



**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION DIVISION
1155 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1155**

Ref: 24-F-0835
March 1, 2024

Mr. John Greenewald, Jr.
The Black Vault, Inc.
27305 W. Live Oak Road
Suite #1203
Castaic, CA 91384

Dear Mr. Greenewald:

This is a final response to your December 2, 2020 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the United States Air Force (USAF). For your convenience, I have enclosed a copy of your request. We received your request from USAF on February 28, 2024, and assigned it FOIA case number 24-F-0835. We ask that you use this number when referring to your request.

The Office of the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, a component of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, conducted a search of their records systems and located 69 pages determined to be responsive to your request. Ms. Tanya R. Rose, Information Management Director, in her capacity as an Initial Denial Authority, has determined that portions of the 69 responsive pages are exempt from release pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6), information which, if disclosed, would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of the personal privacy of individuals. Please note that we have considered the foreseeable harm standard when reviewing records and applying exemptions under the FOIA in the processing of this request.

In this instance, fees for processing your request were below the threshold for requiring payment. Please note that fees may be assessed on future requests.

If you have any questions or concerns about the foregoing or about the processing of your request, please do not hesitate to contact the Action Officer assigned to your request, Justin Liu, at justin.liu8.ctr@mail.mil or 571-372-0406. Additionally, if you have concerns about service received by our office, please contact a member of our Leadership Team at 571-372-0498 or Toll Free at 866-574-4970.

Should you wish to inquire about mediation services, you may contact the OSD/JS FOIA Public Liaison, Toni Fuentes, at 571-372-0462, or by email at OSD.FOIALiaison@mail.mil. You may also contact the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) at the National Archives and Records Administration to inquire about the FOIA mediation services they offer. The contact information for OGIS is as follows:

Office of Government Information Services
National Archives and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Road-OGIS
College Park, MD 20740
E-mail: ogis@nara.gov
Telephone: 202-741-5770
Fax: 202-741-5769
Toll-free: 1-877-684-6448

You have the right to appeal to the appellate authority, Ms. Joo Chung, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Privacy, Civil Liberties, and Transparency (PCLT), Office of the Secretary of Defense, at the following address: 4800 Mark Center Drive, ATTN: PCLFD, FOIA Appeals, Mailbox #24, Alexandria, VA 22350-1700.

Your appeal must be postmarked within 90 calendar days of the date of this response. Alternatively, you may email your appeal to osd.foia-appeal@mail.mil. If you use email, please include the words "FOIA Appeal" in the subject of the email. Please also reference FOIA case number 24-F-0835 in any appeal correspondence.

We appreciate your patience in the processing of your request. As stated previously, please contact the Action Officer assigned to your request, Justin Liu, and reference FOIA case number 24-F-0835, if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

for Pamela Andrews
Stephanie L. Carr
Chief

Enclosures:
As stated

This document is made available through the declassification efforts
and research of John Greenewald, Jr., creator of:

The Black Vault



The Black Vault is the largest online Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) document clearinghouse in the world. The research efforts here are responsible for the declassification of hundreds of thousands of pages released by the U.S. Government & Military.

Discover the Truth at: <http://www.theblackvault.com>

From: (b)(6)
Subject: Morning News of Note 11 Mar 2018 (UNCLASSIFIED)
Date: Sunday, March 11, 2018 4:57:44 AM
Attachments: [Morning News of Note 11 Mar 2018.pdf](#)

CLASSIFICATION: UNCLASSIFIED

OVERVIEW

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Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. A14 | Karen DeYoung and Kareem Fahim

In an effort to repair tattered relations, the Trump administration has told Turkey it will move to rein in Kurdish fighters who have been the backbone of the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in Syria, according to U.S. and Turkish officials.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

4. 2019 Budget: More of Everything for Defense

CQ Magazine, Mar. 12, Pg. 27 | Andrew Clevenger

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number that will meet little resistance in Congress.

AIR FORCE

5. Reserve Rescue Aircrews to Air Force: Don't Forget About Us

Military.com, Mar. 10 | Oriana Pawlyk

There may be darker days ahead for the Air Force's most active Reserve unit as a looming pilot shortage and shortfalls in related career fields create challenges throughout the force.

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EUROPE

17. Britain to raise Russian spy poisoning with Nato allies

The Independent (UK), Mar. 11, Pg. 4 | Adam Lusher

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18. Putin's sabre-rattling raises tensions with West ahead of vote

Agence France-Presse, Mar. 10 | Anna Smolchenko

Vladimir Putin's pre-election nuclear sabre-rattling has raised the stakes in Moscow's confrontation with the West on the eve of his fourth Kremlin term.

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

19. Amid little scrutiny, U.S. military ramps up in Afghanistan

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Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. A16 | Sayed Salahuddin and Pamela Constable
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AFRICA

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CNN.com, Mar. 10 | Steve George and Brad Lendon
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NOTABLE COMMENTARY

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28. The Ex-Jihadi in Plain Sight
New York Times, Mar. 11, Pg. SR7 | Rania Abouzeid
We met in a European city where he didn't live, a neutral location on a quiet side street far from the crowds of shoppers and sightseers. To passers-by, he looked like a hipster, dressed in rust-colored skinny pants and a gray polo shirt. But he was not. I had known him for years in his native Syria. He was a onetime confidant of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, then the leader of Al Qaeda in Syria.

29. Russia and NATO: Outgunned
The Economist (UK), Mar. 10 | Not Attributed
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

AS OF 0500 HOURS, MARCH 11

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"I may leave fast" if progress does not seem possible, Trump said at a campaign rally for Republican congressional candidate Rick Saccone in western Pennsylvania. Trump said he believes North Korea wants to make peace and that, "I think it's time."

A time and place to meet has not yet been set, although the meeting is supposed to happen by the end of May.

"Who knows what's going to happen?" said Trump, who added that if the meeting takes place, "I may leave fast or we may sit down and make the greatest deal for the world."

Trump made the shocking decision on Thursday to meet with Kim after the North Korean leader's invitation was relayed by a South Korean delegation who visited the White House. The move abruptly reversed decades of U.S. policy aimed at preventing North Korea from developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Earlier in Washington, Trump sought to rally international support for a potential summit, saying North Korea had agreed to not conduct another missile test until after proposed meetings had taken place.

"North Korea has not conducted a Missile Test since November 28, 2017 and has promised not to do so through our meetings. I believe they will honor that commitment!" Trump wrote on Twitter.

Trump's comments aligned with what a South Korean official stated on Thursday about the possible talks. Trump's tweet made no mention of nuclear tests, however.

It was not immediately clear which meetings Trump was referring to or their timing. South Korean officials said this week that Trump had agreed to an invitation from Kim to meet by May.

The White House has been under fire for agreeing to talks and responded to the criticism on Friday by warning that no summit would occur unless Pyongyang took "concrete actions" over its nuclear program.

Trump also took to Twitter on Saturday to characterize the leaders of China and Japan as supportive of the potential dialogue, yet did little to clear up confusion over the preconditions and timing of any talks.

Chinese President Xi Jinping "told me he appreciates that the U.S. is working to solve the problem diplomatically rather than going with the ominous alternative," Trump wrote on Twitter. "China continues to be helpful!"

Trump also tweeted on Saturday: "Spoke to Prime Minister Abe of Japan, who is very enthusiastic about talks with North Korea."

The United States has long said it wants any talks to aim at Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear weapons and missile programs.

Hopes for a breakthrough had risen on Thursday when Trump said he was ready to meet with Kim, who had invited Trump to what would be unprecedented talks between leaders of the two nations.

Trump and Kim prompted jitters around the world last year as they exchanged bellicose insults over the North's attempts to develop a nuclear weapon capable of hitting the United States. Pyongyang has pursued its nuclear program in defiance of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

Tensions eased around last month's Winter Olympics in South Korea, laying the groundwork for what would be the biggest foreign policy gamble for Trump since he took office in January 2017.

The head of South Korea's National Security Office, Chung Eui-yong, said in Washington on Thursday he briefed Trump about a meeting South Korean officials held with Kim this week. He said Kim had "committed to denuclearization" and to suspending nuclear and missile tests.

"I told President Trump that, in our meeting, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said he is committed to denuclearization. Kim pledged that North Korea will refrain from any further nuclear or missile tests"

BUYING TIME?

Trump's sudden decision to meet with Kim stunned even people in his own administration.

"The expectation is that the talks would lead to a discussion around a conclusion that we're ready to engage in negotiations," a senior State Department official said on Friday.

Some U.S. officials and experts worry North Korea could buy time to build up and refine its nuclear arsenal if it drags out talks with Washington.

2. Syria army cuts off main rebel town in Ghouta as death toll tops 1,000

Agence France-Presse, Mar. 10 | Hasan Mohammed

Syrian regime forces continued their offensive against Eastern Ghouta Sunday, a day after they cut off the rebel-held enclave's largest town, pressing on with a 20-day assault that has left more than 1,000 civilians dead.

Government troops and allied militia launched their military campaign for Eastern Ghouta on February 18 and have since overrun more than half of the area, defying global calls for a halt to the violence.

The assault has followed a divide-and-conquer strategy, eating away at rebel-held territory, and government forces on Saturday successfully isolated Ghouta's main town of Douma in a blow for the beleaguered rebels.

Regime fighters cut off a road linking Douma with the town of Harasta further west and also captured the town of Misraba, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"Regime forces have therefore divided Eastern Ghouta into three parts -- Douma and its surroundings, Harasta in the west, and the rest of the towns further south," the Britain-based monitor said.

Shelling and air strikes slammed into Douma on Saturday, trapping residents inside their basements for hours, AFP's correspondents in the town said.

Rescue workers and medics were struggling to navigate the town's rubble-littered roads to bring wounded residents back to field clinics.

At least 20 civilians -- including four children -- were killed in Douma on Saturday, in addition to 17 civilians in other battlefield towns, said the Observatory.

The deaths raised the assault's total toll to 1,031 civilians, including 219 children, according to the Observatory. More than 4,350 have been wounded.

Douma's opposition-run local council issued an urgent "distress call" on Saturday to international organisations.

"The bomb shelters and basements are full, and people are sleeping in the streets and in public gardens," the statement said.

"For three days, it has been hard to bury the dead because of the intense bombing on the cemetery," it added.

Eastern Ghouta is the last remaining opposition-controlled zone on the outskirts of the capital, and rebels there have regularly fired rockets onto Damascus.

On Saturday, at least one child was killed and four other civilians wounded in rebel shelling on eastern districts of Damascus, according to state news agency SANA.

Rebels have tried to slow the advance with an attempted counter-offensive, but President Bashar al-Assad's forces steamrolled their efforts.

Syrian state television broadcast live footage from Misraba hours after it was captured by the army on Saturday, showing dozens of civilians in a dark basement, surrounded by troops.

One elderly man broke down into tears as he relayed how his family had fled to Douma under fierce bombardment.

Eastern Ghouta is home to around 400,000 people, living under a five-year siege that has made food and medical aid exceedingly rare.

On Friday, an aid convoy by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered food to hunger-stricken residents.

It was the second convoy in one week, after deliveries on Monday were interrupted by heavy bombardment.

The UN refugee agency's Syria representative, who entered Ghouta with Monday's convoy, said the area was "on the verge of a major disaster".

"I've never seen such scared faces in my life," Sajjad Malik said Friday.

He described seeing a five-storey building that had been reduced to rubble, with a powerful stench emanating from several bodies trapped underneath.

Two Islamist groups are the most prominent rebel factions in Ghouta, but jihadists from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) -- once linked to Al-Qaeda's Syria branch -- also have a presence.

On Friday, 13 HTS members and their relatives were bussed out of the enclave.

Rebels said they would be taken to HTS territory in the northern province of Idlib, in an arrangement struck following consultations with the UN and international players.

Such evacuation deals have been repeatedly agreed in Syria's seven-year war, most notably in the second city of Aleppo in late 2016.

After a ferocious month-long government assault, thousands of rebel fighters and civilians were bussed out of the city's east.

That paved the way for Syria's government to announce the full recapture of Aleppo -- the largest defeat to date for the fractured opposition movement.

Syria's conflict erupted with protests against Assad but has since developed into a full-blown war drawing in world powers.

Russia has intervened on Assad's behalf while Turkey has backed rebels against his regime.

Saturday, Ankara-backed rebels advanced against Kurdish militia in northwest Syria, coming to within two kilometres (just over one mile) of the flashpoint town of Afrin, the Observatory said.

Elsewhere in Syria, the White Helmets rescue force suffered its first female fatality on Saturday, after air strikes hit a rebel-held town in Idlib province.

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3. U.S. moves to repair its frayed relationship with Turkey

Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. A14 | Karen DeYoung and Karem Fahim

In an effort to repair tattered relations, the Trump administration has told Turkey it will move to rein in Kurdish fighters who have been the backbone of the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in Syria, according to U.S. and Turkish officials.

The first step and "the crux of the matter," a senior Turkish official said, is to withdraw the Kurds from the Syrian town of Manbij and relocate them east of the Euphrates River. The town, about 25 miles from Turkey's border, has come to symbolize the fevered competition for territory and influence in northern Syria among the United States, Turkey, and other regional powers.

The American pledge, if carried out, would satisfy a long-standing demand by the Turkish government and fulfill a promise first made by the Obama administration to keep the Kurdish forces east of the Euphrates. The Kurds helped to take Manbij from the Islamic State in 2016 and have been there since.

Turkey has shown no tolerance for any development that strengthens Kurdish political and military groups in Syria, especially along the lengthy border Turkey shares with Syria. Turkey accuses them of being "terrorists" seeking a permanent Kurdish enclave allied with separatist Kurdish militants inside Turkey, known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Officials gave no timeline for moving the Kurds from Manbij to positions east of the Euphrates, 20 miles away, and did not indicate how the relocation would be accomplished. The officials said this would be discussed by newly established working groups from the U.S. and Turkish governments. The first session was held Thursday and Friday in Washington.

This tentative warming of relations, however, is already coming at a cost to the United States. Saying they feel let down by Washington, U.S.-allied Kurdish forces said last week they are withdrawing from the front lines of the fight against the Islamic State in southern Syria to join the battle against Turkey in the north.

The United States, which has pursued Islamic State forces with single-minded focus, has long insisted that the Kurds were the most effective partners in the fight against the militants, despite Turkish complaints.

U.S. commanders on the ground in and around Manbij have previously warned that several hundred American troops deployed there would defend the Kurds against any attack by Turkish troops, now massed a few miles away. Turkish officials were outraged last month when U.S. commanders touring the area with American journalists praised the Kurds and vowed to fight alongside them if there were a Turkish attack.

A shootout between two NATO members, both agree, would be catastrophic.

The U.S. relationship with Turkey has been on a downward trajectory for several years because of what both sides have been doing, and seeking, during Syria's civil war. An outright rift between the countries has seemed increasingly likely in recent months.

Beyond quarreling over the Kurds, the United States and Turkey have also traded diplomatic volleys in the aftermath of a coup attempt in Turkey in 2016. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has stoked anti-American sentiment at home, and American policymakers have explored the possibility of imposing sanctions on Turkey in response to Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian policies.

The possibility of a deal over Manbij has, at least temporarily, cooled temperatures, according to senior U.S. and Turkish officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity about the still-tenuous rapprochement. The meetings that began last week, which are set to continue in both capitals over the coming months, will deal with a constellation of divisive issues, another senior Turkish official said, including the Trump administration's opposition to Turkish plans to buy a Russian surface-to-air missile system.

The Turkish official said "the Americans understand our concerns more clearly" after visits last month to Turkey by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Trump national security adviser H.R. McMaster. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis also met with his Turkish counterpart in Europe.

It is far from clear, though, whether the improvement in relations will last. A senior Trump administration official expressed trepidation about whether the United States could persuade the Kurdish fighters to pull back.

"A lot of our ability to move forward [with Turkey] is going to depend on that, because we did make a commitment to the Turks, and they're going to hold us to it," he said. In return for the original U.S. promise to keep the Kurds clear of Manbij, Turkey has allowed American warplanes to continue using its Incirlik air base to strike Islamic State targets in Syria.

"It's tricky for us, because we've spent a lot of years with those guys," the U.S. official said of the Kurds. "Especially in terms of our [American] fighters, we've built profoundly deep personal relationships, and nobody wants to see those erode."

But senior U.S. military officials and diplomats, who describe the partnership with Turkey as paramount, appear to have concluded that they can no longer keep deflecting the complaints of a critical ally.

Turkey has already displayed its impatience with the presence of Kurdish forces along its border. In January, Erdogan launched an offensive against Kurdish fighters in the northwest Syrian enclave of Afrin.

Other issues dividing Washington and Ankara have also proved daunting, including Turkey's repeated insistence that the United States extradite Fethullah Gulen, a Pennsylvania-based Turkish cleric whom Erdogan accuses of directing the failed coup. U.S. officials have chafed at this pressure to extradite Gulen.

U.S. lawmakers, meantime, have become increasingly impatient with Erdogan's broad crackdown on dissidents, journalists and others after the coup attempt, and with the Turkish imprisonment of U.S. citizens. A brawl in May

outside the Turkish ambassador's residence in the District, where police said Erdogan's personal guards attacked anti-Erdogan protesters, also prompted outrage.

Several U.S. lawmakers have called on the Trump administration to impose sanctions against the Turkish government. Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.), in urging sanctions, has cited the cases of Andrew Brunson, a pastor from North Carolina imprisoned in Turkey, and Serkan Golge, a dual U.S.-Turkish national and NASA scientist sentenced last month by a Turkish court to 7 1/2 years on terrorism charges.

"The recent level of thuggishness is unprecedented for an ally in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Lankford said in a statement.

Some lawmakers have said that the upcoming State Department spending bill should require the secretary of state to block entry of Turkish officials who are "knowingly responsible for the wrongful or unlawful prolonged detention of citizens or nationals of the United States."

Nicholas Danforth, a Turkey analyst at the Bipartisan Policy Center, said both governments have compelling reasons to quiet their feud. If the dispute escalates, the U.S. government faces the possibility of forfeiting the use of military bases in Turkey or could see more U.S. citizens arrested. And Turkey, facing the prospect of sanctions, is aware that deteriorating relations could hurt its economy.

Tensions have also threatened efforts to achieve the goals both countries share in Syria, Danforth said. Turkey's singular focus on the Kurdish fighters has impeded the fight against the Islamic State and weakened Ankara's hand in negotiations to end the Syrian conflict, "undermining Turkey's ability to achieve a peace deal that would secure its interests," he said.

--Fahim reported from Istanbul

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DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

4. 2019 Budget: More of Everything for Defense

CQ Magazine, Mar. 12, Pg. 27 | Andrew Clevenger

Potential conflicts with Russia and China led the Pentagon to request \$686.1 billion for fiscal 2019, an eye-popping number that will meet little resistance in Congress.

The request, which includes \$69 billion for ongoing conflicts, is a 13 percent increase from the Defense Department's fiscal 2017 budget. Toplines of \$670 billion for 2018 and \$686.1 billion for 2019 were part of the two-year deal struck by Republicans and Democrats last month, but congressional appropriators have not approved specific funding levels for those years, making it difficult to compare 2018 numbers to the president's 2019 budget request.

The Defense Department intends to use the influx of additional funds to address readiness, or the ability to fight right now; and to accelerate preparations for conflicts against well-armed peers like Russia and China.

This closely adheres to Defense Secretary James Mattis' national security priorities, as outlined in the National Defense Strategy released in January.

Mattis has laid out two primary threats: Russia and China. Dov Zakheim, who served as the Pentagon's comptroller under President George W. Bush, says Moscow poses the more immediate problem.

"Given that, then he has to spend more money on operations, maintenance, and all the near-term things that send a message to Moscow," says Zakheim.

Operations and maintenance, the money it takes to keep aircraft, ships and weapons in working order and on active deployment, account for \$281.6 billion of the 2019 request. Efforts to improve readiness drew close scrutiny from Congress after separate collisions involving two guided-missile destroyers that killed 17 sailors last summer.

The budget also calls for modest troop increases, with funding for an additional 4,000 soldiers, 7,500 sailors, 4,000 airmen and 1,100 Marines, which will help ease the burden on a force that has seen deployment after deployment as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have stretched on.

At the same time, the new budget allocates \$144 billion for procurement of weapons and equipment and an additional \$92 billion for research, development, testing and evaluation. These are long-term investments under the heading of modernization that will help replace aging systems and derive innovative new approaches that lead to a competitive advantage on the battlefield.

"You can see that the trajectory has really changed," Zakheim says of the investment accounts.

The request includes significant purchases of familiar combat weapons: 77 F-35 stealth fighters for \$10.7 billion; 24 F/A-18E/F Super Hornet fighters for \$2 billion; 60 Apache helicopters for \$1.3 billion; 68 Black Hawk helicopters for \$1.2 billion; three Arleigh Burke-class destroyers for \$6 billion; two Virginia-class attack submarines for \$7.4 billion; and 5,113 joint light tactical vehicles (a multiuse armored replacement for the Humvee) for \$2 billion.

It also funds research for weapons under development as part of the nuclear triad, capable of launching nuclear devices from land, sea and air, that military leaders deem essential to a credible nuclear posture. That includes \$2.3 billion for the new stealth bomber, the B-21; \$3.7 billion for a new ballistic missile submarine; \$600 million for the long-range stand-off missile and \$300 million for the ground-based strategic deterrent, air- and ground-launched missiles capable of carrying a nuclear payload.

Some programs, like the \$6.5 billion request for the European Deterrence Initiative, address both short- and long-term needs. The training elements of the program help with troop readiness, while the increased military presence in Eastern Europe helps deter Russian aggression in the region.

"If you want to reassure your allies, you can't just step up your exercises, you have to buy more stuff. And [the Pentagon is] buying more stuff," Zakheim says.

The request strikes a pretty good balance between immediate and future priorities, in his estimation. But for now, the outlying years in the budget projections are flat, with no big increases once inflation is taken into consideration. "The real issue is what happens in '20, can this be sustained?" Zakheim asks. That will depend on how the economy is doing, what the threat environment looks like and the makeup of Congress, all yet to be determined.

In the meantime, appropriators will tweak the budget, but don't anticipate much resistance from Congress. There is already a budget deal in place that accommodates the defense budget's topline, and thanks to increased domestic nondefense discretionary spending, Democrats are happy with the deal.

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AIR FORCE

5. Reserve Rescue Aircrues to Air Force: Don't Forget About Us

Military.com, Mar. 10 | Oriana Pawlyk

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Florida -- There may be darker days ahead for the Air Force's most active Reserve unit as a looming pilot shortage and shortfalls in related career fields create challenges throughout the force.

Reservists here who train for combat search and rescue missions anywhere in the world say they're preparing to feel the brunt of the shortfall, and have a message for the Air Force: don't forget about us.

"Especially in the rated career fields -- pilots, navigators, loadmasters, flight engineers -- we're starting to see the same challenges as the active-duty," Col. Mike LoForti, commander of the 920th Operations Group, said.

Military.com on Feb. 20 toured hangars and facilities used for the combat-search-and-rescue mission and spoke with officials here about the 920th's evolving operations.

"You would never think you would have to worry about losing a navigator to the airlines," LoForti said, "but one of my navigators was just hired by an airline. And they're going to train him to be a pilot because of all his flight experience: 3,000 hours as a navigator."

LoForti said he's preparing for the competition to be fierce, not just throughout the Air Force, but with the civilian airlines as well.

"To be honest, I can't compete with the airlines, and I don't want to try to," LoForti said. "I'm just losing them where I'd never thought I'd lose them before."

That's happening as the Reserve tries to snap up active-duty members on the brink of leaving the service altogether, added Col. Kurt Matthews, commander of the 920th Rescue Wing.

The goal of the Reserve is to try and "catch at least 70 percent" of active-duty members who need a change of pace, Matthews said in a follow-up interview with Military.com. But there could be setbacks there, too.

"You hear Lt. Gen. Maryanne Miller, chief of Air Force Reserve, testifying before Congress that a lot of these initiatives for active duty don't apply to the Reserves. And likewise the [director] of the Air National Guard is doing the same thing, saying, 'Hey, wait a minute. We have similar issues but we don't benefit from initiatives going on in active duty all the time,'" Matthews said.

"More often than not, the Reserve has to compete and work that itself, and try and get similar bonuses or whatever it happens to be," he added.

In an ironic twist, initiatives such as aviation bonus hikes or the ability to give pilots preferred rotation choices -- which the active-duty side hopes will create an incentive for retention -- may hurt the Reserve, Matthews said.

"It retains folks we try to capture," he said, "but we try to keep a balance."

When LoForti served as the chief of the Flight Standards Division/Personnel Recovery and Special Operations Division, at Air Force Reserve headquarters, Robins Air Force Base, Georgia, two years ago, there were only 10 full-time pilot slots open throughout the entire Reserve Command. Now, there are about 300 full-time openings, he said.

But both commanders hope that dedicated service will not only be a reminder, but also a motive for citizen airmen to stay in the cockpits and on the flightlines.

Reminder of mission

Personnel recovery isn't always associated with the Air Force as much as the fighter jocks are. Even the drone or space career fields, where the service seems to be promoting its mission these days, get more attention.

But CSAR has a history, and will always have a stand-out place in the service's mission, LoForti said.

The 920th specifically is the most active Reserve unit, and the only Reserve rescue wing in the Air Force. Overall, it is responsible for 18 percent of all Air Force rescue operations, and has made over 3,000 combat saves since 1956, according to officials here.

One of their best-known missions was the race to save Marcus Luttrell, a Navy SEAL on the run from the Taliban, after he and his team were ambushed during Operation Red Wings in 2005.

LoForti played an audio recording from when then-Lt. Col. David Goldfein was shot down in his F-16CJ fighter jet over Serbia in 1999, during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. LoForti himself was in Hungary when Goldfein was shot down, and listened in on his distress calls, aware a mission to find him was about to spin up.

"I've taken a hit, and I'll be getting out of the airplane," Goldfein says over his communications system in the recording. "I'm gonna take to land for as long as I can. Start finding me, boys."

While the 920th was not involved in rescuing Goldfein, now a four-star general and Air Force chief of staff, the rescue was a testament to what CSAR ops mean to the Air Force, LoForti said.

Crews here recently got a taste of training with six A-10 Thunderbolt IIs in what LoForti said was training for a downed-aircraft scenario. Someday, that training may even include F-22 Raptors from Florida's Tyndall Air Force Base or Alaska's Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

"This is our bread and butter; this is what we train to day-to day," LoForti said.

But with only a handful of CSAR wings left across the total force, the services of the 920th are needed more than ever, he said.

"So we get tasked more often. It increases our operations tempo, so we're pretty busy," LoForti said.

Regardless of challenges, he said, "we're making sure every person in their Air Force Specialty Code is training to that mission. That's the one. That's why we're here."

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6. Air Force can't explain unprecedeted spike in cockpit oxygen problems

San Antonio Express-News Online, Mar. 10 | Sig Christenson

When the Air Force cleared the T-6A pilot training plane to resume flying this month, officials said they still couldn't positively identify the root cause of the recent sudden spike of unexplained problems that hit pilots with symptoms suggesting oxygen deprivation.

But while the plane was grounded, investigators uncovered serious issues with the plane's On-Board Oxygen Generating System, called OBOGS, others have since said.

Officials confirmed 21 unexplained physiological events, or PEs, in January. The most such events ever recorded in a single year for the T-6A going back to 2008 was five, the Air Force informed a congressional panel last month.

On Feb. 1, the 19th Air Force grounded all 444 of its T-6 trainers at Air Education and Training Command bases over concerns about hypoxia, the potentially fatal impairment whose symptoms include odd tastes in the mouth, confusion and loss of consciousness.

With his pilots back in the air, Col. Joel Carey, the commander of the 12th Flying Training Wing at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, said the study was extensive and pointed to "certain parts" of the OBOGS, which now will undergo maintenance much more frequently.

Most of the events occurred in other training wings, but "our portion of the T-6 fleet did exhibit similar maintenance issues that could have led to additional PEs if action was not taken," Carey said in a statement.

One pilot, posting on the website Flying Squadron Forums, wrote that although he and others received a briefing that "did a lot to dispel some of the complaints" about the decision to resume T-6A flights, pilots also were told that OBOGS inspected in February were "absolutely horrendous," containing dirt and gunk, stuck valves and oxygen lines that were kinked or had evidence of water in them.

Nearly four of five of the systems examined in February failed inspection, he wrote.

The AETC didn't confirm or deny those claims, saying only that inspections have "identified degradation in some of the system components."

In an email Thursday, its spokeswoman, Marilyn C. Holliday, released an Air Force statement saying the systems still are being examined and "given the number of aircraft and parts that need to be inspected, the statistics are changing on an hourly basis," so an exact failure rate won't be known until the entire fleet is checked.

Technicians are checking more than 250 parts of each aircrew breathing system, which includes the OBOGS, and repairing or replacing them as needed, she said. After testing the overhauled systems, "several hundred sorties have

been flown and the wings are continuing on the path to full scheduling capacity within the next week," the statement said.

The Air Force has described the recent events as "different from classic hypoxia" but even after the T-6 flights resumed it has continued to examine the oxygen system, working with Navy, NASA and industry experts.

"Over the past 10 years, the T-6 has had one of the lowest occurrences of physiological incidents, but they still occurred and will most likely occur in the future," and must be handled by additional cockpit systems and emergency procedures training, Thursday's statement said.

Days after the trainer was grounded, Lt. Gen. Mark Nowland, the Air Force deputy chief of staff for operations, spoke of the "recent rash of unexplained physiologic events" in testimony Feb. 6 before the House Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on readiness.

The pilots reporting hypoxia-like events flew earlier this year out of three AETC installations -- Columbus AFB, Mississippi; Vance AFB, Oklahoma; and Sheppard AFB in Wichita Falls.

Other Air Force fighters and trainer aircraft sometimes have seen spikes in such incidents over the past 10 years. The F-22A, one of the service's newest fighters, had 15 events in the 2012 fiscal year. The F-15C/D, a much older plane, had 20 in the 2016 fiscal year. For most years and most planes, the incidents are much rarer.

Last year, however, the Navy had to idle its T-45C trainers, British-made jets that can land on carriers, for three months after instructor pilots refused to fly it because of similar problems.

Rear Adm. Sara Joyner, who heads the Navy's response, told the House subcommittee that 588 cases in various aircraft have been reviewed dating back a decade, 212 of them involving environmental control system failures, 194 linked to breathing gas issues and another 51 malfunctioning OBOGS components.

A key goal of the Navy and Air Force is to reduce future such episodes. The Navy is developing equipment to measure and report health in the cockpit, and provide warnings or automated actions to alert crews.

The F/A-18A-F and EA-18G now have mandatory cabin pressurization testing every 400 flight hours, as well as improved overhaul and aircraft servicing procedures for environmental control system components. Nine in 10 of the planes' OBOGS have been redesigned with a catalyst to prevent carbon monoxide from reaching the pilot.

Navy EA-18G crews now use portable barometric recording watches that tell them when cabin altitude reaches preset thresholds or exceed fluctuation thresholds.

Neither the Navy nor Air Force says it can explain either recent surge in cockpit problems. But leaders in both services have signaled to Capitol Hill that they've got things under control. They've told their pilots that, too.

"The T-6 has been an incredible workhorse for the Air Force and has safely flown more than 2 million flight hours, but the aircraft is about a third of the way through its life cycle" and needs smart changes to its maintenance routines, said Maj. Gen. Patrick Doherty, commander of the 19th Air Force at Randolph, in a statement.

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VETERANS

7. Afghanistan war impacted Army vet behind California attack

Associated Press, Mar. 11 | Ellen Knickmeyer and Amy Forliti

YOUNTVILLE, Calif. — The Army veteran who killed three women after a siege in California had long dreamed of serving his country in the military, but his skill as a marksman led to dangerous missions in Afghanistan that left him anxious and wary when he came back home, according to people who knew him.

Authorities said 36-year-old Albert Wong, who served a year in Afghanistan and returned highly decorated, took the women hostage Friday at the Yountville veterans center where he had sought help.

Hours later, authorities found all four of their bodies in a room at the center that aids people with post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injuries.

"We lost three beautiful people," Yountville Mayor John Dunbar said. "We also lost one of our heroes who clearly had demons that resulted in the terrible tragedy that we all experienced here."

As family and friends of the victims tried to make sense of the tragedy, authorities offered little information Saturday about why Wong attacked The Pathway Home and whether he targeted his victims.

Those who knew the women said they had dedicated their lives to helping those suffering like Wong, and they would've been in a good position to assist him if things had ended differently.

Authorities said Wong slipped into a going-away party for some employees of The Pathway Home. He let some people leave, but kept the three women.

Police said a Napa Valley sheriff's deputy exchanged gunshots with Wong but nothing was heard from him after that. From a vet-center crafts building across the street from the PTSD center, Sandra Woodford said she saw lawmen with guns but the only shots she heard were inside Pathway.

"This rapid live-fire of rounds going on, at least 12," Woodford said.

The victims were identified as The Pathway Home Executive Director Christine Loeber, 48; Clinical Director Jennifer Golick, 42; and Jennifer Gonzales Shushereba, 32, a clinical psychologist with the San Francisco Department of Veterans Affairs Healthcare System.

A family friend told The Associated Press that Gonzales was seven months pregnant.

"These brave women were accomplished professionals who dedicated their careers to serving our nation's veterans, working closely with those in the greatest need of attention after deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan," The Pathway Home said in a statement.

Wong always wanted to join the Army and serve his country and was "soft-spoken and calm," said Cissy Sherr, his legal guardian when he was a child.

Sherr and her husband became Wong's guardians after his father died and his mother developed health problems, she said. He moved back in with them for a little while in 2013 after he returned from his deployment in Afghanistan and kept in touch online.

Wong thought the Pathway program would help him readjust after the Army, she said.

"I can't imagine what happened. It doesn't make any sense to me," she said.

Dunbar, a member of The Pathway Home's board of directors, said the program has served over 450 veterans in more than a decade.

The program is housed at the Veterans Home of California-Yountville in Napa Valley wine country. The largest veterans home in the nation cares for about 1,000 elderly and disabled vets.

Golick's father-in-law, Mike Golick, said in an interview she had recently expelled Wong from the program.

After Wong entered the building, Golick called her husband to say she had been taken hostage by the former soldier, her father-in-law said.

He didn't hear from his wife again.

Dunbar said veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come home with "a lot of need for special care." But he did not answer questions about why Wong was removed from the program.

At the veterans home, people who served in earlier wars passed the building that houses The Pathway Home, which was surrounded by crime tape.

Muriel Zimmer, an 84-year-old Air Force veteran of the Korean War, said she feels badly for Wong, saying she "cannot blame him. It's because of the war."

Wong served in the Army Reserve from 1998 until 2002 and then enlisted for active duty in May 2010 and was deployed to Afghanistan in April 2011, according to military records.

He was a decorated soldier and was awarded the Expert Marksmanship Badge. But that meant that he was tasked with dangerous assignments, where he saw "really horrible things" that affected his mental well-being, Sherr said.

When Wong found the veterans program in Yountville, he told Sherr, "I think I'm going to get a lot of help from this program," she said.

--Associated Press writers Frank Baker and Michael Balsamo in Los Angeles also contributed to this report

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8. With Snap ‘Yes,’ Trump Rolls Dice On North Korea

New York Times, Mar. 11, Pg. A1 | Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun

WASHINGTON — Summoned to the Oval Office on the spur of the moment, the South Korean envoy found himself face to face with President Trump one afternoon last week at what he thought might be a hinge moment in history.

Chung Eui-yong had come to the White House bearing an invitation. But he opened with flattery, which diplomats have discovered is a key to approaching the volatile American leader. “We could come this far thanks to a great degree to President Trump,” Mr. Chung said. “We highly appreciate this fact.”

Then he got to the point: The United States, South Korea and their allies should not repeat their “past mistakes,” but South Korea believed that North Korea’s mercurial leader, Kim Jong-un, was “frank and sincere” when he said he wanted to talk with the Americans about giving up his nuclear program. Mr. Kim, he added, had told the South Koreans that if Mr. Trump would join him in an unprecedented summit meeting, the two could produce a historic breakthrough.

Mr. Trump accepted on the spot, stunning not only Mr. Chung and the other high-level South Koreans who were with him, but also the phalanx of American officials who were gathered in the Oval Office.

His advisers assumed the president would take more time to discuss such a decision with them first. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, the president’s national security adviser, both expressed caution. If you go ahead with this, they told Mr. Trump, there will be risks and downsides.

Mr. Trump brushed them off. I get it, I get it, he said.

Where others see flashing yellow lights and slow down, Mr. Trump speeds up. And just like that, in the course of 45 minutes in the Oval Office, Mr. Trump threw aside caution and dispensed with decades of convention to embark on a daring, high-wire diplomatic gambit aimed at resolving one of the world’s most intractable standoffs.

The story of how this came about, assembled through interviews with officials and analysts from the United States, South Korea, Japan and China, is a case study in international relations in the Trump era. A president with no prior foreign policy experience takes on a festering conflict that has vexed the world for years with a blend of impulse and improvisation, and with no certain outcome. One moment, he is hurling playground insults and threatening nuclear war, the next he is offering the validation of a presidential meeting.

Whether the high-stakes gamble ultimately pays off, no one can know. Given two unpredictable and highly combustible leaders, it seems just as likely that the meeting will never take place. If it does occur, the challenges are so steep, the gulf so wide and the history so fraught with misunderstanding, suspicion and broken promises that the prospect of an enduring resolution to the impasse seems remote.

But Mr. Trump has staked his reputation as a deal maker on the presumption that he can personally achieve what no other president has before him.

A Thorny Road

The path to a possible meeting led through a thicket of hostility and feints.

Throughout his first year in office, Mr. Trump ratcheted up economic sanctions while rattling his nuclear saber at “Little Rocket Man” and threatening to “totally destroy North Korea.”

Mr. Kim could match the president he called “the mentally deranged U.S. dotard” bombast for bombast. In a New Year’s Day speech, he said he had “a nuclear button on the desk” that could launch missiles capable of reaching the United States. Mr. Trump responded with a tweet saying that “I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his.”

But South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, focused on the other part of Mr. Kim’s speech, when he declared that he would send athletes to the Winter Olympics, which would be held the next month in South Korea. A flurry of negotiations ensued at Panmunjom, the “truce village” inside the Korean demilitarized zone, that, by the standards of inter-Korean talks, went unusually well.

For the opening ceremony, on Feb. 9, Mr. Kim sent his sister, Kim Yo-jong, while Mr. Trump sent Vice President Mike Pence. The vice president was told of a possible meeting with North Korean officials at the Games if he would tone down his message, not talk about sanctions, not meet with defectors and not bring along Fred Warmbier, whose son, Otto, an American student, died soon after being released from captivity in North Korea.

Mr. Pence opted to do all of those anyway to show resolve, and the North Koreans canceled the meeting at the last minute. Taking the hard-line position he believed the president wanted him to take, a grim-faced Mr. Pence refused to stand for the entry of the joint Korean team that included athletes from both North and South and made a point of refusing to greet Mr. Kim’s sister, who was just 10 feet away.

Mr. Pence’s failure to stand was taken as an insult to Mr. Moon and the South Korean public, undercutting the vice president’s intent to show solidarity with an ally. Mr. Moon had been determined to bring the Americans and North Koreans together, to the irritation of the American delegation, which believed that he was deliberately trying to stage-manage an encounter they considered awkward and inappropriate.

Mr. Moon, by contrast, hosted Ms. Kim for a lavish luncheon at the presidential Blue House, and she surprised him with a letter from her brother. She told Mr. Moon that her brother wanted to convene a summit meeting at an early date. The two spent nearly three hours together, with Mr. Moon doing most of the talking.

He said that he really wanted to meet Mr. Kim and improve ties, but that there was a limit to how far he could go without progress in dismantling the North’s nuclear program. He urged North Korea to talk to the Americans and said they needed to hurry so as not to lose the rare momentum from the spirit of the Olympics visits.

A Family Envoy

After the unfortunate optics from Mr. Pence’s visit and what some viewed as a missed opportunity, Mr. Trump sent his daughter, Ivanka Trump, to the closing ceremony of the Games. She had dinner with Mr. Moon at the Blue House and briefed him on new sanctions her father would impose on North Korea, then made a public statement to reporters reaffirming the American strategy of “maximum pressure.”

She then headed to Pyeongchang for the last two days of competition. Briefed by Mr. Pence's staff, Ms. Trump and her team were "incredibly forceful," as one official put it, in going over the seating plan for the box and the timing and sequencing of arrivals to avoid any surprises.

Ms. Trump proffered a smiling, more open image that went over better in South Korea. She stood for the South Korean athletes, who this time entered the stadium separately from their compatriots from the North, and posed for photographs with famous Korean pop stars. But she too made a point of sending a message; for her guest in the box, she brought Gen. Vincent K. Brooks, commander of American forces in South Korea.

When she attended a curling event, Ms. Trump's team received word that the North Koreans were on their way in what the Americans thought was an effort to make a scene or prompt her to leave in an embarrassing spectacle. Ms. Trump decided to stay, and the North Koreans in the end did not come.

All Smiles in the North

With the Olympics over, it was time for Mr. Moon to make his move. Last week, he sent two trusted aides on a two-day trip to Pyongyang: Mr. Chung, his national security adviser, and Suh Hoon, his National Intelligence Service director. Flying north, they knew that they were meeting Mr. Kim but not when.

After landing in Pyongyang, they were taken to a riverside guesthouse where they found their rooms equipped with the internet and access to foreign television channels, including CNN. They could even surf South Korean websites, a rare privilege in the totalitarian state. As soon as they unpacked, Kim Yong-chol, a general who heads inter-Korean relations, showed up and said that they were meeting Mr. Kim that evening.

Black limousines took the South Koreans to Azalea Hall in the ruling Workers' Party headquarters, Mr. Kim's workplace. They found Mr. Kim and his sister waiting to greet them with broad smiles. Mr. Chung and Mr. Suh were the first South Koreans to set foot inside the party headquarters since the Korean War.

Mr. Chung had barely launched into his talking points when Mr. Kim said "I know" and "I understand you." Then he laid out his proposal: talks with the United States on denuclearizing his country; a suspension of nuclear and missile tests during the talks; and his understanding that the United States and South Korea must proceed with annual joint military exercises.

The South Koreans found Mr. Kim to be an extremely confident leader. He was closely following foreign news media, knew how he was depicted, and even joked about it. He had studied Mr. Moon's speeches and overtures toward the North.

He even joked about his missile launches. "I was sorry to hear that President Moon Jae-in had to convene his National Security Council meetings early in the morning because of our missile launchings," he told the South Koreans. "Now, he won't lose his early morning sleep anymore."

Mr. Kim agreed to open a direct hotline to Mr. Moon. "Now if working-level talks are deadlocked and if our officials act like arrogant blockheads, President Moon can just call me directly and the problem will be solved," he said.

And, he added, he was eager to hold a summit meeting with his South Korean counterpart. The South Koreans suggested Pyongyang, Seoul and Panmunjom as possible sites and asked Mr. Kim to choose. Mr. Kim said he would come to the Peace House, a South Korean building inside Panmunjom.

The meeting and dinner, complete with wines and traditional Korean liquor, lasted from 6 p.m. to 10:12 p.m. with much laughter and bonhomie.

After returning to Seoul on Tuesday, the South Korean officials briefed Mr. Moon and then South Korean reporters. After his news conference, Mr. Chung called General McMaster and told him that he was carrying a message from Mr. Kim to Mr. Trump. Only several people at the Blue House knew that the message included a proposal for a meeting with Mr. Trump.

Off to Washington

Mr. Chung and Mr. Suh flew to Washington, arriving Thursday morning. By the afternoon, they were at the White House, meeting separately with General McMaster and Gina Haspel, the deputy C.I.A. director. The four then got together and were soon joined by other American officials, including Mr. Pence, Mr. Mattis, Dan Coats, the national intelligence director, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, and John F. Kelly, the White House chief of staff.

Joined by their ambassador to Washington, the South Korean visitors were not supposed to meet with Mr. Trump until Friday, but when he heard they were in the building, he called them to the Oval Office.

Mr. Kim's invitation to meet was not a complete surprise to Mr. Trump's team. An American official said they had learned about it from intelligence agencies, so on Thursday morning, before the arrival of the South Koreans, Mr. Trump talked by phone with Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, who was traveling in Africa, about the possibility. What he did not tell Mr. Tillerson was that he would accept.

Mr. Trump was eager enough, however, that once he said yes, they discussed a meeting as early as next month. The South Koreans suggested it would be better to wait until after Mr. Moon's summit meeting with Mr. Kim in April, which led to a target of May.

Not only did Mr. Trump surprise the South Koreans by accepting immediately, he even suggested that they make the public announcement right there and then at the White House.

A stunned Mr. Chung said he had to first talk with his president, so he retreated to General McMaster's office to call Mr. Moon on a secure telephone line, waking him up in the middle of the night in Seoul, and then drafted a statement in collaboration with the Americans.

Elated, Mr. Trump stuck his head into the White House briefing room to tell reporters there would be an important announcement soon, something he had never done before.

Some of the president's advisers objected to the idea of a foreign official making a statement from the White House lectern, so they had him do it instead on the White House driveway, where visitors typically speak with reporters. Still, it was highly unusual for a foreign official to announce an American president's decision in a major international situation.

Out of the Loop

Mr. Trump's quick decision caught many off guard, including Mr. Tillerson and American allies. Television networks set up live feeds from the White House driveway to carry Mr. Chung's announcement. Congressional leaders and top officials at the Pentagon and the State Department learned what was happening from news reports.

The fact that it came on the same day that the president slapped stiff new tariffs on imported steel that would hit South Korea and Japan hard indicated how hasty and unplanned it was.

While Mr. Chung headed to the driveway, Mr. Trump hurriedly called Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan to let him know. Mr. Abe has worked assiduously to cultivate a close relationship with Mr. Trump and taken a hard line on North Korea, but he was left out of the loop, a fact that stung.

"I have an impression that the Japanese are not quite well informed," said Mine Yoshiki, head of a previous Japanese delegation seeking normalized relations with North Korea. "What we have been told is awfully out of tune, I should say."

Mr. Trump did not reach President Xi Jinping of China until the next morning. China has backed Mr. Trump on North Korea, generating good will between Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi. But China refused last month to go along with an American plan to interdict oil tankers bound for North Korea on the high seas, demonstrating that there were limits to how far China would go in punishing Mr. Kim, given the risk of a North Korean collapse on its borders.

Mr. Trump said his conversation with Mr. Xi went well. "President XI told me he appreciates that the U.S. is working to solve the problem diplomatically rather than going with the ominous alternative," the president wrote on Twitter on Saturday. "China continues to be helpful!"

But in response to Mr. Trump's planned meeting, China is engaged in what some call "exclusion anxiety," worried about being shut out. China would like the meeting to be held in Beijing, where six-nation talks were held with North Korea during President George W. Bush's administration, but Chinese analysts doubt Mr. Kim would agree.

For now, Mr. Trump is juggling these dynamics and preparing to meet the world's most hermetic. To his advisers, Mr. Trump has said he is impressed that Mr. Kim at such a young age has outmaneuvered almost everyone, but he has added that the North Korean leader is a wild card.

Of course, so is he. Mr. Trump vacillates between confidence and fatalism when it comes to North Korea. For the moment, he is optimistic.

"North Korea has not conducted a Missile Test since November 28, 2017 and has promised not to do so through our meetings," he wrote on Twitter on Saturday. "I believe they will honor that commitment!"

--*Reporting was contributed by Jane Perlez from Beijing, Motoko Rich from Tokyo, and David E. Sanger and Mark Landler from Washington*

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9. Trump's Abrupt Calls on North Korea and Trade Open a Door for China

New York Times, Mar. 11, Pg. A11 | Motoko Rich

TOKYO — Under normal circumstances, just one of the announcements that came out of the White House on Thursday would have unnerved American allies in Asia.

But in a single day, President Trump managed to unsettle the region on not just one front but two. Hours after he signed orders to impose stiff and sweeping tariffs on imported steel and aluminum, including from key allies like Japan and South Korea, he accepted an invitation to personally meet North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, for negotiations over the North's nuclear program.

For allies who have long looked to the United States to provide security and stability, it was a dizzying jolt of drama that injected fresh uncertainty into strategic calculations in the region, where China is seeking to supplant the United States as the major power.

"This is without question a big opportunity for China," said Ian Bremmer, the president of the Eurasia Group, a New York-based research firm that forecasts global risks. "The United States has become a less certain partner for a while now."

By all accounts, Mr. Trump made improvisational decisions about both the tariffs and the talks, either against the advice or without the knowledge of key administration officials and advisers.

"The abrupt decision on steel tariffs and now the summit with Kim Jong-un will inevitably raise questions in Tokyo and other allied capitals about how decisions are made by this administration that affect their interests," said Michael J. Green, a former Asia adviser to President George W. Bush who is now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, and who met with Japanese officials in Tokyo on Friday.

The news that Mr. Trump wanted to meet with Mr. Kim did provide relief, at least in the short term, from months of growing fears that military conflict would break out on the Korean Peninsula.

"On the one hand, we're buying time and Trump is not going to bomb in the spring," said Gordon Flake, chief executive of the Perth US-Asia Center at the University of Western Australia. "That's good."

But, Mr. Flake added, Mr. Trump "demonstrated extreme capriciousness on something like tariffs. This is why everyone in the region is having the same reaction: equal parts relief and alarm."

Mr. Trump's seemingly unstoppable series of erratic moves has helped cast China as the more stable power in Asia. But it has also diverted attention from Chinese actions that would otherwise have raised much more alarm.

"One of the most underreported consequences of the last 18 months is that China has gotten a free pass," said Mr. Flake, citing the country's military buildup on islands in the South China Sea, its economic punishment of South Korea for cooperating with the United States on a missile defense system and, most recently, President Xi Jinping's power grab, persuading the Communist Party to abolish limits on his time in office.

Under any other American administration, "the dominant narrative would have been Chinese overreach and internal crackdowns," Mr. Flake said. "But that narrative has been completely washed away by the chaos that is Trump."

The most recent announcements out of Washington, particularly the tariffs, could hurt China. Clearly, a trade war would be painful. And as Mr. Trump plans his meeting with Mr. Kim, Beijing is forced to sit on the sidelines awaiting the result.

“The downside risk for them is that they are not in the room,” said Mira Rapp-Hooper, a scholar of Asian security issues at Yale Law School. “Being completely cut out of a genuine relationship between the U.S. and North Korea is not in their interest.”

Still, lengthy talks between the United States and North Korea, even if they do not produce an agreement, would serve to delay some unpalatable decisions for China, analysts said.

North Korea has become increasingly disgruntled with China since Mr. Kim took charge, particularly as Beijing has backed economic sanctions against it. That has complicated China’s efforts to diminish American influence in the region.

“China wants the nukes removed, but not at too high a geostrategic cost, in the form of North Korea becoming China’s permanent enemy or falling into enormous domestic chaos or sliding into the American fold,” said Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing.

From China’s perspective, the Trump-Kim talks, by cooling the bellicose rhetoric between the United States and North Korea, would reduce the need for intense cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea.

“It suits China’s long-term strategic interest perfectly, because what they don’t want to see is pressure on North Korea leading to the strengthening of American alliances,” said Mr. Green. “China’s strategy is to start pulling apart those alliances incrementally.”

Increasingly, Asian allies that once viewed the United States as an anchoring force in the region now worry about being played off against each other. Japan and South Korea in particular, whose relations have recently deteriorated over longstanding historical disputes, find themselves jockeying for Washington’s favor.

In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has worked hard to cultivate a warm relationship with Mr. Trump. So even as Mr. Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multilateral trade deal centered in Asia, and imposed the new steel and aluminum tariffs, government officials have tempered their criticism.

“Japan and the United States are allies, so the Japanese government doesn’t want to be too negative towards the Trump government,” said Kazuhiro Maeshima, a professor of politics at Sophia University in Tokyo.

South Korea, meanwhile, lobbied for an exemption to the tariffs, citing the importance of the alliance. The envoys who visited the White House to brief Mr. Trump on their meeting with Mr. Kim made personal appeals to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and the national security adviser, Gen. H.R. McMaster, on the tariff issue, according to Kim Eui-kyeom, a spokesman for President Moon Jae-in.

The tariffs prompted harsh words in some South Korean news outlets for the leader of the country’s most important ally. “His style of governing, marked by disconnectedness and arrogance, is just mind-blowing,” a liberal daily newspaper, Hankyoreh, said in a Saturday editorial.

For Asian allies, perhaps the most difficult task in dealing with Mr. Trump — one that is hardly unique to foreign governments — is scrambling to discern his true intentions.

Mr. Trump often “is saying one thing in Japan and another thing in Seoul,” said Mine Yoshiki, a former Japanese Foreign Ministry official who was involved in past talks between Japan and North Korea, and who now runs a think tank, the Institute of Peaceful Diplomacy.

Mr. Moon, after being sidelined by Washington in its approach to North Korea a few months ago, would now seem to be in favor, having effectively brokered Mr. Kim’s invitation to Mr. Trump. But analysts warned that the talks could go in directions South Korea might not welcome.

“We quickly get to the question of what is going to be talked about here,” said Ms. Rapp-Hooper. “Kim Jong-un is clearly not ready to give up his nuclear weapons. If it gets to that, he will make extreme security demands, not only a security guarantee, but demanding that we end our alliance with South Korea and withdraw our troops from the peninsula.”

If Mr. Trump offered to significantly reduce America’s presence in South Korea in exchange for limits on the North’s nuclear program, it would be a setback for South Korea and Japan and a long-term win for China.

American allies in the region, along with many developing countries in Southeast Asia, want the United States to maintain a strong presence, as much to counterbalance China as to promote democratic values, said Kristi Govella, an assistant professor of Asian studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

“Most countries would prefer not to be dominated by anybody — whether it is the U.S. or China or Japan,” Ms. Govella said. “Especially for the smaller countries, they want to hedge a bit and have different options, and not be subject to the will of any particular country.”

--Jane Perlez contributed reporting from Beijing, and Choe Sang-Hun from Seoul, South Korea

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10. Rational yet unpredictable: North Korea's Kim an enigma for US

Agence France-Presse, Mar. 10 | Paul Handley

Kim Jong Un has been accused of executing generals, murdering relatives, presiding over global criminal operations and has threatened the United States with nuclear armageddon.

But a string of surprising diplomatic openings -- including Thursday's stunning offer to meet US President Donald Trump -- has only deepened the enigma surrounding the North Korean leader.

At a lengthy dinner he hosted for South Korean officials on Monday, the man once dismissed by the West as irrational and paranoid presented himself as gracious and confident.

With Trump now planning to meet Kim possibly in May, US officials are working overtime to get a better understanding of what makes him tick.

The prince-like Kim, 34, and his isolated country, remain one of the most impenetrable targets for US intelligence. The most prominent American to have met him is former NBA star Dennis Rodman, who has visited the basketball-mad Kim several times.

Kim's determined push to gain a long range nuclear ballistic missile capability to threaten not only Japan but the United States, and his threats to use it, made US intelligence officials concerned last year that he had a precarious understanding of the world outside Pyongyang.

Kim didn't know the kind of danger he was putting his country in, they said. In December, CIA Director Mike Pompeo openly questioned whether Kim is getting "sound advice" from those around him.

Scott Snyder, a Korea specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations, said that the past few weeks, in which North Korea joined the Winter Olympics in South Korea, invited Seoul officials to Pyongyang, and then offered to freeze nuclear and missile tests for talks with Trump, was possible evidence that Kim may have wised up.

"He's definitely getting some good advice from somewhere now," he told AFP.

He noted that Kim's offer came before he had fully demonstrated he could bomb the United States. That could have been a red line for Washington.

"He stopped short of a full capability, a good move," said Snyder.

Former CIA official and Korea negotiator Joseph DeTrani said two changes have become clear with Kim.

First is the country's success in its military advances. "He's got to feel good about his nuclear missile program," DeTrani said.

But at the same time, he said, Kim now knows how much the international sanctions imposed because of those advances are hurting his country and people.

"I think we know that sanctions are biting and military exercises are intimidating," he said.

One thing Kim is not, DeTrani added, is irrational.

"He seems to be an extremely rational actor, a bit unpredictable, also very ruthless."

Michael Madden, whose group North Korea Leadership Watch does deep dives into all things Kim, said the North Korean leader appears to be moving into a new phase.

Since inheriting his father Kim Jong Il's mantle in 2011, he spent his first six years consolidating power, reportedly liquidating dozens of opponents, trimming some of the military's independent power, and building his internal surveillance capabilities.

Today, Madden said, Kim's regime "is more flexible than we think they are."

That was on display at the dinner with the South Koreans Monday where he showed himself to be "a fairly graceful person," with his rarely-seen wife at his side, readily joking and making fun of himself, Madden said.

The North Koreans released photographs and video from the lavish banquet almost immediately. "It confirms he's confident in having consolidated his power," said Snyder.

Former US diplomat Bill Richardson, who met Kim Jong Il several times, said Kim is on the cusp of achieving what his father and grandfather always wanted: to be treated as equals by Washington.

At just 34, Kim "is unpredictable, sometimes irrational. But he's been underestimated," Richardson said.

"I've long thought he had an agenda, an end-game, and it's obvious that he does. He's evolved from a bomb-throwing leader to a man with a strategic vision," Richardson said.

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11. In state media, China presents itself as crucial to U.S.-North Korea talks

Reuters, Mar. 10 | Ben Blanchard

BEIJING -- China helped bring about a dramatic easing of tensions between the United States and North Korea, according state media outlets, adding evidence that the government sees itself as a central player in any agreement despite largely sitting on the sidelines so far.

The commentary seeks to cast the planned talks between the two Koreas - and a meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un - as the result of Chinese efforts.

The Communist Party's official People's Daily cited China's plan for North Korea to suspend nuclear and missile tests, and South Korea and the United States to suspend military drills as leading to this moment.

"It should be understood that these easing of tension signals are actually an effect brought about by the 'dual suspension'" proposal, the paper said on Saturday.

The paper cited Trump as telling Chinese President Xi Jinping in a telephone call on Friday that China's position that the United States should talk to North Korea was the correct one.

"The U.S. side profusely thanked and put high importance on China's important role in the Korean peninsula issue," the paper said in its regular "Zhong Sheng," or "voice of China," column, which presents the paper's position on foreign policy.

China has been front and centre in diplomatic efforts over North Korea, long pushing for a resumption of talks to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. A decade ago, it hosted numerous rounds of negotiations that fizzled out.

It has also been deeply involved in diplomatic efforts at the United Nations.

But its relations with North Korea have nosedived. There are few high-level contacts between the two countries at present, and North Korea's youthful leader, Kim, widely derided on Chinese social media as "Fatty Kim," has not visited China since taking power in 2011.

China played little obvious role in the thaw between the two Koreas at last month's Winter Olympics, which saw a high-level North Korean delegation attend and set the groundwork for an inter-Korean summit in April.

Han Zheng, Shanghai's former Communist Party boss, led China's delegation at the opening ceremony. Though he is the party's seventh-ranked leader, with a position on the party's elite Standing Committee, which runs China, he has little diplomatic experience.

China said he met the North Koreans, but gave no details on what was said. Beijing-based diplomats say contacts between China and North Korea have been sporadic, limited to party-to-party exchanges, and have yielded nothing.

CHINA'S ROLE "CAN'T BE AVOIDED"

Beijing has key strategic interests when it comes to North Korea, and has long feared that a collapse of its isolated neighbour could push waves of refugees into northeastern China, or that nuclear war on the Korean peninsula could contaminate swathes of the country.

The emotional ties are deep too. The two countries fought side by side in the 1950-53 Korean War - a son of Mao Zedong's died in the conflict - and China has long viewed North Korea as a useful buffer between it and U.S. forces in South Korea.

So although peace is Beijing's earnest desire, it needs to ensure China's interests are properly accounted for.

Zheng Jiyong, director of the Centre for Korean Studies at Shanghai's Fudan University, said in an interview posted on the WeChat account of the overseas edition of the People's Daily that China must be involved in U.S.-North Korea talks.

"China's role can't be avoided, and there's no way for it to be kept away," Zheng said.

If the United States and North Korea really want results, China is the only country that can play the role of guarantor, he added.

"No matter the direction of North Korea-U.S. talks, be it war or peace, if there is no help or obstruction from China then it's impossible for there to be real stability on the peninsula," he said.

State media have sought to downplay any implication that China is being marginalised, and reinforce the point that China has a vital part to play.

"China will advocate the international security mechanism and help prevent North Korea from being deceived or squeezed by the U.S. once it begins to denuclearise," widely read tabloid the Global Times wrote in an editorial.

"China will welcome the dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea, and resolutely support North Korea securing its due interests in the process of denuclearisation. Through these efforts, China's interests will not be pushed aside," it said.

Exactly what China wants to do is unclear at this point, though it might want to host the Trump-Kim get-together.

China's Foreign Ministry said on Friday the country would continue to play a "positive role" in pushing for a political resolution and for lasting peace and stability. But it offered no other details and avoided directly answering a question on whether it could host the Trump-Kim talks.

"China will feel very good in the sense that basically North Korea has offered something that looks like an endorsement of the dual suspension strategy," said Zhao Tong, a North Korea expert at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center in Beijing. But "in terms of the direct talks and negotiations, China is no longer the most relevant player," he said. "And given the progress is taking place at such a rapid pace there is increasing concern in China that China's being kept out of the whole thing and that China's losing control, even though again China is, in general, supportive of this progress."

--Additional reporting by Philip Wen

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12. India, France to work for Indian Ocean freedom of navigation

Associated Press, Mar. 10 | Ashok Sharma

NEW DELHI — India and France pledged Saturday to work together to ensure freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and signed an agreement to expedite construction of a major nuclear power plant in India by a French company.

After talks with French President Emmanuel Macron in New Delhi, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also highlighted a solar alliance and cooperation between the two countries in defense, security, technology, space and counterterrorism.

Macron, who arrived in New Delhi on Friday for a four-day visit to India, said France and India should be key partners.

"And I dream to have more and more Indian citizens coming to France -- studying, becoming entrepreneurs, creating startups -- and I want my country to be a best partner in Europe, an entry point," Macron said at a reception ceremony.

"I want to double the number of Indian students coming to France," he said later on Twitter.

Modi said it was critical for the two countries to cooperate in the Indian Ocean region.

"Both our countries believe that for world peace, progress and prosperity in the future, the Indian Ocean region is going to play a very important role," he said.

To help ensure freedom of navigation, the space agencies of the two countries signed an accord to help them detect, identify and monitor sea vessels.

The United States considers India a critical anchor in a regional strategy for the Indian and Pacific Oceans to blunt an increasingly assertive China. India is rallying support of countries including France and Australia on the maritime security front.

Shivani Singh, an Indian researcher on nuclear security, said France, like India, is an Indian Ocean power with a similar culture of strategic autonomy.

"France has the largest Exclusive Economic Zone in the world, of which 24 percent lies in the Indian Ocean region," Singh wrote on her blog on Friday.

France has three Indian Ocean territories -- Reunion, Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands -- comprising a total of almost 1 million French citizens.

"France also has military bases in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates," Singh wrote. "This gives France significant sovereign, demographic and economic interests to defend militarily in the region."

France and India also agreed to exchange information and technical experts in the fields of environment and climate change.

The nuclear agreement is considered significant, with critics saying that Jaitpur, the site of the six-unit plant, which is to generate 9,900 megawatts of power in western India, is in a seismic zone. The opposition has grown since Japan's nuclear accident in 2011, with several villagers refusing to hand over their land to the Indian government for the project.

On Saturday, the nuclear agreement was signed by state-run Nuclear Power Corporation of India and the French firm EDF.

Another agreement envisages reciprocal logistical support between the two countries' armed forces.

In 2016, India signed an \$8.78 billion deal with France to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets in "ready to fly" condition, meaning they will be made in France.

On Sunday, India and France will co-host the first meeting of the International Solar Alliance, an initiative launched by the two countries on the sidelines of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference.

India says that access to solar technology is becoming a reality, with costs coming down and grid connectivity improving.

The objective of the solar alliance of more than 120 countries is to work for efficient exploitation of solar energy to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

France is the ninth-largest foreign investor in India. Bilateral trade between the two countries touched \$10.95 billion during April 2016 to March 2017, according to India's External Affairs ministry.

India's main exports to France include textiles, boilers, electrical machinery and equipment, organic chemicals, railroad rolling stock, mineral fuels, leather goods, and gems and jewelry.

France mainly exports aircraft, medical instruments, organic chemicals, iron and steel, plastics, pharmaceuticals and chemical products to India.

Macron also paid homage to the tens of thousands of Indians who died in World War I, and said India is being invited to a major ceremony being planned in Paris for Nov. 11, the 100th anniversary of the war's end.

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IRAQ/SYRIA

13. Turkey's president slams NATO for lack of support in Syria

Associated Press, Mar. 10 | Not Attributed

ISTANBUL — Turkey's president has criticized NATO for not supporting his country's ongoing military operation against Syrian Kurdish fighters in Syria.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking to reporters on Saturday, asked, "Hey NATO, where are you?" and accused the military alliance of double standards.

Erdogan said NATO member Turkey sent troops to conflict zones when requested, but did not receive support in return.

Turkey launched a solo military offensive against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units or YPG on Jan. 20 to clear them from Afrin in northwestern Syria.

The country considers the YPG a terror organization, but its NATO ally, the United States, backs the fighters to combat the Islamic State group.

Erdogan urged NATO to come to Turkey's aid, saying its borders are "under threat right now."

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14. Allied With Both the U.S. and a Leader Jailed as a Terrorist

New York Times, Mar. 11, Pg. A7 | Rod Nordland

AINISSA, Syria -- At the headquarters of the Syrian Democratic Forces in Ainissa, the normally bustling offices were thinly populated on a recent day as the Kurdish-dominated coalition shifted its fighters to battle against the Turkish invasion in northwestern Syria.

Haqi Kobani, the deputy commander of the S.D.F., was holding down the fort in his capacious office, where a portrait of Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., had pride of place. While Kurds hold most of the leadership positions, the S.D.F. is a majority Arab force now, engaged with the Americans in the fight against the Islamic State, mostly in Arab rather than Kurdish areas of Syria.

"Arabs love Abdullah Ocalan too," Mr. Kobani said, casting a glance at the portrait. "There's nothing hidden from our side. Everything we do is obvious and clear to the world."

Many Arabs would probably differ about their love of Mr. Ocalan, whose socialist, radically egalitarian philosophy of governance holds sway throughout the autonomous region, known as Rojava, that the Kurds have carved out in Syria, with the help of the American-led international coalition. Their uneasy alliance, held together by the fight against the Islamic State, could be severely tested as the Kurds expand their control.

Kurdish aspirations will also come up against an implacable Turkey, which regards a self-governing Kurdish region across its southern border, and controlled by the P.K.K., as nothing short of an existential threat. Those fears led to the offensive against Afrin, the eastern region of Rojava, and Turkey has even talked about attacking further east, which would put it in conflict with American forces.

In the face of those daunting obstacles, the Kurds have been slowly and systematically building Rojava, knowing that eventually the war would end and the truly difficult job of managing the peace would begin.

For six years they have been establishing local and regional governments, sending foreign affairs representatives abroad, collecting taxes, organizing socialist communes and raising militias. They often describe their revolution as "the project" or "the experiment," the implementation of local self-governing democracy, freedom and equality for women and a socialist system inspired by anarchist and Marxist philosophies.

As the Islamic State has crumbled in the eastern part of Syria controlled by the Americans and the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurds have moved into what had been majority Arab areas, bringing Mr. Ocalan's principles and governing philosophy along with them. Self-administration governments, after the Kurdish model, have been established in the city of Manbij since the Islamic State was defeated there in 2016, and recently even in Raqqa, after the coalition and their Kurdish-led allies drove the extremists from their self-declared capital last year.

On a recent visit to the predominantly Arab city of Manbij, outside Rojava, strains between the Kurdish leadership and the Arab populace were clearly visible, despite official efforts to deny the problem. But there were also signs of acceptance.

An Arab schoolteacher said most Arabs in the town were unhappy with what they see as a Kurdish government, but were afraid to speak out. For visiting journalists, it was difficult to speak to Arab residents without government minders insisting on being present.

Many Arabs, the schoolteacher said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he feared detention, have been particularly unhappy since the reported arrests in early January of two Arab men, whose bodies were found 17 days later, dumped on the highway outside town.

Government officials at first promised journalists that they could visit family members of those who were killed, and also meet with a committee of Arab elders, set up to investigate the killings. The officials said both groups had absolved the Kurdish authorities of blame.

But the visit to the families was denied, and while the meeting with the committee did take place, it happened only in front of half a dozen Kurdish officials. Reached independently later, at the village of Kabor Emo outside Manbij, the father of one of the victims had a different story.

"It was the democratic government, I blame the democratic government," said the father, Muhammad Omar al-Masri, but then he broke off the interview as villagers became angry and agitated at visitors.

Dealing with Arab populations is not the only problem that Mr. Ocalan presents for Kurdish aspirations. The group he leads from prison, the P.K.K., is a designated terrorist organization to Western countries, including the Kurds' American allies. The Syrian Kurds claim they have nothing to do with the P.K.K., but Mr. Ocalan's cultlike popularity in Rojava argues otherwise.

Washington does not consider the Peoples Protection Units, or Y.P.G., the Kurdish militia that is the dominant partner in the Syrian Democratic Forces, a terrorist outfit. They fight alongside American Special Operations troops in Syria, and American military leaders praise them for bringing stable government to the areas they control. That includes areas that are largely Arab, as the Kurds have expanded their writ in the north and the Islamic State has been reduced to small pockets mostly near the Iraqi border in the south.

"There's a lot of people that do equate them with the P.K.K., but I have not seen any indication of that in my dealings with them," said Maj. Gen. James B. Jarrard, the American Special Operations commander in Syria and Iraq.

The Kurdish forces have set up civilian governments that are often run by Arabs in areas where they predominate, and have successfully turned the S.D.F. into a majority Arab force, General Jarrard said. The result has been stable government, which has helped to turn sympathies away from the extremists, the general said, during a recent visit to the front lines near Manbij.

Many independent observers disagree about the Y.P.G. "Everybody knows with a wink and a nod that it's the P.K.K.," said Joost Hilterman, a longtime observer of the Kurds with the International Crisis Group. "The Y.P.G. is an integral part of the P.K.K. command structure. They may be mostly Syrians, though not exclusively, but all are part of the P.K.K."

Salih Muslim, the foreign affairs representative for the coalition representing the civilian side of the Kurdish movement, denied that. "We belong in Rojava, we have organized our people in Rojava, but it doesn't mean we are P.K.K. also," he said. "We decide for ourselves."

But he also defended the P.K.K. and refused to describe it as a terrorist organization, one implicated in attacks that killed civilians. "That is not true now, maybe during the '80s or '90s, but then they agreed internationally to protect civilians and since then I didn't hear of any attack on civilians."

For now, Syria's Kurds and their American allies are doing their best to manage an awkward situation, and not all signs are bleak for the future of Rojava. Many Arabs say they are happy with the new authority, even in Arab areas. Younger Arab women have eagerly joined gender equality initiatives and even volunteered for the Y.P.J., the Kurdish women's military force.

At the Hassan al-Amin High School in Manbij, a group of Arab teenage boys gathered outside after classes were dismissed, so that people could join demonstrations in town against the Turkish attack on Afrin. All of them said they looked forward to joining the Manbij Military Council as soon as they were old enough to fight. While the council is majority Arab, its leadership is Kurdish and it is under the ultimate control of the Kurdish military and part of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Ali, 14, said his father had joined; Thebet, 13, said the same of two of his brothers. "I will be the first to join, as soon as I graduate," said Ahmed, 16, the tallest, while several of the other boys objected that they would be. "We will go and fight the Turkish colonizers."

--*Karam Shoumali contributed reporting from Berlin*

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15. A city of walls and fear in Iraq

Los Angeles Times, Mar. 11, Pg. A1 | Nabih Bulos

The walls are constructed of cinder blocks, steel and concrete. Some have gates for pedestrian traffic. Others evoke the oppressive days of the Berlin Wall -- towering concrete panels lined up in a row, and impassable.

The barriers snake through Tuz Khurmatu, turning it into a city of walls.

In years past, walls went up to protect against car bombs. Then Shiite Turkmens erected walls to guard against Islamic State after its resurgence in 2014.

Now even after the jihadis have been driven out of the city, the walls still stand, and Tuz Khurmatu remains a flashpoint with an unstable melange of sects and ethnicities. Once united to fight Islamic State, Kurds, Turkmens and Arabs resumed viewing one another with hostility and suspicion.

"Without a doubt, Tuz Khurmatu is a case study for Iraq 2.0. It's the most violent, most divided place in the country. You have so many layers of conflict," said Michael Knights, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The Shiite Turkmens had erected walls because the Islamic State jihadis, who adhere to a strict Sunni doctrine, believe Shiites are apostates who should be killed.

Turkmens also accused the mostly Sunni Kurdish residents of allowing, if not colluding with, the jihadis to make the city more Kurdish. Turkmens started erecting more walls, but not always with Islamic State in mind.

Mohammad Kawthar, a Turkmen judicial councilman in the city, said, "We were forced to turn all the Turkmen neighborhoods into prisons." But the walls offered protection.

Arab tribesmen, meanwhile, are viewed with suspicion by both Turkmens and Kurds. Complicating matters further is the city's location, about 40 miles south of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, and the presence of Turkmen paramilitary groups called the Popular Mobilization Forces.

In the city, explained Knights, Turkmens stand against the Kurds, "but you've also got a layer of powerful Popular Mobilization Forces fighting against a Kurdish oil-smuggling mafia."

The disputes dividing the various groups were momentarily set aside in 2014 when Islamic State, also known as ISIS, launched an offensive.

"The country was not ready to defeat ISIS in a way that would usher in post-conflict stability. It defeated it, sure, but only because it had to rely on a coalition of foreign militaries and dozens of militias," said Ramzy Mardini, a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"It's too bad ISIS wasn't an invading foreign country," Mardini added. "Instead of the war solidifying Iraqi nationalism, it led to a hardening of ethnic and religious identities."

In Tuz Khurmatu, those identities solidified into physical borders threading throughout the city.

Protective walls can be found throughout Iraq, but here they are a constant feature. Initially, some were low concrete barriers designed to block traffic -- the car bombs. But then people began building walls 8 feet high or taller, sometimes right in the middle of a thoroughfare.

Some barriers are nothing more than a wire fence, others elaborate constructions topped with barbed wire and sandbags and equipped with gates for pedestrian traffic that can be locked at night. Kurdish merchants abandoned the city's central market, once a place where business trumped sect, and created their own commercial strip on the Kurdish side of the city.

Tensions took on new life last September when Kurds held a referendum calling for independence. And when the Iraqi army swept into Kirkuk, the Turkmens kicked the Kurdish peshmerga out of Tuz Khurmatu and took charge of the city's administration -- a change that people like Abbass Maarouf, a 38-year-old medical assistant, celebrated.

"I could finally visit my land near the city for the first time in 14 years," he said. "The Kurds had taken it and they said 'These lands are all ours.' "

Hostilities took a deadly turn in October when Turkmens and Kurds began hurling dozens of mortars and artillery shells at each other. At least 11 residents were killed, and dozens more wounded, according to the rights group Amnesty International.

The rights group said that when the peshmerga were routed, tens of thousands of Kurds fled their neighborhoods; Turkmens and the Popular Mobilization Forces followed right behind, burning and looting houses of Kurdish officials and security personnel.

The government in Baghdad, meanwhile, has sought to reassure the estimated 35,000 displaced Kurds who escaped. In the days after October's flare-up, it assigned government troops to protect Kurdish neighborhoods.

"We're begging the Kurds to stay," said one major posted at the entrance to the Kurdish-dominated Jumhuriya neighborhood. His underlings handed out yellow and blue papers with numbers to call "in case of any attack."

Tensions remain high, especially near the walls. When a visiting reporter crossed one barrier, a pair of Turkmen boys chased after him, shooting their AK-47s in the air. They later boasted that they had blown up the homes of Kurdish politicians who had supported the independence referendum.

Members from one group will sometimes slip into the other's territory to unleash havoc. This creates unique hazards for some residents because the walls don't always split neighborhoods neatly.

Turkmens who ended up on the "Kurdish side" of a barrier spray-painted "Turkmen" on the entrance of their house in the hope of avoiding its destruction by fellow Turkmens who cross over to attack Kurds.

In January the Iraqi government said it would investigate the violence in Tuz Khurmatu, but it's unclear what, if anything, will come of that.

Iraq's conventional army is overstretched and, according to Mardini of the Atlantic Council, there is little hope that Baghdad can "demonstrate enough control over armed forces or have enough armed forces to govern the area."

"Tuz Khurmatu is a prime example of state weakness. The Iraqi government is too weak to reassert its political authority there," he said. "It's becoming clear that a post-ISIS Iraq will not experience a period of stability."

The bitterness dividing Tuz Khurmatu was captured one day at a traditional wedding feast. Long tables were set out with rice and spiced meat. But the celebration played out in the shadow of a cinder-block wall dead-ending a street linking Turkmen and Kurdish districts.

Akram Tarzi, a resident of the Turkmen side, was in no mood to celebrate. He glowered as his 11-year-old son awkwardly limped to a white plastic chair.

"The Kurds shot him in the leg. They attacked us, came to steal our land and remove the Turkmen identity here," he said, turning to point at the wall.

Peace negotiations were held, but had stopped. The fighting, Tarzi predicted, "will start again. We all know it."

He was right. That wedding feast occurred more than a year ago, long before more violence in the city of walls.

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MIDEAST

16. Qatar accuses UAE, Bahrain over new airspace violations

Agence France-Presse, Mar. 10 | Not Attributed

Qatar has made another complaint to the United Nations alleging new violations of its airspace by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, state media reported on Saturday.

The Qatar News Agency said its airspace was violated by a UAE military transport aircraft carrier on January 14 and again on February 25.

A Bahraini military plane also flew into Qatar's airspace on February 26, it said.

The QNA said the UN secretary general and the Security Council were informed about the incidents, which come at a time of high political tension in the Gulf.

"Qatar called upon the Security Council and the United Nations to take the necessary measures... to maintain international peace and security," it added.

For the past nine months, Qatar has been isolated by its former neighbouring allies in a rancorous diplomatic dispute.

Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt allege Doha supports terrorism -- a charge it categorically denies -- and imposed sanctions including closing their airspace to Qatari planes.

It is the second time Qatar has complained to the UN about violation of its airspace.

In a tit-for-tat exchange in January, Qatar claimed an incursion by a UAE aircraft.

In response, UAE officials denied the charge and alleged that Qatari aircraft had intercepted two civilian Emirati aircraft, and also complained to the UN.

On Friday, Qatar also alleged that a UAE navy vessel had "kidnapped" a Qatari fishing boat at gunpoint and was still holding its eight-strong Indian crew.

A complaint has been lodged with the UN over this matters as well, said the QNA.

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EUROPE

17. Britain to raise Russian spy poisoning with Nato allies

The Independent (UK), Mar. 11, Pg. 4 | Adam Lusher

Britain is to raise the Sergei Skripal poisoning case with its Nato allies, a defence minister has revealed. With military chemical weapons experts now investigating the suspected nerve agent attack and Home Secretary Amber Rudd chairing an emergency Cobra meeting on Saturday afternoon, Tobias Ellwood said the Government intended to discuss the case at Nato level.

"We mustn't get ahead of ourselves, but we must have a robust response and it's something that we'll be discussing with our Nato partners," the defence minister said. "Some big questions arise, as to how do you stand up to a clandestine and sinister attack deliberately done to play havoc in our society?"

His firm line appeared to be backed by the security minister Ben Wallace, who mentioned Britain's "powerful allies" as he said the Government was ready to respond with "the full force of the United Kingdom's resources" once investigators had established who was behind the attack.

Mr Wallace told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "Once we have established the facts and the attribution, the Government and law enforcement and others will respond appropriately. We will respond with the full force of the United Kingdom's resources if that is the appropriate and proportionate thing to do."

"There are lots of things that the United Kingdom can do," Mr Wallace added. "It is a powerful country with a powerful economy, powerful allies, powerful military and powerful other capabilities – and we shall look at all those."

After Saturday's Cobra meeting, Ms Rudd revealed that the investigation of the suspected nerve agent attack on Mr Skripal and his daughter Yulia had now become a massive operation involving more than 250 counter terrorism police officers. Investigators have now identified over 240 witnesses and are looking at more than 200 pieces of evidence.

Mr Skripal, 66, and his 33-year-old daughter remain seriously ill in hospital. Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, one of the first to come to their assistance when they collapsed on Sunday, is also still in hospital. He was, however, able to release a statement via Wiltshire Police on Saturday, saying he was not a hero and had only been doing his job.

Meanwhile, the war of words between the UK and Russia was inflamed last night when a former Russian spy who was exchanged for poisoned double agent Sergei Skripal in a Cold War-style spy swap has labelled him a “traitor”.

Anna Chapman condemned Britain’s response to the nerve agent attack, which has left the 66-year-old and his daughter Yulia Skripal in a critical condition.

“As always Russia is guilty by default... despite the fact that traitor Skripal was pardoned by the President and released,” the 36-year-old, who now works as a model and television presenter, wrote on Instagram.

“When investigating any murder, the first issue is the motive of the crime. Who benefits from it? In any case, Russia is definitely not interested in such scandal. Does the West need proof to blame Russia?”

Ms Chapman, who married to a British trainee psychologist, was allegedly part of a Russian spy ring in the US known as the “Illegals Program”. She pleaded guilty to conspiracy to act as an unlawful agent of a foreign government and was among 10 “sleeper” agents returned to Russia in 2010.

They were exchanged for four double agents, including Mr Skripal, who was given refuge in the UK having passing intelligence to MI6 during his time as a GRU military intelligence agent.

The mention of Nato suggests a potential further hardening of Government attitudes towards Russia, from a point where tensions were already high even before the events in Salisbury. On Monday, hours before it became clear that Mr Skripal had been poisoned, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson was telling MPs: “Vladimir Putin has made it quite clear that he has hostile intent towards this country. We have to wake up to that threat and we have to respond to it.”

If the investigation does prove Russian state involvement, the Government will face intense pressure to produce a strong response. It has already been accused of emboldening Russia with a “weak” reaction to the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, who had radioactive polonium slipped into his tea at a London hotel in 2006. In 2016 a public inquiry found there was a “strong probability” that Mr Litvinenko’s killers were acting on behalf of the Russian secret service in an operation “probably approved” by Mr Putin.

Theresa May, then Home Secretary, told MPs she would be seeking European arrest warrants for the two suspected killers, and said there would be a Treasury freeze on the pair’s assets. She added that the UK had been “leading” on EU sanctions that were already in place against Russia as a result of the Ukraine crisis.

But she and then Prime Minister David Cameron were accused of going soft on Moscow and taking only symbolic action. The inquiry reported a month after Mr Cameron and Mr Putin had pledged to “work together” to defeat Isis in Syria.

Some MPs and Mr Litvinenko’s widow Marina had been calling for the expulsion of all Russian security service officers from Britain, for action against “dirty money” invested in London and for Britain to reconsider its

involvement in the 2018 World Cup in Russia. At the time, Ms Litvinenko's lawyer Ben Emmerson said Government inaction would be "craven".

After Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned, Bill Browder, a British businessman who has campaigned to expose high-level corruption in Russia, told MPs: "The consequences of the Litvinenko inquiry were laughably inadequate, and have basically given the Russian government and Putin a green light to do more hits on UK soil."

A similar argument was advanced by Tory MP John Whittingdale, the former Culture Secretary, who told Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson on Tuesday that it was "two years since the public inquiry concluded that President Putin almost certainly approved the murder of Mr Litvinenko."

"Is it not therefore clear," Mr Whittingdale demanded, "that existing sanctions are failing to deter Russia, possibly even from carrying out further assassinations on British soil, and that the time has come to impose far tougher sanctions against targeted individuals associated with President Putin's regime?"

In reply, Mr Johnson said: "If the suspicions of members on all sides of this House are indeed confirmed, then that is going to have to be one of the options we look at."

It is unclear what collective action – if any – Nato might take if investigators were able to confirm widespread suspicions that Russia is behind the poisoning of Mr Skripal and his daughter. The first time that Nato invoked the collective defence principle enshrined in Article 5 of its founding treaty was in response to the 9/11 terror attacks in the US.

Nato also announced collective defence measures in 2014 in response to what was seen as Russia's annexation of the Crimea from Ukraine. The measures adopted consisted largely of increased military presences and shows of strength. Nato increased its presence in the south east of the alliance area, which is centred on a multinational brigade in Romania. The alliance also stepped up its policing of airspace over the Black Sea and bolstered the defences of eastern European Nato members by deploying multinational battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Russia has vehemently denied involvement in the nerve agent attack and accused British politicians of engaging in "pure propaganda". Security officials, however, have said the specific chemical used would have been difficult to obtain and could only have come from a state run or state-licensed laboratory.

This, though, does not rule out the possibility of freelance action by aggrieved Russian agents still bitter at the way Mr Skripal betrayed his comrades by passing on the identities of operatives to the British. A senior British diplomat who had served in Moscow told The Independent: "Skripal was an MI6 agent who was highly successful and who passed on the identities of Russian spies, supposedly in return for money. So he had betrayed lots of his comrades, he had made lots of enemies. Maybe this was payback."

It has been reported that Mr Skripal, codenamed "Forthwith" by his British handlers, was even able to hand over the entire telephone directory of the GRU, Russia's foreign military intelligence agency.

It was said the double agent spent nearly 10 years handing over secrets after MI6 first made contact with him when he was spying for Russia in Spain in July 1995. MI6 reportedly ended up buying Mr Skripal a timeshare holiday home near Malaga, and his case officer would allegedly fly out to see him, paying between \$5,000 and \$6,000 in cash at the end of every visit.

But in December 2004 Mr Skripal was arrested by the Russians. He was jailed for treason in 2006 but freed in 2010, in what is thought to have been the biggest spy swap since the Cold War.

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18. Putin's sabre-rattling raises tensions with West ahead of vote

Agence France-Presse, Mar. 10 | Anna Smolchenko

Vladimir Putin's pre-election nuclear sabre-rattling has raised the stakes in Moscow's confrontation with the West on the eve of his fourth Kremlin term.

The 65-year-old former KGB officer is all but guaranteed to extend his rule until 2024 in a presidential election on March 18 that follows an anaemic campaign punctuated by international scandal.

Since taking power 18 years ago, Putin has stamped his total authority on the country, silencing opposition and reasserting Moscow's lost might abroad.

This has included sparking a fresh rivalry with the West, which Russia remains at odds with on numerous fronts, from its support for the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian war, to the annexation of Crimea, sports doping and accusations of interference in foreign elections.

"It appears that on the eve of the Russian presidential election a conflict between our country and the West -- which both sides are not embarrassed to publicly call a new 'Cold War' -- can enter a new, even more dangerous level," the Gazeta.ru news site said in an editorial.

Earlier this month Putin rolled out a new arsenal of nuclear weapons in a pre-election address that many analysts called the most aggressive and militaristic speech of his nearly two decades in power.

"We would consider any use of nuclear weapons of small, medium or any other power against Russia or its allies to be a nuclear attack on our country. The response would be immediate and with all its attendant consequences," he said.

The speech followed the first major direct clash between Russian and US forces in Syria, where a US-led coalition struck pro-regime forces in February, killing dozens of people including Russian mercenaries.

The former Cold War rivals have also been feuding over allegations that Russia meddled in the 2016 US presidential election, with Putin telling US television network NBC that he did "not care" if individual Russians had been involved.

But the latest diplomatic row casting a shadow over the election campaign is with Britain, after former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal was poisoned with a nerve agent in England.

The attack in the southwestern city of Salisbury revived memories of the 2006 poisoning of former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko in London, and UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said Britain would respond "robustly" if Russia was found responsible.

The *Gazeta* editorial said Russia's ties with the West were "the most toxic since the end of World War II" and -- no matter who was behind the attempted murder -- "the Skripal case can poison Russian ties with the West even further".

But analysts say that far from hurting his chances at the ballot box, the controversies surrounding Putin reinforce a besieged fortress mentality that prompts Russians to rally behind their leader despite a fall in living standards.

March 18 will mark four years since Putin signed a treaty that declared Crimea part of Russia following its annexation from Ukraine, an action that led to the war in the east of the former Soviet state.

"It will not be an election in the true sense of the word, but rather a sort of celebration of the post-Crimea majority's identity," said Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Centre.

Running against a motley crew of seven challengers, Putin barely campaigned, promising "victories" to tens of thousands of supporters at a rally this month.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny -- seen as the only politician with enough stamina to challenge Putin -- has been barred from running and is awaiting a court hearing that could put him in jail for 30 days for organising an unauthorised protest.

Navalny has called on Russians to boycott the "pseudo-elections", but official polls suggest that Putin will take nearly 70 percent of the vote with a turnout of more than 60 percent.

Critics warn that armed with a strong new mandate, Putin will preside over a fresh round of repressive laws to further limit freedoms after muzzling media and crushing the opposition.

Lawmakers are discussing legislation that could deem not only organisations but also individuals "undesirable" as space for dissent and independent thought rapidly shrinks in Russia.

Over the past weeks Kremlin supporters have unleashed a campaign against actor Alexei Serebryakov, a star of Oscar-nominated "Leviathan," for saying that Russia's national idea was "force, impudence and loutishness".

"A tyranny of the majority is emerging," said Kolesnikov.

"Russia may have problems -- very serious ones -- but the country is united by common anti-Western, isolationist, and conservative values."

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AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

19. Amid little scrutiny, U.S. military ramps up in Afghanistan

Associated Press, Mar. 10 | Robert Burns

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is bolstering its military presence in Afghanistan, more than 16 years after the war started. Is anyone paying attention?

Consider this: At a Senate hearing this past week on top U.S. security threats, the word "Afghanistan" was spoken exactly four times, each during introductory remarks. In the ensuing two hours of questions for intelligence agency witnesses, no senator asked about Afghanistan, suggesting little interest in a war with nearly 15,000 U.S. troops supporting combat against the Taliban.

It's not as if the war's end is in sight.

Just last month the bulk of an Army training brigade of about 800 soldiers arrived to improve the advising of Afghan forces. Since January, attack planes and other aircraft have been added to U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

But it's not clear that the war, which began in October 2001, is going as well as the U.S. had hoped seven months after President Donald Trump announced a new, more aggressive strategy. The picture may be clearer once the traditionally most intensive fighting season begins in April or May. Over the winter, American and Afghan warplanes have focused on attacking illicit drug facilities that are a source of Taliban revenue.

One of Washington's closest watchers of the Afghanistan conflict, Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote last month that the administration has made major improvements in military tactics and plans for developing Afghan forces but has "done nothing to deal with civil and political stability." That challenge is expected to come into clearer focus with the approach of parliamentary elections planned for July.

The administration "not only faces a deteriorating security situation, it has no clear political, governance, or economic strategy to produce Afghan stability," Cordesman said. In his view, the U.S. military has been assigned a "mission impossible" in Afghanistan.

The weak central government in Kabul and the resilient Taliban insurgency are not the U.S. military's only problems there. It also faces what Gen. Joseph Votel, the top U.S. general overseeing the war, calls interference by Russia. He told a congressional panel last month that Moscow is seeking to undermine U.S. and NATO influence in Afghanistan by exaggerating the presence of Islamic State fighters there and portraying this as a U.S. failure.

When Trump announced in August that he was ordering a new approach to the war, he said he realized "the American people are weary of war without victory." He said his instinct was to pull out, but that after consulting with aides, he decided to seek "an honorable and enduring outcome." He said that meant committing more resources to the war, giving commanders in the field more authority and staying in Afghanistan for as long as it takes.

Stephen Biddle, a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, said Americans' relative lack of interest in the war gives Trump political maneuver room to conduct the war as he wishes, but that dynamic is not necessarily a good one.

"The idea that a democracy is spending billions of dollars a year, killing people and sacrificing American lives waging war, and the elected representatives of the people aren't paying attention I think is inappropriate," Biddle said. "But to say it is inappropriate isn't to say it's surprising, because this is the way Congress has been behaving toward this war for a long, long time."

Last November, the U.S. commander in Kabul, Gen. John Nicholson, said the Afghan army, with U.S. support, had "turned the corner" and captured momentum against the Taliban. Since then, the Taliban have conducted a series of

high-profile attacks in Kabul and elsewhere that have killed scores of civilians. U.S. officials have portrayed this as desperation tactics by the Taliban, arguing that they are unable to make new territorial gains.

Dan Coats, the director of U.S. national intelligence, offered a less optimistic forecast when he testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday.

"We assess the overall security picture will ... modestly deteriorate in the coming year and Kabul will continue to bear the brunt of the Taliban-led insurgency," Coats said. Afghan forces, while "unsteady," probably will maintain control of most major population centers in 2018, he added.

Testifying at the same hearing, Army Lt. Gen. Robert Ashley, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, offered a mixed outlook. He forecast that Afghan forces this year will continue to develop offensive combat power. But he also predicted the Taliban will "threaten Afghan stability, undermine public confidence by conducting intermittent high-profile attacks in urban areas," increase its influence in rural areas and threaten district centers.

The Defense Department's special inspector general for Afghanistan said in January that Afghan government control or influence has declined and Taliban control or influence has increased since the U.S. watchdog began reporting this type of data in January 2016.

It said in a follow-up report last month that as of October 2017, about 20.9 million Afghans, or 64 percent of the total population of 32.5 million, lived in areas where the government has control or influence. The rest of the population was in areas under Taliban control or influence, or deemed "contested" by both sides.

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20. No direct talks with Taliban unless it engages with Afghan – US

Press Trust of India, Mar. 10 | Lalit K. Jha

WASHINGTON -- The US today ruled out a recent request from the Taliban for a direct talk with the White House, unless it engages with the elected government of Afghanistan.

This comes a day after the Trump administration surprised the world by agreeing to a North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's invitation for a meeting with President Donald Trump.

"Obviously there is no comparison between North and South Korea and the Afghanistan situation. I would note that North and South Korea have spoken to each other in advance of the president's offer to also engage in the conversation," senior US diplomat for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, told a Washington audience at the US Institute of Peace, a US-Congress supported top American think-tank.

"So, what we're looking for in Afghanistan is a fundamental recognition that in an insurgency, the insurgents and the government that is ruling need to engage in a conversation with one another as well as with other interested parties to that settlement. We have been very consistent in this approach," Wells said.

In the absence of a full-fledged Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, she is currently the State Department's point person for South and Central Asia.

"We've been spending so much time focused on how do we get the Taliban across the starting line in recognition of a need for negotiations and how do we use our military actions to help shape the conditions for a successful negotiation," she said.

The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in the recently concluded Kabul Process conference in the Afghan capital, she said, laid out some important principles in his remarks about implementation of the peace process that this will be a part of a national plan that would encompass social development, that would be equitable, that would have a demobilization plan.

"That would require the support of the international community. There's no way to walk away from Afghanistan even in a time of peace. And so how can the donor community through targeted support help the government, at a time when it's going to be restructuring and demobilizing some of its own forces yet having to integrate and deal with the Taliban combatants as well," she said.

Wells noted that it was a complicated process which cannot be pre-judged but underscored its importance for the success of the stabilisation of Afghanistan.

"So, the Afghan government's ability to manage conclusion to a piece and to manage its own security and territory in a responsible fashion will all feed into the international assessment of how we need to structure our future relations with the government of Afghanistan," Wells said, responding to a question on the presence of US troops in Afghanistan.

Alleging that the Taliban had been indifferent to the Afghan people, she said the US sees that in their targeting of civilians or use of civilians as shields to the effort, there is an enormous cost that Afghanistan has borne.

"It's time for this conflict to end. There's a way to end this conflict. There's a will to end this conflict. There's international support to this. It's the Taliban who are the stumbling block to peace," Wells said.

The top American diplomat said it's now up to the Taliban leaders to respond to this serious offer of talks from the Afghan President.

"This is a peace offer that the US supports and is prepared to facilitate, but we cannot substitute for the direct negotiations that are required between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership," Wells said in her remarks at the US Institute of Peace.

Wells said when it comes to the US, its conditions based South Asia strategy ensures the Taliban cannot win on the battlefield, but it recognises that a resolution to the conflict will be through a negotiated political settlement.

"The recent Taliban letter to the people of the US misses the point. For eight years the US has been prepared to support a peace process, but we cannot be a substitute again for the Afghan people in the Afghan government in a negotiation with the Taliban," the top American diplomat said.

"Let us not forget that it was the Taliban which repeatedly refused to hand over Osama bin Laden and to this day the Taliban maintain relations with Al-Qaeda and a host of other terrorist organizations," she said.

"We are not in Afghanistan to acquire its natural resources to impose our own form of government to prevent the free practice of Islam or to destabilize the region," Wells said.

"We will remain in Afghanistan as long as it takes to keep it from becoming a terrorist safe haven," she asserted.

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21. Afghan Taliban urge religious scholars to boycott peace conference

Reuters, Mar. 10 | James Mackenzie

KABUL -- The Taliban urged Islamic scholars on Saturday not to take part in a conference due to take place in Indonesia aimed at building agreement and support for possible future peace talks in Afghanistan.

The call follows President Ashraf Ghani's offer last month to hold peace talks with the Taliban and comes as international powers have sought to build pressure on the movement to accept negotiations to end more than 16 years of war in Afghanistan.

The Taliban have so far proved unresponsive to the offer. And on Saturday they said the proposed conference of religious scholars from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia was merely intended to "legitimize the presence of infidel invaders in the Islamic country of Afghanistan".

The conference, proposed by Indonesian President Joko Widodo in January and due to be held later this month, was an effort to present "the sacred Jihad in Afghanistan ... as unlawful bloodshed", the Taliban said in a statement.

"Do not afford an opportunity to the invading infidels in Afghanistan to misuse your name and participation in this conference as means of attaining their malicious objective."

Fighting to drive out international forces and re-establish their version of strict Islamic law, the Taliban control or contest large areas of Afghanistan and inflict heavy casualties on government security forces.

They have offered to talk to the United States about a possible peace agreement but have so far ruled out direct talks with the Western-backed government in Kabul, which they say is an illegitimate foreign-imposed regime.

Despite their unpromising rhetoric, however, Western diplomats say that efforts have been intensifying behind the scenes to lay the groundwork for possible future talks with regular contacts through intermediaries.

At the same time, the United States has stepped up battlefield pressure, notably through air strikes on the Taliban as Afghanistan's international partners have sought to build up diplomatic support from neighboring countries to push the movement to the negotiating table.

They have also invested considerable effort in trying to build consensus among religious scholars against tactics such as suicide bombings, which have been regularly carried out by Taliban and other insurgent groups.

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22. As many as 18 Afghan soldiers killed fighting in western province

Reuters, Mar. 10 | Mohammad Stanekzai

LASHKAR GAH, Afghanistan -- As many as 18 Afghan soldiers and members of the special forces have been killed in fighting in the western province of Farah, local officials said on Saturday.

Taliban fighters attacked troops assembled to prepare an attack in Bala Buluk district in the night, setting off a fierce battle, officials said.

Defence Ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri said four members of the special forces had been killed and a number wounded, but the head of the local provincial council, Farid Bakhtawar, said the death toll had reached at least 18.

As the fighting went on, an air strike was called in and killed around 25 insurgents, he said.

In a message posted on Twitter, a Taliban spokesman said 53 commandos had been killed or wounded after arriving in Tapa Sadat, close to the Bala Buluk district centre, and a sizeable quantity of weapons seized.

U.S. and Afghan officials say the Taliban have been under increasingly heavy pressure from air strikes and army operations but the insurgents have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to inflict severe damage on Afghan security forces.

This week's incident was the latest in a series to have hit Farah province, between the border with Iran and the Taliban heartland of Helmand province, source of much of Afghanistan's opium crop.

It came ahead of an expected increase in fighting with the end of winter and the approach of spring.

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23. ID cards intended to unify Afghanistan do the opposite

Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. A16 | Sayed Salahuddin and Pamela Constable

KABUL — When the new Afghan national ID card was introduced by President Ashraf Ghani at a recent palace ceremony, it was not so much the debut of a technological advance as the denouement of a long battle over old political and ethnic enmities.

The fight over the "e-taskira," as the biometric card is known, has dragged on since Ghani took office in 2015. After a fraud-plagued election, the new president promised to produce a new identity document that would unite the country and make it almost impossible to steal or falsify votes at the polls.

Yet despite the evident virtues of a foolproof ID card in a country where many adults cannot write and use only one name, the e-taskira has triggered endless suspicion, conspiracy theories and shouting matches over such seemingly simple decisions as whether the card should designate - "Afghan" as the nationality for all Afghan citizens.

In essence, the card has become a high-tech proxy for the unresolved conflicts that drove Afghanistan to civil war in the early 1990s, sweeping the extremist Taliban movement to power as the country deteriorated into interethnic savagery and chaos.

No one has come to blows yet, but heated political battles over whether and how to identify cardholders by ethnicity and "nationality"—a term commonly used here to mean one's tribe—have disrupted and delayed production of the new cards for several years. At one point, a batch of several million newly minted cards had to be thrown out and redesigned.

On the surface, the official version of the card appeared to be a compromise. It described every citizen as an "Afghan" by nationality, as stated in the constitution, while allowing each one to choose an ethnic identity from any of the 14 groups listed in the charter as well. The largest of those is Pashtun, followed by Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek.

But even during the long-awaited palace rollout Feb. 16—where Ghani, his wife, Rula Ghani, and his second vice president, Sarwar Danish, signed up for the first three cards—controversy continued to rage inside and outside the government.

Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's chief executive and Ghani's governing partner, did not appear at the event and called for the announcement to be delayed, warning that it could precipitate a political crisis. The ceremony was attended by Ghani's aides and some cabinet ministers but boycotted by others from ethnic minorities or loyal to Abdullah.

"The government should not create problems among the people by issuing decrees that contravene the people's will," Abdullah said at a separate public ceremony the same day. "In this critical situation, a non-calculated word and a non-calculated move against the people can create a big challenge. We should not try to go from crisis to crisis."

The "non-calculated word" was "Afghan." Leaders of the large -Tajik-led party Jamiat-i-Islami—to which Abdullah belongs—objected to the use of "Afghan" as a universal nationality, because it has historically been synonymous with "Pashtun," the numerically dominant tribe that ruled the country for three centuries.

They accused Ghani, a Pashtun who plans to run for reelection next year, of using his executive powers for political gain after he overruled a law passed by parliament in 2015—and originally signed by him—that said the cards would not use the word "Afghan" or mention ethnic background at all.

The harshest reaction came from Atta Mohammad Noor, the powerful and wealthy governor of Balkh province and a Jamiat leader. He has refused to relinquish the governorship since the president tried to fire him in December, and he is now expected to challenge Ghani in the presidential race.

At a recent gathering of supporters, Atta warned that distributing cards with the word "Afghan" as the universal nationality would "divide the country in two parts" and bring "the dangerous smell of deadly fights and disintegration." The former militia leader has made past threats to unleash violent protests unless Jamiat is given more power and perks.

Public reaction to the new card was mixed. Many Afghans agreed it was valuable tool to reduce voter fraud and provide an accurate count of ethnic populations. With no national census conducted since the 1970s, groups have inflated their numbers to enhance political clout. Some dismissed the contretemps over the word "Afghan" as overblown.

"If there are those who do not like to be named as Afghans, then they should leave Afghanistan," said Abdul Qadir Qalatwal, a Pashtun legislator from the south. But Fawzia Koofi, a liberal lawmaker from the north, said the original

law agreed on in parliament should have been implemented. "Afghanistan needs a standard ID card with no mention of ethnicity or nationality," she said.

Palace officials said the decision to use the term "Afghan" was based strictly on the constitution and should be respected by all citizens. But Abdullah's comment reflected growing concern about tensions between majority Pashtuns and various ethnic minorities in the run-up to elections, in which ethnic identity and loyalty count more than any other factor.

The issue of voter fraud was also a crucial factor in the disastrous 2014 electoral contest between Abdullah and Ghani. Abdullah, who is half Tajik and half Pashtun, won the first polling round but lost to Ghani in the second. That contest, however, was so discredited by fraud that it was deemed inconclusive, and the two men were forced to share power in a U.S.-brokered pact.

Despite the high-level opposition, officials are continuing with the enrollment process for cards as announced, though registration has been slow. One minor, somewhat quirky, reason is a boycott by a handful of tiny ethnic groups that object to the new cards because their groups are not listed among the choices.

"I hope this issue doesn't become a major headache, but we will not compromise our identities as Sadat, as Bayat, as Qarlug, or as Khalili," said Ishaq Gailani, a Pashtun politician from a prominent religious family and a member of the Sadat tribe.

Ghani, perhaps hoping to placate at least a few minority voters, has said it may be possible to add them to the list.

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AFRICA

24. 'Weaponizing capital': US worries over China's expanding role in Africa

CNN.com, Mar. 10 | Steve George and Brad Lendon

HONG KONG -- Concerns in Washington are growing amid reports that China is poised to gain control of a major commercial port on the Horn of Africa, further consolidating the country's influence in the critically strategic region.

In late February, the Djibouti government terminated a contract with Dubai-based port operator DP World to run the Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT), on the grounds it was "contrary to the fundamental interests of the nation."

The port is partly owned by China's state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings, which maintains a 23.5% stake. It is also located immediately adjacent to China's only overseas military base, on the west bank of the Gulf of Aden and the southern entrance to the Red Sea close to the Suez Canal.

The government's sudden seizure of the port, among the largest in Africa, has led to speculation it could fall into Chinese hands, with US lawmakers citing reports that Djibouti was preparing to hand it over to China as a "gift."

On Tuesday, the future of the port dominated discussions during a hearing of the US House Armed Services Committee, with one senior US general warning that the US military could face "significant" consequences should China take control of the port.

Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, the US' top military commander in Africa, said Chinese control of the port could result in restrictions on its use, potentially cutting off access to a key US resupply route and naval refueling stop.

"If the Chinese took over that port, then the consequences could be significant," said Waldhauser.

The port currently constitutes the primary access point for American, French, Italian and Japanese bases in Djibouti. The US base, Camp Lemonnier, is home to an estimated 4,000 personnel, including various special forces troops, and is used as a staging point for US military and counter-terrorism operations throughout Africa, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean.

"When we talk about influence and access, this is a classic example with regards to China, of how we've got to proceed and how we've got to be careful as we move forward," said Waldhauser.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang did not comment directly on Djibouti during a regular press briefing Wednesday. When asked about the port, he said he was "not aware of the specific situation," adding that China hoped the US would view "China-Africa cooperation in an objective and unbiased manner."

However, the question of China's role in Djibouti did appear in an article published Wednesday in China's state-owned Global Times, in which US concerns were dismissed as "pointless."

Quoting Song Zhongping, a military expert, the article argued that if a Chinese company were to gain the right to operate the port, "it would be based on business and economic interests between China and Djibouti, and it has no intention at all to make trouble for the US military."

Chinese funding

The government of Djibouti, led by President Ismail Omar Guelleh, has so far welcomed China's role in the country's economy, maintaining that because Djibouti is resource-poor, its development is dependent on maximizing its location, and increasing investment in port infrastructure.

To date, China has provided the East African nation with more than \$1.4 billion in infrastructure funding, equivalent to 75% of Djibouti's GDP, according to a 2018 report from the Center for Global Policy Development.

In addition to investing in the DCT, Chinese state firms have also financed and built Ethiopia-Djibouti Water Pipelines and the Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway.

In the hearing Tuesday, Waldhauser admitted the United States would "never outspend the Chinese" in Djibouti, pointing out that as well as major infrastructure projects, Beijing has also built shopping malls and stadiums.

According to a report by CNA, a US-based nonprofit research and analysis organization, most of the capital that China provides to Djibouti is in the form of loans from the Export-Import Bank of China.

The bank, which is wholly state-owned and is under the direct leadership of the China's State Council, has a mandate from the Chinese government to "help Chinese companies secure contracts and acquire assets abroad," says the report.

On Friday, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrived in Djibouti as part of a cross-continent trip, intended to shore up support among African leaders.

Addressing those debt concerns at a press conference alongside Tillerson, Djibouti's foreign minister, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, said the country's debt to China "is so far manageable."

"Let me first underline the fact that no country can develop itself without having a strong infrastructure," said Youssouf, "And China is, from that perspective, a very good partner."

The issue of the Doraleh Container Terminal was not raised during the press conference.

Military reach

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, China's maritime reach has grown considerably, expanding far beyond its immediate coastline into areas not previously considered within its sphere of influence.

China formally established its Djibouti base in July last year, followed several months later by the country's controversial acquisition of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka.

Speaking to CNN, Malcolm Davis, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Sydney, described the Hambantota deal -- which saw Sri Lanka grant China a 99-year lease on the port to service some of the billions in debt it owes to Beijing -- as part of a "bigger picture."

"The more you invest in the Belt and Road initiative, the more the Chinese are in a position to force your country to align politically in terms of policy," Davis told CNN, referring to the China's ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) international development strategy.

"So you become dependent on their investment and their largesse, and you're less likely to be critical of them and you're more likely to accommodate their interests strategically."

In a separate hearing Wednesday before the House Appropriations Committee, US Navy Secretary Richard Spencer accused Beijing of "weaponizing capital," saying China is making loans, not grants or aid, to finance the infrastructure projects.

If the debtor fails to make payments, "the asset owner comes and reclaims it and says these are now ours," said Spencer, referencing China's Hambantota port deal with Sri Lanka. "They're doing that around the globe. So their open checkbook keeps me up at night."

Blue-helmet deployments

China's infrastructure and development projects are only a part of a broader Africa strategy, that includes both military and peacekeeping elements. According to a report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), cooperation with Africa on peace and security is now an "explicit part of Beijing's foreign policy."

In 2015 Chinese President Xi Jinping committed 8,000 troops to the UN peacekeeping standby force --- one fifth of the 40,000 total troops committed by 50 nations. China also pledged \$100 million to the African Union standby force and \$1 billion to establish the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund.

Speaking at the hearing alongside Spencer, Wednesday, US Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert Neller said President Xi's strategy was to "win without fighting."

"The Chinese are playing the long game ... Everywhere I go, they're there," said Neller.

More than 2,500 Chinese combat-ready soldiers and police officers are now deployed in blue-helmet missions across the African continent, with the largest deployments in South Sudan (1,051), Liberia (666), and Mali (402), according to the ECFR.

In addition, Africa is currently home to an estimated one million Chinese nationals, with many employed in infrastructure projects backed by the Chinese government.

"China's involvement in African security is a product of a wider transformation of China's national defense policy. It is taking on a global outlook ... and incorporating new concepts such as the protection of overseas interests and open seas protection," says the ECFR report.

In a letter to US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, dated March 5, Rep. Bradley Byrne, a Republican from Alabama, said he was concerned about China's growing influence in Djibouti and the potentially detrimental impact it could have on the US' ability to operate effectively in the region.

"If Djibouti is willing to confiscate a port terminal operating under a legal 30-year agreement, what is to stop (Djibouti) President Guelleh from renegeing on the twenty-year lease the US signed in 2014 for Camp Lemonnier?" asked Byrne, who reiterated his question during Tuesday's committee hearing.

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NOTABLE COMMENTARY

25. A war crime of inaction

Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. A20 | Editorial

Nearly two weeks after the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution mandating a 30-day cease-fire in Syria, Russian and government forces are unrelentingly pursuing one of the bloodiest and most brutal offensives of the war. They are attempting to overrun the rebel-held area of Eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus, where nearly 400,000 people have been besieged since 2013. Scores of people are being killed each day; the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights counted 93 on Wednesday alone. There have been numerous reports of attacks on hospitals and schools and of the use of chlorine gas — all of which are war crimes.

Tragically, there is little new in this, apart from the intensity. Over and over, the government of Bashar al-Assad and Russia have accepted cease-fires, or "humanitarian pauses," or "de-escalation zones" in Eastern Ghouta, only to continue their attacks. Their brazenness is enabled by the unwillingness of any other power to enforce U.N. resolutions, or the Chemical Weapons Convention, or to otherwise punish the regime or Russia for their crimes.

There is, at least, reason to hope that the impunity will not last forever. Since 2011, a U.N. commission has been meticulously gathering evidence of war crimes in Syria for presentation at the U.N. Human Rights Council, and eventually to international and national courts. Its latest report, covering the period from last July until January, offers horrifying detail about the Russian-Syrian depredations in Eastern Ghouta.

The siege, the report says, has been "characterized by pervasive war crimes, including the use of prohibited weapons, attacks against civilian and protected objects, starvation leading to acute malnutrition, and the routine denial of medical evacuations." Hospitals and schools have been systematically bombed; on a single day, Nov. 8, three schools were struck from the air. Hundreds of medical workers have been killed or injured in airstrikes, and women have begun giving birth at home rather than risk going to a hospital.

The United Nations documented three uses of chlorine against rebel fighters in July, and another attack in November in which a phosphorus-based pesticide was used. These are carefully calibrated atrocities. President Trump ordered a retaliatory strike following the regime's use of nerve gas last year, but he has not responded to chlorine attacks. And so they continue.

Russian forces also target civilians, and the United Nations documented one incident it says "may amount to a war crime." Last Nov. 13, a Russian plane was observed carrying out a series of airstrikes on the main market as well as surrounding houses in the town of Atarib, in Aleppo province. The report says at least 84 people were killed, including six women and five children. It said the plane dropped unguided "blast weapons," even though "the use of such weapons in a densely populated area was certain to impact civilians." That, no doubt, was the intention.

As the Ghouta offensive has continued, the State Department has objected; spokeswoman Heather Nauert castigated Russia on Twitter. The trouble is, Moscow knows that Mr. Trump feels differently. When he was asked about Eastern Ghouta, on Feb. 23, the president reiterated his view that the only U.S. interest in Syria was "to get rid of ISIS and to go home." For the Assad regime and Russia, that's an open invitation to continue gassing children, bombing hospitals and committing other war crimes.

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26. Trump's North Korea Gamble

New York Times, Mar. 11, Pg. SR9 | Nicholas Kristof

It's infinitely better that North Korea and the United States exchange words rather than missiles.

Yet President Trump's decision to meet Kim Jong-un strikes me as a dangerous gamble and a bad idea. I'm afraid that North Korea may be playing Trump, and that in turn Trump may be playing us.

I fear that Trump is being played because at the outset, apparently in exchange for nothing clear-cut, he has agreed to give North Korea what it has long craved: the respect and legitimacy that comes from the North Korean leader standing as an equal beside the American president. And I worry that we in the media and the public are being played because this is a way for Trump to change the subject from a Russia investigation and a porn actress to himself as Great Peacemaker.

To be clear, I'm all for negotiations. Ever since I began covering North Korea in the 1980s, I've favored direct talks between the United States and North Korea, and I've called on Trump to send emissaries to meet Kim Jong-un.

But direct talks should be conducted by seasoned diplomats, offering an eventual summit meeting only as a carrot at the end of the process — and only if the summit serves some purpose higher than changing the headlines in the U.S. and legitimizing Kim’s regime abroad. A face-to-face should advance the interests of two countries, not just two leaders.

There’s a misperception that the North Koreans’ offer of a direct meeting is a grand concession. Not at all. It’s something they’ve been seeking for decades, but past presidents refused.

So a summit constitutes a huge gift to Kim, and it’s puzzling that our Great Dealmaker should give up so much right off the bat.

Frankly, another fear about a Trump-Kim summit is that our president will shun advice from aides and will impetuously agree over dinner to some harebrained scheme to get a deal. (“Withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea and Okinawa? No problem, if you’ll build a wall for me.”) Indeed, it seems he jumped on the idea without consulting important aides, who were left scrambling to praise the kind of talks that the administration previously had condemned.

Still, it’s genuinely encouraging that Kim doesn’t object to the U.S. resuming military exercises and that he apparently is willing to suspend missile and nuclear tests. Those are real concessions, although he apparently is not suspending production of nuclear materials or missiles; we should insist on that as well.

If Kim will halt testing, maybe there’s a grand bargain to be achieved. It would involve North Korea giving up its nuclear program in exchange for the U.S. ending sanctions and normalizing relations, with some commitments from North Korea on human rights as well. This would be a tremendous achievement that would make the world safer, but verification would be a huge challenge and would require short-notice inspection visits to military sites.

Most experts are extremely skeptical that Kim will agree to a bargain in which he verifiably gives up nuclear weapons. The White House says Kim has committed to denuclearize, but that may be on unacceptable terms that North Korea has previously proposed: You Americans end your alliance with South Korea and pull your troops, and we’ll proceed with denuclearization (presumably on a nonverifiable basis). And while the White House says the U.S. made no concessions, the summit is itself the concession.

Does Trump get credit for pushing the North Koreans to make concessions such as suspension of testing? I think he probably does, in two respects.

First, Trump raised the economic pressure on North Korea with additional sanctions and extra support from China, and the pain was visible when I visited North Korea in September. Kim has made rising living standards a hallmark of his leadership, and sanctions have threatened that pillar of his legitimacy.

Second, Trump’s talk about military strikes may or may not have rattled North Korea, but it certainly horrified South Korea. The upshot was South Korea’s deft diplomatic outreach to North Korea, leading to the North Korean promise to suspend testing.

So give Trump’s approach some credit. Likewise, it’s very healthy that he’s pivoted from his previous position that “talking is not the answer.” He’s right this time, that talking may actually be part of the answer — even if a summit is the wrong way to begin.

One reason for skepticism is that nobody has ever made money betting on North Korean moderation or denuclearization. And a summit raises the stakes, so a failure could trigger angry new escalations on each side, leaving us worse off than where we started.

Perhaps I'm wrong: A "North Korea expert" is an oxymoron, and traditional diplomacy in the past certainly hasn't succeeded. For all the uncertainties, we do have a reprieve for two months from the threat of nuclear war.

One can now envision a path forward for the U.S. and North Korea — even if it means we also worry that the path dead ends at a precipice. At least for the time being, we can look forward to talks instead of tanks.

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27. Six thousand days, and still no objective

Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. A21 | George F. Will

"The war is over."

— Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in Afghanistan in April 2002

"I believe victory is closer than ever before."

— Vice President Pence in Afghanistan in December

With metronomic regularity, every thousand days or so, Americans should give some thought to the longest war in their nation's history. The war in Afghanistan, which is becoming one of the longest in world history, reaches its 6,000th day on Monday, when it will have ground on for substantially more than four times longer than U.S. involvement in World War II from Pearl Harbor to V-J Day (1,365 days).

America went to war in Afghanistan because the not-really-governed nation was the haven from which al-Qaeda planned the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. It was not mission creep but mission gallop that turned the intervention into a war against the Taliban, which had provided, or at least not prevented, the haven. So, the United States was on a mission opposed by a supposed ally next door — Pakistan, which has supported the Taliban through Directorate S of its intelligence service.

This fascinating, if dispiriting, story is told in Steve Coll's new book, "Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan." There cannot be many secrets about this subject that are not in Coll's almost 700 pages.

He reports that when Gen. Stanley McChrystal went to Afghanistan in May 2002, "A senior Army officer in Washington told him, 'Don't build [Bondsteel],' referring to the NATO base in [Kosovo] that Rumsfeld saw as a symbol of peacekeeping mission creep. The officer warned McChrystal against 'anything here that looks permanent. ... We are not staying long.' As McChrystal took the lay of the land, 'I felt like we were high-school students who had wandered into a Mafia-owned bar.'" It has been a learning experience. After blowing up tunnels — some almost as long as a football field — thought to be created by and for terrorists, U.S. officials learned they were actually an ancient irrigation system.

A decade ago, seven years after the war began on Oct. 7, 2001, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the U.S. objective was the creation of a strong central government. When he was asked whether Afghanistan had ever had one, he answered without hesitation: "No." Which is still true.

Years have passed since the time when, years into the war, U.S. military and civilian officials heatedly debated "counterinsurgency" as contrasted with "counterterrorism," distinctions that now seem less than crucial. In his book, Coll writes of military commanders rotating in and out of Afghanistan annually: "The commanders starting a rotation would say, 'This is going to be difficult.' Six months later, they'd say, 'We might be turning a corner.' At the end of their rotation, they would say, 'We have achieved irreversible momentum.' Then the next command group coming in would pronounce, 'This is going to be difficult.'" The earnestness and valor that Americans have brought to Afghanistan are as heartbreaking as they are admirable.

For 73 years, U.S. troops have been on the Rhine, where their presence helped win the Cold War — and now serves vital U.S. interests as Vladimir Putin ignites Cold War 2.0. Significant numbers of U.S. troops have been in South Korea for 68 years, and few people are foolish enough to doubt the usefulness of this deployment, or to think that it will or should end soon. It is conceivable, and conceivably desirable, that U.S. forces will be in Afghanistan, lending intelligence, logistical and even lethal support to that nation's military and security forces for another 1,000 — perhaps 6,000 — days.

It would, however, be helpful to have an explanation of U.S. interests and objectives beyond vice-presidential boilerplate about how "We will see it through to the end." And (to U.S. troops) how "the road before you is promising." And how the president has "unleashed the full range of American military might." And how "reality and facts and a relentless pursuit of victory will guide us." And how U.S. forces have "crushed the enemy in the field" (or at least "put the Taliban on the defensive") in "this fight for freedom in Afghanistan," where Bagram Airfield is "a beacon of freedom." If the U.S. objective is freedom there rather than security here, or if the theory is that the latter somehow depends on the former, the administration should clearly say so, and defend those propositions, or liquidate this undertaking, which has, so far, cost about \$1 trillion and more than 2,200 American lives.

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28. The Ex-Jihadi in Plain Sight

New York Times, Mar. 11, Pg. SR7 | Rania Abouzeid

We met in a European city where he didn't live, a neutral location on a quiet side street far from the crowds of shoppers and sightseers. To passers-by, he looked like a hipster, dressed in rust-colored skinny pants and a gray polo shirt. But he was not. I had known him for years in his native Syria. He was a onetime confidant of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, then the leader of Al Qaeda in Syria.

Saleh, as I called him, was a former member of the small inner circle of the Nusra Front, a group of men so young that, as Saleh put it, "none of us have any gray in our beards." He was part of the machinery that helped Al Qaeda's local affiliate plant its black flags in Syrian rebel territory. He had been since late 2011, just months into a peaceful uprising that became a war so ghastly it killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced half the population of 23 million — a war that is still killing and displacing Syrians.

I had covered the conflict from inside Syria since the first protests in 2011. Saleh had joined the throngs that left his shattered homeland for Europe, escaping a battlefield that was as complicated as it was horrific.

He had defected from the Nusra Front with the leader's tacit blessing, claiming to have left his old life behind. In the year since he'd fled, he'd added two European languages to his English and Arabic, busying himself, he told me, "with learning something, anything, to quiet the thoughts in my head." He reflected on Nusra's mistakes, on his path to militant Islamism, the Jihadi infighting between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and a Syria he'd worked to cloak in Islamist black.

"Now I can see the whole chessboard. Before, I was a piece," he said. "I wasn't a regular soldier, I was with the command. I saw things," he added, pausing for a long while. "There are many people we oppressed."

With distance, he saw that members of the rebel Free Syrian Army weren't the "kuffar," or infidels, he had been conditioned to despise, the men Nusra planned to destroy after the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Nusra was just as unscrupulous as the groups he'd self-righteously berated and could be as ruthless as its foes in the Islamic State. It killed Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It stole from civilians and institutions. It had commanders hungry for power and money, driven by ego and fame, men who Saleh said "wanted to be the next Osama bin Laden," who could kill a friend as easily as drink a sip of water.

The infighting with the Islamic State proved that. That was Saleh's breaking point: "We were brothers and days later we were killing each other," he said. "I started wondering, what are people like this made of?"

He was a man who had never been photographed with the Nusra Front, who was careful to never appear in any of the group's video or audio recordings. He had a fake Syrian ID for entering Turkey and could blend into a cafe in Istanbul as easily as into a Nusra training camp.

He sneaked into a Europe that feared men like him, a Europe that, after absorbing millions of refugees, was shifting right, under pressure to close its doors after terror attacks in France and Belgium in order to keep men like him from slipping in.

Saleh had been an aide to Syria's Al Qaeda leader. He claimed that he'd discarded his ideology, along with his nom de guerre; that Europe had taught him to live and let live; that he wasn't a threat.

"I have no problem now with all of these people walking in the street," he said. "Before, when I first became a Salafi jihadi, I had a problem with everyone who wasn't like me. It was planted in me — why is this woman not in a hijab? Why is this woman in heavy makeup? But I am not a god to hold people accountable. If I consider things wrong, I learned that I should not do them, but others can do as they please. What I've seen here in Europe, of the kuffar, as we used to call them, I've met people who are so much better than the people I met in jihad. They mind their own business and are respectful of others."

But did he mean it? Could a man like that really change? Were his old extremist ideas merely dormant, awaiting activation? He spoke with sincerity, but could Saleh really assimilate into a society he'd once despised? Was he a threat to Europe, or is redemption possible, even for a man like him?

He had entered the world of Salafi jihadism in his late teens, exposed to the banned writings of Islamist leaders before he was detained by the Syrian regime, just shy of his 19th birthday. He didn't even pray regularly, let alone consider himself an Islamist, before he was imprisoned. "I was a kid," he said, jailed with Qaeda members. The prison, he said, "made me what I became." A six-year "sleep" (in prisoner parlance) ended when the regime opened his cell door in April 2011, releasing him with no formal charge as part of an amnesty.

With Syria in the throes of revolution, he formally joined his freed cellmates in Al Qaeda. “Ten years of my life like this,” he said. “I haven’t lived a normal day. You know what I do now? I work in a restaurant. I clean tables after customers. I wipe them down. That’s my job and I’m happy doing it. When I wipe a table, I feel normal, like this is what a normal person might do.” It was also one of the few jobs he could get. “What was I going to put on my C.V., that I’d graduated from a sniper training course?”

He had European friends who surprised him with the kindness they showed a Syrian refugee. His former Nusra Front colleagues didn’t know where he was. He avoided Syrians and other Arabs, lest they learn his background. Only his family knew his whereabouts. He had once been an “amni,” a security agent, tasked with finding and surveilling Al Qaeda’s enemies and defectors in Turkey — men like him. He knew what might happen if an amni found him. He didn’t dwell on it, although he had trouble sleeping, sometimes for days.

A European friend introduced him to a psychiatrist, thinking he was traumatized from witnessing war, not knowing he had been a senior member of Al Qaeda. Saleh attended a few sessions and then stopped. “What was the point?” he said. “I was lying to the doctor and to myself. I couldn’t tell him who I really was.” He had killed men in battle but said he never executed anyone. He had watched others do it, though, “many, many times.”

“Humanity died in Syria,” Saleh said. “I was dealing with monsters.” He wondered whether he was right to leave his country. He’d abandoned its children to Assad’s warplanes, he said, or to brainwashing by his former colleagues and the Islamic State, or to drowning in the Mediterranean while trying to flee both.

He still believed in a conservative Islam, in a future Syria that was “not like the Europeans and not like Daesh” — an Arabic acronym for Islamic State — but “something in between.” He was torn and confused. “I can’t speak to anyone except my family. You’ve known me for years now,” he said. “Be honest with me, do you think I made the right decisions?”

--Rania Abouzeid is the author of “*No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*,” from which this essay is adapted

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29. Russia and NATO: Outgunned

The Atlantic alliance faces superior conventional forces near Russia's borders

The Economist (UK), Mar. 10 | Not Attributed

Boasting about nuclear weapons is something Vladimir Putin clearly enjoys. In his annual state-of-the-nation speech on March 1st, he listed five new weapons. Russia’s president gave pride of place to the development of a nuclear-powered cruise missile with, in effect, unlimited range, which was guaranteed to thwart America’s missile defences (see *Science*). He got the headlines he wanted, though there is nothing new about Russia being able to devastate America with nuclear weapons, nor anything likely to change on that front. What should concern Europe more than Mr Putin’s nuclear sabre-rattling are the formidable conventional forces that Russia is steadily building up, particularly in the Baltic region.

On most measures, NATO appears comfortably ahead of Russia. Between them, America and its European NATO allies spent \$871bn on defence in 2015, compared with Russia’s \$52bn. But as a recent report by the RAND Corporation, a think-tank, argues, the reality on the ground is rather different. It finds that Russia would now enjoy

significant local superiority in any confrontation with NATO close to its own border. NATO's latent strengths, once they were brought to bear, would be too much for Russia to cope with. But in the early stages of a conflict, for at least the first month and possibly for a good deal longer, the alliance would find itself outnumbered, outranged and outgunned.

Since Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO has bolstered its forces in the Baltic region with what it calls its "enhanced forward presence". By last summer, the alliance had a total of 4,530 troops near the border with Russia in four battlegroups led by Germany (in Lithuania), Britain (in Estonia), Canada (in Latvia) and the United States (in Poland). But, in accord with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, an anachronistic agreement that reflected a more optimistic time, the soldiers are not permanently based, but constantly rotate.

NATO has also beefed up its "very high readiness joint task-force" of about 5,000 more troops who can be deployed within a week. But it admits that neither force is more than a tripwire to convince Russia that any attack on them would be seen as an attack on the alliance as a whole.

Over the past decade, Western forces and their Russian counterparts have diverged in terms of capability. NATO members adjusted for counter-insurgency operations in places such as Afghanistan by restructuring with light expeditionary forces. Russia concentrated on rebuilding forces with the mobility and firepower to wage high-intensity warfare against a peer adversary. As part of a comprehensive effort at military reform following a disjointed performance in the war against Georgia in 2008, Russia has professionalised its forces (largely relegating conscripts to a second echelon), equipped them with modern heavy weapons, and honed them with frequent large-scale exercises and combat experience in Ukraine and Syria.

What worries NATO commanders, such as General Sir Nicholas Carter, chief of Britain's general staff, and his American opposite number, General Mark Milley, is the sheer amount of combat power Russia can concentrate at very short notice in the Baltic region. RAND found that in main battle tanks, Russia would outnumber NATO by 5.9 to 1; in infantry fighting vehicles by 4.6 to 1; in rocket artillery by 270 to none. And while NATO would enjoy a substantial advantage in combat aircraft, their effectiveness would be greatly reduced when faced with the world's most powerful integrated theatre air defences.

Russia's edge over NATO, says Ben Barry of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, is increased by its ability to use its internal lines to reinforce at speed. By contrast, NATO has neglected to preserve its cold-war military-transport infrastructure. Bridges cannot take the weight of tanks, and rail systems are not designed for trucks carrying heavy armour.

There is plenty that NATO could do to enhance conventional deterrence. It could permanently station forces in the Baltic region with more hitting power; it could hold regular large-scale short-notice exercises; it could invest in strengthening its internal lines; individual member countries could do more to meet their spending obligations and use the money to restructure their ground forces for high-intensity conflict.

Whether NATO is capable of such focus is debatable. Its southern members worry more about refugee flows; France is fighting an insurgency in the Sahel; Germany's new coalition agreement relegated the (wretched) state of its armed forces to page 156 of a 177-page document. Mr Putin's priorities are very different.

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30. The Pentagon isn't taking UFOs seriously enough

Washington Post, Mar. 11, Pg. B5 | Christopher Mellon

In December, the Defense Department declassified two videos documenting encounters between U.S. Navy F-18 fighters and unidentified aircraft. The first video captures multiple pilots observing and discussing a strange, hovering, egg-shaped craft, apparently one of a "fleet" of such objects, according to cockpit audio. The second shows a similar incident involving an F-18 attached to the USS Nimitz carrier battle group in 2004.

The videos, along with observations by pilots and radar operators, appear to provide evidence of the existence of aircraft far superior to anything possessed by the United States or its allies. Defense Department officials who analyze the relevant intelligence confirm more than a dozen such incidents off the East Coast alone since 2015. In another recent case, the Air Force launched F-15 fighters last October in a failed attempt to intercept an unidentified high-speed aircraft looping over the Pacific Northwest.

A third declassified video, released by To the Stars Academy of Arts and Science, a privately owned media and scientific research company to which I'm an adviser, reveals a previously undisclosed Navy encounter that occurred off the East Coast in 2015.

Is it possible that America has been technologically leap-frogged by Russia or China? Or, as many people wondered after the videos were first published by the New York Times in December, might they be evidence of some alien civilization?

Unfortunately, we have no idea, because we aren't even seeking answers.

I served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence for the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations and as staff director for the Senate Intelligence Committee, and I know from numerous discussions with Pentagon officials over the past two years that military departments and agencies treat such incidents as isolated events rather than as part of a pattern requiring serious attention and investigation. A colleague of mine at To the Stars Academy, Luis Elizondo, used to run a Pentagon intelligence program that examined evidence of "anomalous" aircraft, but he resigned last fall to protest government inattention to the growing body of empirical data.

Meanwhile, reports from different services and agencies remain largely ignored and unevaluated inside their respective bureaucratic stovepipes. There is no Pentagon process for synthesizing all the observations the military is making. The current approach is equivalent to having the Army conduct a submarine search without the Navy. It is also reminiscent of the counterterrorism efforts of the CIA and the FBI before Sept. 11, 2001, when each had information on the hijackers that they kept to themselves. In this instance, the truth may ultimately prove benign, but why leave it to chance?

(A Pentagon spokesman did not respond to requests from The Washington Post for comment, but in December, the military confirmed the existence of a program to investigate UFOs and said it had stopped funding the research in 2012.)

The military personnel who are encountering these phenomena tell remarkable stories. In one example, over the course of two weeks in November 2004, the USS Princeton, a guided-missile cruiser operating advanced naval radar, repeatedly detected unidentified aircraft operating in and around the Nimitz carrier battle group, which it was guarding off the coast of San Diego. In some cases, according to incident reports and interviews with military

personnel, these vehicles descended from altitudes higher than 60,000 feet at supersonic speeds, only to suddenly stop and hover as low as 50 feet above the ocean. The United States possesses nothing capable of such feats.

On at least two occasions, F-18 fighters were guided to intercept these vehicles and were able to verify their location, appearance and performance. Notably, these encounters occurred in broad daylight and were independently monitored by radars aboard multiple ships and aircraft. According to naval aviators I have spoken with at length, the vehicles were roughly 45 feet long and white. Yet these mysterious aircraft easily sped away from and outmaneuvered America's front-line fighters without a discernible means of propulsion.

From my work with To the Stars Academy, which seeks to raise private funds to investigate incidents like the 2004 Nimitz encounter, I know they continue to occur, because we are being approached by military personnel who are concerned about national security and frustrated by how the Defense Department is handling such reports. I am also familiar with the evidence as a former Pentagon intelligence official and a consultant who began researching the issue after the Nimitz incident was brought to my attention. On several occasions, I have met with senior Pentagon officials, and at least one followed up and obtained briefings confirming incidents such as the Nimitz case. But nobody wants to be "the alien guy" in the national security bureaucracy; nobody wants to be ridiculed or sidelined for drawing attention to the issue. This is true up and down the chain of command, and it is a serious and recurring impediment to progress.

If the origin of these aircraft is a mystery, so is the paralysis of the U.S. government in the face of such evidence. Sixty years ago, when the Soviet Union put the first manmade satellite in orbit, Americans recoiled at the idea of being technologically surpassed by a dangerous rival, and the furor over Sputnik ultimately produced the space race. Americans responded vigorously, and a little more than a decade later, Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. If these craft mean that Russia, China or some other nation is concealing an astonishing technological breakthrough to quietly extend its lead, surely we should respond as we did then. Perhaps Russian President Vladi-mir Putin's recent chest-thumping claims about propulsion breakthroughs are not pure braggadocio. Or, if these craft really aren't from Earth, then the need to figure out what they are is even more urgent.

Lately, media coverage of the issue of unidentified aerial vehicles has focused on an expired \$22 million congressional earmark for Bigelow Aerospace, a contractor with ties to former Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid (Nev.). The money mostly funded research and analysis by that contractor, without participation from the Air Force, NORAD or other key military organizations. The real issue, though, is not a long-gone earmark, helpful though it may have been, but numerous recent incidents involving the military and violations of U.S. airspace. It is time to set aside taboos regarding "UFOs" and instead listen to our pilots and radar operators.

Within a roughly \$50 billion annual intelligence budget, money is not the issue. Existing funds would easily cover what's needed to look into the incidents. What we lack above all is recognition that this issue warrants a serious collection and analysis effort. To make headway, the task needs to be assigned to an official with the clout to compel collaboration among disparate and often quarrelsome national security bureaucracies. A truly serious effort would involve, among other things, analysts able to review infrared satellite data, NORAD radar databases, and signals and human intelligence reporting. Congress should require an all-source study by the secretary of defense while promoting research into new forms of propulsion that might explain how these vehicles achieve such extraordinary power and maneuverability.

As with Sputnik, the national security implications of these incidents are concerning — but the scientific opportunities are thrilling. Who knows what perils we may avoid or opportunities we might identify if we follow the data? We

cannot afford to avert our eyes, given the risk of strategic surprise. The future belongs to not only the physically brave but also the intellectually agile.

-- *Christopher Mellon served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence in the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. He is a private equity investor and an adviser to the To the Stars Academy for Arts and Science*

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TWEETS OF NOTE

Twitter, Mar. 10

President Trump, @realDonaldTrump: “The European Union, wonderful countries who treat the U.S. very badly on trade, are complaining about the tariffs on Steel & Aluminum. If they drop their horrific barriers & tariffs on U.S. products going in, we will likewise drop ours. Big Deficit. If not, we Tax Cars etc. FAIR!” (3/10, 1629)

President Trump, @realDonaldTrump: “In the first hours after hearing that North Korea’s leader wanted to meet with me to talk denuclearization and that missile launches will end, the press was startled & amazed. They couldn’t believe it. But by the following morning the news became FAKE. They said so what, who cares!” (3/10, 1502)

President Trump, @realDonaldTrump: “North Korea has not conducted a Missile Test since November 28, 2017 and has promised not to do so through our meetings. I believe they will honor that commitment!” (3/10, 1338)

President Trump, @realDonaldTrump: “Spoke to Prime Minister Abe of Japan, who is very enthusiastic about talks with North Korea. Also discussing opening up Japan to much better trade with the U.S. Currently have a massive \$100 Billion Trade Deficit. Not fair or sustainable. It will all work out!” (3/10, 1223)

President Trump, @realDonaldTrump: “Chinese President XI JINPING and I spoke at length about the meeting with KIM JONG UN of North Korea. President XI told me he appreciates that the U.S. is working to solve the problem diplomatically rather than going with the ominous alternative. China continues to be helpful!” (3/10, 1115)

President Trump, @realDonaldTrump: “We are deeply saddened by the tragic situation in Yountville and mourn the loss of three incredible women who cared for our Veterans.” (3/10, 0838)

Vice President Pence, @VP: “Our veterans are heroes & those who care for them deserve our thanks & praise. Karen & I are praying for comfort and healing for the families of 3 wonderful women who cared for our veterans at the Yountville Veterans Home.” (3/10, 1055)

Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin, @SecShulkin: “The VA is actively reviewing procedures to take all possible steps to prevent this outcome in the future, especially in outpatient settings.” (3/10, 1505)

Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin, @SecShulkin: “Nothing is more important than caring for our Veterans and employees during this time, and the VA is providing mobile resources at the location to assist those dealing with this incident and to employees impacted across the country.” (3/10, 1505)

Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin, @SecShulkin: “We know the unfailing commitment that these brave employees had to working with Veterans during some of their most challenging times; and we are committed to continuing to try to make sure these events do not happen again.” (3/10, 1504)

Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin, @SecShulkin: “We are saddened by the tragedy at the Yountville State Veterans Home. Our sympathies are with the families, friends and colleagues who are grieving for those who lost their lives.” (3/10, 1455)

Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA), @MarkWarner: “This is a national security issue. With 700,000 people waiting for their clearances, the time for reforming this broken system is now.” (3/10, 1132)

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) @SenGillibrand: “Appalling. An officer accused of sexual misconduct should not have been assigned to work at an agency intended to prevent and respond to sexual abuse. This failure must be addressed.” (3/10, 0921)

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), @marcorubio: “It is possible #NorthKoreaTalks are happening b/c Kim feels pressure from elites to improve direction of #NorthKorea But it is more likely this is an effort to make him appear reasonable & undermine both U.S. pacific alliances & support for intl sanctions” (3/10, 0857)

U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison, @USAmbNATO: “Talking about the importance of transatlantic alliances like @NATO with @RichardLui @MSNBC. Speaking with 29 voices has a greater impact when dealing with global security challenges. #BrusselsForum” (3/10, 0652)

U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison, @USAmbNATO: “A good conversation with @RepGregoryMeeks at #BrusselsForum discussing EU cooperation on military mobility and issues related to PESCO.” (3/10, 0533)

U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison, @USAmbNATO: “At #BrusselsForum this morning with @ChrisMurphyCT, @RepMikeTurner, @RepDelBene, and @RepLawrence discussing @NATO role in Afghanistan and NATO-EU cooperation.” (3/10, 0522)

Russian Embassy in the U.S., @RusEmbUSA: “#Putin: Russia & #US should sit down and talk it over in order to get things straight. We are ready to discuss any matter, be it missile-related issues, cyberspace or counterterrorism efforts. But the #US should also be ready.” (3/10, 2258)

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, @poroshenko: “Our next ambition is the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine. This is what my letter to @jensstoltenberg on February 2018 was about, where, with reference to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, I officially fixed Ukraine's aspirations to become a member of the Alliance” (3/10, 0710)

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