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Europe, Iran to back nuclear deal as Trump decision looms

January 11, 2018 spacedaily.com reported: "Europe and Iran are to put on a united front in support of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal at talks in Brussels Thursday as Washington mulls reimposing sanctions on Tehran.

The European Union and the foreign ministers of Britain, Germany and France will unite to defend the accord, which curbed Iran's nuclear ambitions in return for the relaxing of punishing sanctions but which US President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticised and threatened to leave.

While EU diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini wants to keep the nuclear issue separate from other contentious issues with Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif will also face tough questions about recent anti-government protests which left 21 people dead.

Trump, who in October refused to certify Iran was complying with the deal but stopped short of withdrawing from it, is expected to decide on Friday whether to extend waivers on nuclear-related sanctions against Tehran.

The EU and other world powers have repeatedly warned it would be a mistake to abandon the deal, thrashed out with Iran over 12 years by the US, Britain, France, China, Germany and Russia. British foreign minister Boris Johnson called the deal "a crucial agreement that makes the world safer"..."

Iran threatens to ramp up enrichment beyond pre-nuke deal pace

January 11, 2018 timesofisrael.com reported: "An Iranian official threatened Wednesday to greatly accelerate the pace of the country's uranium enrichment beyond the levels seen ahead of the 2015 nuclear deal if the United States decides to back out of the landmark pact and reimpose punishing sanctions on Tehran.

'Iran is ready to increase the speed of its nuclear activities in various areas, especially enrichment, several times more than pre-JCPOA era,' said Behrouz Kamalvandi, a spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran in an interview with state television, using the technical acronym for the nuclear deal.



The comments came as a decision loomed for US President Donald Trump on whether to once again waive sanctions or put them back in place, effectively spelling the end for the nuclear deal, which lifted the financial penalties in exchange for Iran rolling back its enrichment program. Trump is expected to announce his decision Friday.

'If the sanctions suspension are not extended, that would violate the nuclear deal and the Islamic Republic of Iran will take first retaliatory action immediately,' Kamalvandi added..."

North Korea Declares 'Weapons Only Aimed at United States' at Olympic Talks

January 10, 2018 Breitbart.com reported: "Delegations from North and South Korea met at the border village of Panmunjom on Tuesday to discuss North Korea's participation at the Winter Olympics and generally improving the tense situation on the peninsula. At the meeting, North Korea made an obvious play to fracture the international coalition aligned against its nuclear missile program and weaken South Korean resolve.

'North Korea's weapons are only aimed at the United States, not our brethren, China or Russia,' Pyongyang's representative Ri Son-gwon declared during eleven hours of talks on Tuesday. He was referring to his country's illegal nuclear arsenal, which he said South Korea should refrain from discussing if it wants relations between the two countries to improve.

The meeting concluded with a joint statement that North Korea will send a large delegation to the Winter Olympics in the South Korean city of Pyeongchang, including high-ranking officials, athletes, and other performers. According to South Korea's Yonhap News, South Korean negotiators 'proposed the two sides march together during the opening and closing ceremonies and form a joint cheering team.' This would be the first time the two Koreas have marched together at an international sporting event since 2007..."

Philippines to protest over China activity on reclaimed reef

January 9, 2018 spacedaily.com reported: The Philippines will lodge a diplomatic protest with China after Manila questioned if Beijing had reneged on a pledge not to militarise a disputed South China Sea reef. Beijing claims nearly all of the sea and has been turning reefs in the Spratly and Paracel chains into islands, installing military facilities and equipment on them.

Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana Tuesday said Manila was investigating reports of recent Chinese activity on Fiery Cross Reef, an outcrop that Beijing turned into an artificial island and which now appears to house a military base. Lorenzana spoke out despite recent moves by President Rodrigo Duterte to ease tensions with China.

"According to them they are not militarising (the reefs) and it was for peaceful purposes only like tourism," Lorenzana said.

"But if it is true and we can prove that they have been putting soldiers and any weapons, defensive (or) otherwise, that would be a violation of what they said". Lorenzana said he had also received reports Philippine fishermen had been "harassed" by Chinese coastguards.

Asked about the Philippine complaints, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang said China "is conducting peaceful construction in our own territory", and that Beijing "has the need to build necessary territorial defence equipment". He added: "It's not targeted at any country. I need to point out that China and the Philippines are friendly, neighbours."

Last month, a US think tank released new satellite images showing deployment of radar and other equipment in disputed South China Sea islands. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) said the buildup continued despite rival claims across the sea from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan.

Over 2017, China installed infrastructure to support air and naval bases, such as "large radar and sensor arrays", the Washington-based think tank said. Fiery Cross Reef saw the most construction last year, with building work spanning 27 acres, or about 110,000 square metres, AMTI said its analysis of satellite images showed."..."

Israeli air strikes, rockets hit Syria: Syrian army

January 9, 2018 spacewar.com reported: "The Israeli army carried out air strikes and fired rockets at targets in Syria overnight, causing damage near a military position, the Syrian army said Tuesday. Israel's military has carried out several attacks on the Syrian army and its ally Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011.

The Israeli air force conducted strikes on the Qutayfeh area northeast of Damascus, causing the Syrian army to retaliate and "hit one of its planes", the Syrian army said in a statement.

Syrian air defences intercepted one rocket, but several more hit "near a military position, causing material damage," it added. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the air strikes targeted Syrian army and Hezbollah weapon depots.

The strikes sparked "successive explosions and fires, causing material damage" in the depots, where land-to-land missiles have been stored among other weapons, the Observatory said. The Syrian army also said Israel launched land-to-land missiles into Syria from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, but it intercepted them.

In a letter to the United Nations, Syria's foreign minister called on the UN Security Council to "condemn these blatant Israeli aggressions... and to adopt firm and immediate measures to put an end to them," official news agency SANA reported.

Israel seized 1,200 square kilometres (460 square miles) of the Golan Heights from Syria in the Six-Day War of 1967 and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community. Syria and Israel remain technically at war, and the Jewish state fought a devastating war against Hezbollah in 2006."..."

Report: Saudi Arabia working with Israel against Iran

January 8, 2018 Arutz Sheva 7 reported: "The Swiss newspaper Basler Zeitung on Monday morning reported that Israel and Saudi Arabia are working together to fight Iran's expanding presence in the Middle East. According to the report, the two countries are cooperating significantly in the areas of military issues and security on strategic issues, despite the fact that they have no open diplomatic ties.



Another report said that the shared interest in preventing Iran from establishing itself throughout the Middle East with a land corridor to the Mediterranean Sea has caused the Saudis to debate purchasing Israeli-made military equipment and defense systems. Basler Zeitung also claimed that Riyadh requested Israel examine the possibility of acquiring, including through a third party, anti-tank defense systems and the Iron Dome anti-missile system.



Recently, there were several reports of Israeli and Saudi officials meeting, though neither side disclosed the topics discussed. The Swiss report claims that in October, intelligence officials from both countries met in order to tighten cooperation, and discussed holding an additional meeting with intelligence leaders of both countries..."

Olive branch or booby trap? North Korea's new tone divides analysts

January 7, 2018 SpaceDaily.com reported: "North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un could be laying a trap for the US and the South with his apparent olive branches towards Seoul, analysts say, warning that Pyongyang's ultimate goal is to divide their 70-year alliance. After months of high tensions over the North's weapons ambitions — last year it launched missiles capable of reaching the US mainland and carried out its most powerful nuclear test to date, proclaiming it a hydrogen bomb — events have moved quickly in recent days.

In his New Year speech, Kim said the country had completed its nuclear deterrent — Pyongyang says it needs to defend itself against a US invasion — and he had a 'nuclear button on my desk'.

At the same time he made overtures to Seoul, saying Pyongyang could send athletes to the Winter Olympics the South is hosting next month and expressing a willingness to discuss the issue. It was a 180-degree turnaround for the North, which has long ignored South Korean President Moon Jae-In's efforts to engage it.

Since then the two sides have reopened a communications hotline and agreed to talks next week at Panmunjom, in the Demilitarized Zone that divides the peninsula, while Washington has agreed to a request by Seoul to postpone joint military drills that always infuriate Pyongyang until after the Olympics and Paralympics.

Unusually, Pyongyang — whose propaganda can be colourfully aggressive, sometimes threatening to turn Seoul into a 'sea of fire' — has referred to Moon as 'president', and asserted Kim's desire for improved North-South relations.

Sceptics say Kim is trying to drive a wedge between the allies — the US has 28,500 troops stationed in the South to defend it from the North — at a time when the international community should remain united in putting pressure and sanctions on the North over its weapons programmes..."

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