in a variety of technical areas. They, Norvanto emphasized, included oil and gas, high-tech, transportation, renewable energies, manager training, industrial renovation, steel, water, investment and finance.

Iran's media also quoted Swedish Ambassador to Iran Helena Sangeland as saying after signing the agreement with IDRO that her country was interested in promoting

economic relations with Iran, stressing that Swedish private sector enterprises were specifically interested in cooperating with their Iranian peers.

Furthermore, Denmark's Ambassador to Iran Danny Annan was quoted as saying his country was interested in expanding cooperation with the Islamic Republic over the production of solar panels. Ali Araqchi, the director for international affairs of IDRO, told reporters the idea to sign an industrial cooperation agreement with the three Nordic countries had emerged last year. Araqchi said the agreement would make IDRO - which is the engineering arm of Iran's Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade - would make the Organization the gateway for the three countries to the industrial sector of the Islamic Republic. (Press TV)

Pakistan Top Court Indicts Minister in Contempt Case

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan's top court has indicted a minister in a contempt case for critical speeches he made after the court disqualified former prime minister Nawaz Sharif for concealing assets.

Danyal Aziz, a ruling Pakistan Muslim League party leader and minister for privatization, pleaded not guilty Tuesday. The Supreme Court had taken notice of speeches made by Aziz last year and he was charged with

accusing the court of bias against Sharif and saving opposition leader Imran Khan from disqualification.

The court set a hearing for March 26 for witness testimony.

Earlier this year, the court sent ruling party Sen. Nihal Hashmi to prison for a month for speaking against the judiciary.

The court disqualified Sharif last year on charges stemming from leaked papers from a Panama law firm. (AP)