

2 US Warships Sail Through Taiwan Strait amid Tensions with China

BEIJING - Undeterred by Chinese jet overflights and previous warnings, the US Navy has once again challenged the 'One China' policy by sending its vessels through the Taiwan Strait in what it called a routine freedom-of-navigation exercise.

After sailing in the vicinity of the Chinese-claimed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea earlier this month, USS McCampbell (DDG-85) reached another disputed waterway in the Pacific on Thursday. Conducting what the US Navy claimed to be a "routine" passage, the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer was joined by Henry Kaiser-class oiler USNS Walter S. Diehl (T-AO-193) as they sailed across the 110-mile-wide Taiwan Strait.



"The ships' transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to

a free and open Indo-Pacific," Lt. Cmdr. Tim Gorman told USNI News. "The US Navy will continue to fly, sail and operate

anywhere international law allows."

Taiwan's Ministry of Defense confirmed the passage of US warships, separately noting that mainland China's air force was continuing its overflights in the region for the second day running. H6 bombers and KJ500 early warning and control planes were seen flying over the Bashi Channel on Thursday. A day earlier, the Chinese reportedly sent "various military aircraft," including a Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jet and a Shaanxi Y-8 transport plane over the waterway separating the Philippines from Taiwan. Taipei responded by sending military aircraft and surveillance ships to the region. (RT)

S. Korea in Airborne Fight against 'Chinese' Pollution

SEOUL - Seoul on Friday sent aircraft over the Yellow Sea to carry out cloud-seeding experiments in an effort to tackle air pollution many South Koreans blame on China.

Air quality in South Korea is generally better than in its giant neighbour, the world's biggest polluter, which is periodically affected by choking bouts of filthy air and according to the International Energy Agency uses coal to generate around three quarters of its energy. Beijing has been seek-

ing to tackle the scourge, which causes widespread public anger, and a recent study found urban levels of PM2.5 - the tiny airborne particles considered most harmful to health - had been cut by almost a third on average over four years.

But they remain far above World Health Organization norms, and pollution levels in Korea sometimes spike as the prevailing winds blow PM2.5 particulates - referred to as "fine dust" in the South - across the sea between the two countries. (AFP)

BEIJING - U.S. billionaire George Soros' criticism of Chinese President Xi Jinping was "meaningless", China's foreign ministry said on Friday, after the investor and philanthropist called Xi the world's most "dangerous opponent" of open society.

Soros, who promotes liberal causes through his charities, said during a speech on Thursday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that China was the wealthiest, strongest and technologically most advanced authoritarian re-

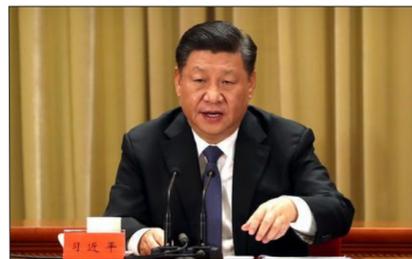
gime in the world.

"This makes Xi Jinping the most dangerous opponent of open societies," Soros said.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, asked about the comments, said remarks by some individuals that "invert right and wrong" were "meaningless and not worth refuting".

"We hope the relevant American can correct his attitude, not be shortsighted, and hold an objective, rational and correct opinion of China's development," Hua told reporters

China Says Soros' Criticism of Xi Is 'Meaningless'



at a regular briefing.

Xi has presided over a crackdown on dissent since coming to power in 2012, with hundreds of rights lawyers and activists detained. Dozens have been jailed. Soros

said Xi was wielding Chinese technology companies to develop artificial intelligence and a nascent social credit system that would allow China's "one-party state to reign supreme". (Reuters)

France Tells Iran New Sanctions Loom If Missile Talks Fail



PARIS - France is ready to impose further sanctions against Iran if no

progress is made in talks over its ballistic missile program, the French

foreign minister said on Friday. "We are ready, if the

talks don't yield results, to apply sanctions firmly, and they know it," Jean-Yves Le Drian told reporters.

Diplomats previously told Reuters in private that France, Britain and other EU countries were considering new economic sanctions against Tehran.

Those could include asset freezes and travel bans on Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iranians developing the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile program, three diplomats said. (Reuters)

Macron Popularity Up after Campaign-Style Public Performances

PARIS - French President Emmanuel Macron's popularity is creeping up in opinion polls as he tours the country as part of a "great national debate", part of his government's response to anger expressed by the "yellow vest" protest movement. The president, who lost 15 points between June and November, according to polls by the BVA survey group, has recovered four points over the past month, the latest BVA poll said Friday. The survey, carried out between January 23 and 24,

showed 31 percent of people had a positive view of Macron, while 69 percent expressed a negative opinion. An Odoxa poll, carried out on January 22 and 23 and also released Friday, found that 30 percent of people thought he was a "good president", while 69 percent thought otherwise. Analysts see his recovery as being linked to four campaign-style performances in "the great national debate" - a series of town hall meetings held up and down the country over the past 10 days. (AFP)

Canada Finance Minister Sees Headwinds from China Trade, Diplomatic Issues

DAVOS, Switzerland - Canadian Finance Minister Bill Morneau said on Friday the economy and business are facing headwinds from the U.S.-China trade dispute as well as his country's own diplomatic tensions with China.

Morneau, speaking to Reuters TV on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, said that Canada wanted to ensure that both its central bank and finance ministry have tools to deal with any economic challenges. (Reuters)

EU, Ireland to Step Up Brexit No Deal Planning: EU

BRUSSELS - Ireland has agreed with the European Commission to step up preparations for Britain possibly leaving the European Union without a deal to smooth its departure, a spokesman for the EU executive said on Friday.

Confirming that Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar had spoken late on Thursday, Margaritis Schinas told reporters that they had "looked forward to continuing close cooperation ... including on intensifying no deal contingency action in the coming weeks".

EU and Irish insistence on a "backstop" protocol to avoid a hard customs border with the British province of Northern Ireland after Brexit is among reasons why British lawmakers have refused to ratify a treaty agreed by Prime Minister Theresa May and intended to ease disruption when Britain leaves on March 29. (Reuters)

NATO Chief Says Missile Pact in Danger after Russia Talks

BRUSSELS - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned Friday that Russia shows no sign of respecting a major Cold War-era missile treaty and that the future of the pact is in danger as the United States readies to start pulling out of it next week.

"The treaty is now in jeopardy and unfortunately we have not seen any signs of (a) breakthrough," Stoltenberg told reporters after chairing NATO-Russia talks in Brussels.

The 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty between the United States and the



Soviet Union bans production, testing and deployment of land-based cruise and ballistic missiles with a range of 500-5,500 kilometers (310-3,400 miles). The Pentagon has shared information with NATO allies asserting that Russia's new 9M729 mis-

sile system falls within the treaty. It believes the ground-fired cruise missile could give Moscow the ability to launch a nuclear strike in Europe with little or no notice. Moscow insists the missile has a range of less than 500 kilometers. (AP)

Northern Irish DUP Says Wants Brexit Consensus, Sees Ways Forward

LONDON - The Northern Irish party that props up Prime Minister Theresa May's government said on Friday it wanted to reach consensus on a deal that worked for the European Union and United Kingdom and that it saw paths to avoid the border backstop. "We want to reach a consensus which respects the constitutional and economic integrity of the United Kingdom and which also works for our

neighbors in the Republic of Ireland," Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) deputy leader Nigel Dodds said.

"The trap of the backstop is the problem," he added. "There are ways forward which do not require this backstop and we need to see a willingness to explore such options."

Dodds said he was encouraged by what he called a more realistic approach from the EU. (Reuters)

U.N. Names Members of International Inquiry on Khashoggi Murder

GENEVA - The United Nations' human rights office said on Friday a three-member team of international experts would conduct an inquiry into the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, confirming a Reuters report.

Agnes Callamard, U.N. special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, told Reuters on Thursday she would travel to Turkey next week to head an "independent international inquiry" into Khashoggi's murder at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on Oct 2.

The U.N. rights office said in a statement that the independent panel would seek to establish "the nature and extent of States' and individuals' responsibilities for the killing".

The other two panel members are British barrister Helena Kennedy and Duarte Nuno Vieira, a pathology expert and professor at the department of legal and forensic medicine and ethics and medical law at Coimbra University, Portugal.

The trio will visit Turkey from Jan 28-Feb 3 and plan to report to the U.N. Human Rights Council in June, it said.

U.S. intelligence agencies believe Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered an operation to kill Khashoggi, a critic and Washington Post columnist, and say his body was dismembered and removed to a location still publicly unknown. Riyadh denies the crown prince had any involvement in the murder. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Hashemi Says Public Support Crucial to Her Release

TEHRAN - African-American Press TV news anchor Marzieh Hashemi has said public support definitely played a part in her release and vowed to further protest rights violations in the US. "I just wanted to thank all of you for your prayers and your support. It has obviously been of utmost importance and definitely has played a part in my release," said Hashemi in a filmed statement released on Thursday. Hashemi further urged viewers to take part in protests planned on Friday, saying her case highlighted how citizen rights can be easily violated by the US government. "It's about the possibility of this happening to any person at any time

in the United States; that they can be illegally detained and incarcerated without being charged, simply by saying that they are a material witness or so many other things," said Hashemi. "Once again, thank you all for all of your support," she added. The American-born anchor, who was released on Wednesday afternoon, said she will be staying in Washington DC to personally attend a planned Friday protest. Hashemi, a 59-year-old Muslim convert who has lived in Iran for years, was detained at St. Louis Lambert International Airport in Missouri last Sunday while in the US to visit her ailing brother and other family members. (Press TV)

Turkmenistan, France Ready to Intensify High-Level Bilateral Visits

ASHGABAT - The political consultations between the Turkmen and French foreign ministries were held in Ashgabat, Trend reports referring to the Turkmen Foreign Ministry on Jan. 25.

The French delegation was led by Florence Mangin, Director of the Department of Continental Europe of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development of the French Republic.

During the meeting, a proposal was made to consider the possibility of organizing official visits at various levels in 2019 and

holding joint events. The importance of intensifying bilateral visits at the level of the presidents, as well as strengthening inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary ties, was stressed.

The sides stressed the importance of developing the cooperation in financial and banking spheres, as well as the promotion of the activity of French companies in Turkmenistan.

French businessmen work in such areas as construction, transport, tourism and energy in the Turkmen market. (Trend)

Pakistan Eases Visa Rules to 'Heaven for Tourists'

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan has loosened travel restrictions in the hope of reviving tourism by offering visas on arrival to visitors from 50 countries and electronic visas to 175 nationalities, the government said on Friday.

The reforms, approved by the cabinet, would open up a new era for the tourism industry, which was devastated by Islamist violence after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States, Minister of Information Fawad Chaudhry said. "We have mountain tourism, we have beach tourism," Chaudhry

told reporters in Islamabad, referring to Himalayan peaks and Arabian Sea beaches seldom visited by foreigners. "Pakistan is a heaven for tourists."

Chaudhry did not identify the countries that would benefit from the new rules but in December, he told Reuters that citizens of most European countries would be granted a visa on arrival.

Tourists would also be allowed to visit the politically sensitive Himalayan region of Kashmir and other northern areas, which now require special permission. (Reuters)

Tajik Police Expected to Change Their Uniform in Spring

DUSHANBE - New samples of uniform for officers of internal affairs agencies of Tajikistan will be made ready by March 1, Major-General Farodbek Shodmonzoda, National Coordinator for Police Reform, told Asia-Plus in an interview, Trend reports referring to news.tj.

According to him, the new samples of police uniform will be submitted for consideration to President Emomali Rahmon in early March.

"If the President approves new uniform, first of all traffic police officers, district police officers and Patrol-Guard Service officers will be provided with new uniform," Shodmonzoda said. Besides, Tajik law enforcers are expected to be renamed from "militsiya" (militia) to politsiya (police). Tajik police reform

is a reform aimed at improving the efficiency of Tajikistan's police forces. The Police Reform Strategy in Tajikistan (Strategy) is a document, which defines the state policy on combating crime. It reflects the actions that will be implemented by the Government of Tajikistan in a mid-term on police reforming and development of Tajikistan.

The Strategy has been developed by national experts in cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office in Tajikistan based on the Joint Needs Assessment of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of Tajikistan, carried out by the OSCE assessment team in 2008, as well as based on the "Police Reform Assessment" workshop, conducted from November 9 to 20, 2009. (Trend)