



Washington Insider

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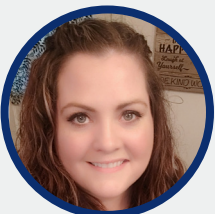
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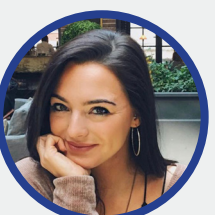
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ABOUT US



We believe in providing our audience with independent journalism throughout expert writers, analysts and journalists. Our culture is distinguished by unwavering grit, honesty, and a focus on innovation.

Transatlantic Today delighted to present the Washington Insider Magazine, a product that we present to our readers in Washington DC and beyond. Our magazine publishes unique and independent coverage on transatlantic relations with a Washington perspective. Transatlantic Today covers policymaking, politics and business related to the transatlantic relationship.

Our magazine strives to be become a key news analysis source for news on politics and policymakers in the US with particular focus on DC. Our coverage is designed with nonpartisan journalism and real-time tools create, inform and engage a those seeking timely and concise news.

Our work is designed by relentless grit, integrity and a prioritization of urgent and newsworthy topics.

In both of our website and and this magazine we cover topics about Diplomacy, Security, Defence, Counter Terrorism, foreign policy and international affairs. Indeed our reporting, OPeds, interviews with various stakeholders provide unique insights and analysis as well as the tools to arm you with the intel you need to make informed decisions.

Here I wish to commend.

Hannah Ochocki
Editorial Team

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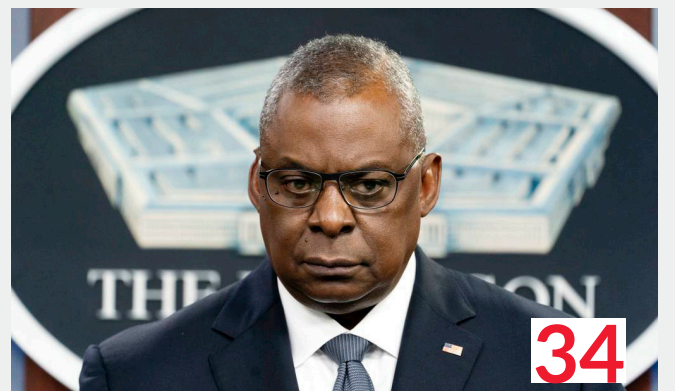
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ON DETERRING RUSSIA AND CHINA, PENTAGON OFFICIALS WALK A FINE LINE

Biden Promises Consequence to Putin if Ukrain Attacks Occur

by Christina Levandowski

With tensions rising to a boiling point between Russia and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin received a straightforward phone call from President Biden last Tuesday. This occurred in the wake of Putin's threats to invade and attack Russia that has been circulating over the past few weeks.

President Biden's scope of restriction on Putin would come in the form of severe economic sanctions and restrictions. While this may have been effective in other situations, President Putin has shown resistance to Biden, rebuffing his authority as President of the United States since he's assumed office in January of 2021. Political commentators from a variety of sources have expressed disbelief that this will keep Putin from executing political strategy over Ukraine and its citizens.

This is especially a risk, as President Biden has confirmed that at the moment, using US troops to help reinforce the threat will not be considered. Although reasons for the passive strategy are unclear, many doubt the efficacy of the strategy given President Putin's past history of inaction until there is military reactivity involved.

Currently, Biden has stated that troops will not be involved, as the US is not beholden to Ukraine in the same way that it is to other allies under NATO – which, while accurate, is not considering any of the potential human rights abuses or concerns for Ukraini-



an wellbeing if the country were to suffer an attack under President Putin.

Instead, President Biden is considering making allowances for the Russian frustration surrounding the expansion of NATO. While this act of diplomacy may elevate the United States under different circumstances, many fear that this lapse in foreign policy will signal concurrent weakness or passive leadership under the current presidency.

This was already noted and evident by the resumption of the oil pipeline construction the day after Biden swore into the US presidency.

The goal of these allowances and talks is to reduce the tension in the East, especially surrounding Ukraine. If these talks go well, one may consider that this is a long-form strategy that will continue to shape US policy in the future.

Putin has been very vocal about his refusal to attack and subse-

quently encroach on Ukraine, stating that his concern comes with the expansion of NATO and Russia's inability to maintain monitoring and intelligence in other relative areas.

To completely ignore and enable the expansion without quantification of Russian concern would show evidence of indifference to the political and security interests of Russia, according to President Putin.

While tensions are still on the rise, Putin has affirmed that Russia is proceeding with a peaceful foreign security policy unless otherwise provoked by Ukraine. Both presidents have affirmed that the phone call was open, honest, and otherwise constructive when it comes to the future of US foreign policy and Russian procedure.

Despite US Intelligence sources seeing and vocalizing a heavier military presence along the Ukrainian border, Russia has dismissed all claims of possible invasion at this time.

Blockade of Ambassador Selection Continues Despite Biden's Best Efforts

by Christina Levandowski

Current US selection processes to various authorities and entities around the world are currently in process of being slowed or halted by key Republican representatives. The currently-sitting President has been working to nominate additional appointees for ambassador selection without much success as we prepare to close out the end of 2021.

Due to the severity of the backlog for ambassador nominees, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is working to encourage lawmakers in a way that will speak to them most effectively: their vacation time. Currently, Mr. Schumer has advised that if no progress has been made to alleviate the backlog, White House lawmakers will need to work throughout the holiday season to get the appointment process started.

This decision and pressure are made in the wake of the realization that President Biden's presidency will end its first year with some of the most vacancies seen out of any presidential Administration in American history. With his current approval rating significantly lower than his predecessors, Democrats and other White House officials are working to make significant changes before the end of the year.

These appointments are especially important, as they set the tone for the Nation's presentation and execution of foreign policy. The absence felt in these key roles could leave the US open to



significant vulnerabilities.

The current conversations on the Hill are surrounding the impact that these vacancies have had on US interests, such as international trade. Karine Jean-Pierre, White House Deputy Secretary, has openly voiced her concern and frustration that the Senate has still not had the opportunity to confirm any of these appointees to their appropriate positions and vacancies.

These holds from the Republican side are not unfounded, as (most notably) Senator Cruz has pointed out the slew of procedural errors and footholds that the Biden Administration continues to run up against. Pointing back to the legislation, the senators have reached a stalemate when it comes to appointing the current nominees to positions.

Senator Lindsay Graham, among others, are growing increasingly frustrated and concerned due to the significant vulnerability that the US is welcoming by delaying the position appointments. While many news sources are pointing

to the obvious procedural delays that keep coming into play from the Republican senators, it is important to note that President Biden has made no efforts to keep appointments impartial.

The President has notably been inflexible or attempted to compromise on his appointments, causing Republicans to be even more adamantly opposed to progressing or compromising on any procedural avenue.

While consternation grows in Washington, the world wages on and is making significant development and changes that the US may be missing.

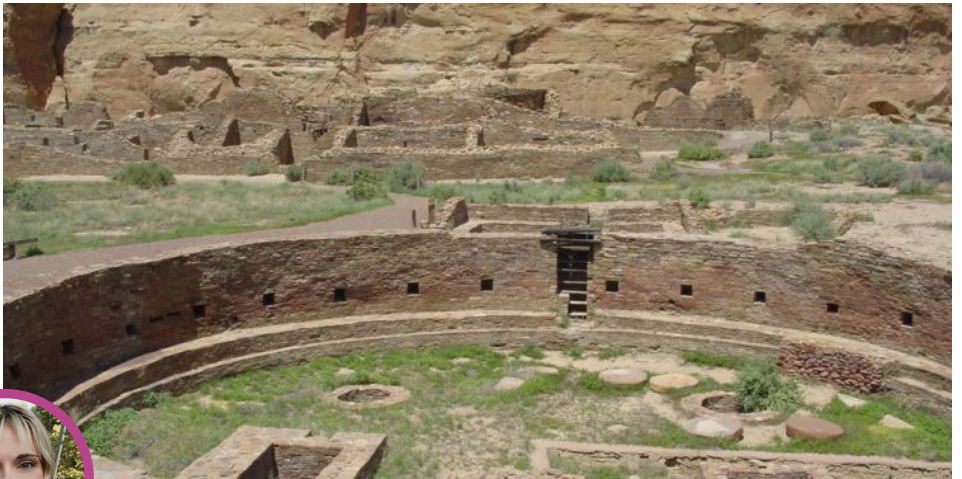
Throughout the process, Republicans work to create compromises that would further open discussion on international issues and topics, such as the Nord 2 project overseas. If these topics were discussed, additional appointments may be confirmed and executed to fill the roles in a timely way.

The Senate will likely continue to confirm these roles as we welcome 2022.

Biden proposes ban on oil drilling near Native American site in New Mexico

by Breanna Tabor

White House officials announced Monday that President Joe Biden proposed a 20-year ban on oil and gas drilling in northeast New Mexico's Chaco Canyon — one of the oldest Native American sites — White House officials stated. The Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management is going to begin the process of effectively banning oil and gas leasing on federal land within a 10-mile radius of Chaco Culture National Historical Park.



It will take some time to stop new oil and natural gas

drilling on the land. The Bureau of Land Management stated that it plans to soon publish a notice in Federal Register to start two-year segregation of federal lands around Chaco Canyon. The bureau will also conduct an environmental analysis and solicit public comments on the ban on oil and gas drilling.

Separately, the State of New Mexico Land Office also banned new state mineral leases located within 10 miles of the historic park. Officials stated that the federal proposal will not apply to any individual Indian allotments, or minerals in the area owned privately by state, tribal, and private entities. Concerns have been raised by Native American tribes from Arizona and New Mexico about the potential for oil and gas development in an area that could pose a threat to sacred lands and cultural sites near Chaco Canyon. However, the oil and gas industry is likely to complain about the move. New Mexico is a state rich in oil and gas, particularly the Permian Basin

located in the southeastern corner of the state. After the president restored protection for Bears Ears, Grand Staircase-Escalante monuments (both in Utah) — national monuments of historic importance to Native American tribes — Biden's action regarding Chaco Canyon is a result. Other tribes from the Midwest strongly criticized the Biden White House's decision to not stop the Line 3 pipeline. This would transport tar sands crude oil from Canada and through tribal land in Minnesota. Interior and Biden are working together to protect the site. However, there are larger questions about how the administration has approached oil and gas drilling. For months, the Interior Department has been working to produce a major report that will evaluate the federal government's oil-and-gas leasing program. The report was originally due to be released in the summer. However, members of Congress are still puzzled by the delay.

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Federal Contractor Vaccine Mandate Disputed

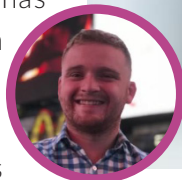
by Liam Flynn

The Biden administration's vaccine mandate for Federal contractors has been contested and blocked by courts across the nation. The mandate, which required federal contractors and their employees to be vaccinated, was announced in July of 2021 as a part of the administration's comprehensive covid response plan.

The policy was set to activate at the beginning of 2022, but has been contested in court in multiple states, led by Georgia. Judges in these states contend that the mandate is an overreach of executive power, and the president cannot use his authority to require Covid-19 vaccinations.

With over 800,000 deaths to the virus year-to-date, the president is facing pressure to halt the spread of the vaccine without further lockdowns which have curtailed the country's economic bounce back. Recently, the country has been hit by a new wave of the Delta variant. Meanwhile, fears loom that the Omicron variant could cause a similar spike in cases and deaths across the country.

The mandate would impact close to 25% of workers, affecting some of the largest companies in the world from Defense & Aerospace, Automotive, and Big Tech. Cur-



rently, about 60% of the US population is vaccinated, while experts agree 80-90% of the population needs to be vaccinated for herd immunity.

Judge R. Stan Baker, a Trump-appointed judge, filed an injunction on Tuesday, December 7th claiming that while the vaccine could be effective in stopping the spread of the virus, the mandate was beyond the purview of the presidency. Other opponents of the directive argue that it would be an expensive endeavor that could cause many organizations to lose valued employees who refuse the vaccine.

Biden's spokesperson has pushed back on the criticism, stating that the policy is within the legal right of the presidency. Moreover, the

administration believes that policy can be successful, pointing to the 92% vaccination rate among federal government employees, which was spurred by a similar mandate earlier in the Biden presidency.

With multiple states contesting the executive order, the enforcement of the regulation has been temporarily halted nationally. While it remains to be determined if the Biden administration truly overreached, the country will continue to struggle with the spread of Covid-19 which has had a devastating impact on many industries including retail, hospitality, and K-12 education. If the mandate is not possible, the US government will need to seek alternative means to continue to build immunity nationwide.

White House To Rejoin the Foreign Policy Discussions Surrounding Iranian Nuclear Deal in Vienna

by Christina Levandowski

After an already-tumultuous year involving Iran and its nuclear assets, the 2015 Iranian Nuclear Deal has been resurrected and reintroduced to the global stage. According to sources, the global authorities are to meet in Vienna the week after Christmas to determine Iran's nuclear future.

This is a significant development, considering the halting of discussion that occurred late last week based on new demands from Tehran. After these demands were made the Iran nuclear negotiator had requested to return home for additional discussion and consultation, leaving the discussion at an impasse. Currently, Britain, French, Germany, China, and Russia are consulting with Iran – and the United States may not be far behind.

After withdrawing from discussion under the Trump Administration in 2018, the United States largely indirectly influenced discussions. After a quiet few years, the Biden Administration would like to make significant changes to foreign policy, rejoining the deal.

If the United States were to continue to follow through on this change, this could mean lessened economic restrictions and sanctions for Iranian trade and commerce, in exchange for a responsible nuclear policy.

Rejoining would also mean a more immediate return to safe nuclear practices, as Iran has acted on a



reactionary basis. The US withdrew from the deal in early 2018, causing an almost-immediate risen threshold of Uranium production and enhancement out of Tehran – signalling to the rest of the world that Iran had resumed nuclear capacity and production at an enhanced rate.

While Tehran left the discussion table after making demands, the European authorities have also been considering making concessions and loosening the current regulations to comply with components of the new Tehran developments. This is done, presumably, to reduce the amount of nuclear research and enhancement that Iran has been doing, blocked from the UN in an effort to maintain the proprietary nature of the advancements.

This secrecy is pointing to a potentially larger problem down the line if Tehran is not satiated.

Additional developments are expected to come throughout the week prior to and of New Year's,

although legislators and authorities are not fond of working through the holiday season. The fact that discussions are still being held despite the season points to the importance that this deal holds for nationals, as well as humanity.

In 2018, President Donald Trump decided that the United States would no longer support the current structure and framework of the 2015 Iranian Nuclear Deal. Calling the layout rotten and ineffective, the president utilized his abilities to remove the nation from the agreement.

Political agencies and commentators alike were shaken from this monumental decision, defining a new era of foreign policy that allowed the US to reinforce its authority and inability to tolerate opaque political stances that otherwise pandered to the possibility of terrorism.

For the Biden Administration to reverse this decision so definitively, shows a renewed tenure of tolerance for Iran's nuclear behaviour and for national entities as a whole.

Will Action Be Taken Against Rep. Lauren Boebert's Islamophobic Remarks?



BY RANDY WHITEHEAD

Allegations of normalized bigotry against Muslims are swirling around members of the Republican Congressional caucus.

In both September and November of this year, Lauren Boebert — the U.S. Representative of Colorado's Third District — made remarks about fellow Representative, Ilhan Omar. Videos have recently surfaced of Boebert claiming that she joked to a Capitol Police officer that they were all probably safe because Omar — who was standing in the vicinity — wasn't wearing a backpack. The implication, of course, was that Omar — who is a Muslim — may be a radicalized suicide bomber.

The comments caused Boebert immediate backlash online with many people calling her "joke" both anti-Muslim and Islamophobic. Boebert is also reported to have said that Omar and another Muslim Democratic House member, Rashida Tlaib, were part of the "Jihad squad" and were "black-hearted evil."

This would not be the first time



that Omar has experienced anti-Muslim sentiment. In fact, she has received numerous anonymous death threats on more than one occasion and was the victim of a false social media story in which she was said to have married her brother. As a result of past experiences, Pelosi requested that Capitol Police give Omar extra security to keep her safe.

Many politicians have condemned Boebert's comments and have spoken out against the Islamophobia in American politics and society in general. In fact, some Republican Representatives, including Fred Upton and Adam Kinzinger, have reached out to Omar to express their disagreement with Boebert's actions and comments. Omar stated that they are now being ridiculed and ostracized by other members of the Republican party, stating that the issues of Islamophobia and Muslim hate are party-wide and run deep.

People are unsure as to how Boebert's comments are going to be handled. Omar feels "confident" that Nancy Pelosi will take "decisive action" against Boebert, adding that Kevin McCarthy, the House's Minority Leader, is incapable of taking action. Although Boebert may have her conservative supporters, many prominent progressives in the House — such as Representative Ayanna Presley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan — are demanding that action be taken against Boebert.

It's likely that Pelosi will make an attempt to punish Boebert; in fact, some have already suggested that she be removed from all committees. However, such a move will likely cause massive pushback from Boebert's numerous GOP supporters. In all likelihood, Boebert's comments will drive the wedge of political polarization even deeper into the House of Representatives.

Senate passes government funding, averts shutdown after GOP demand



by Amber Erwin

On Thursday, Congress avoided government shutdown a day before the funding deadline. This remarkable turnaround was possible because of Republican demands for defunding vaccine mandates from Biden Administration.

After the House had voted mostly along party lines for funding the government at its current level through February 18, the Senate took up and passed the continuing resolution. The bill passed the 60-vote threshold in a bipartisan vote of 69 to 28, and it was also avoided from filibustering. The bill now goes to President Joe Biden, who has indicated that he will sign it into law.

A conservative push to repeal the federal vaccine mandates for workers in the private sector and employees of the health care system led to the fight over funding. The GOP senators who spearheaded the effort offered an ultimatum: Let a simple majority vote on an amendment to that effect, or they would block immediate consideration of the continuing resolution. Funding will likely be suspended through the weekend if there is no speedy process.

The GOP requested that Democrats give in to their request. This



was especially true since the Senate's likelihood of the amendment being passed was significantly reduced by the absence of a few Republicans, even though one of them voted for it.

Before the votes, Senator Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York stated that "With this agreement, there will not be a government shutdown." "I am happy that cooler heads prevailed in the end. "The government will remain open."

The Senate first voted on the GOP amendment by Sen. Roger Marshall (Kansas) and Sen. Mike Lee (Utah), which would prohibit money from the continuing resolution for funding mandates set forth by Biden. These include vaccination requirements for large-company workers and employees of health care who are eligible for Medicare and Medicaid. If they aren't vaccinated, workers have the option of having frequent testing.

"It's wrong, and it's immoral. It's not right to tell someone that if they don't do what you want, they will lose their job," Lee said, noting

that he was vaccinated before the vote. It's not moral, and it's certainly not constitutional.

The amendment was defeated by 50 to 48 votes, with the 49 votes required for adoption falling short of 51 votes. Democrats did not support the GOP provision. Senator Joe Manchin from West Virginia had indicated an openness to the amendment earlier but ultimately voted for his party.

The Senate then proceeded to the final consideration of the funding measure for the government. It passed easily in the upper chamber, putting any fears of a shutdown to rest.

The continuing resolution's approval is a significant, necessary item Congress must pass before the holiday recess. However, lawmakers must still consider the debt ceiling increase by December 15, a defense policy bill, and the Democrats' broad social spending legislation. The latter could be put off until next year if Senate Democrats don't agree in the next few days.

After anti-Muslim remarks, Omar ‘very confident’ Pelosi will punish Boebert this week.



by Henry Nicholas

Democratic US Rep. Ilhan Omar announced Sunday she’s “very confident” House Speaker Pelosi is going to deliver “decisive action” upon GOP Rep. Lauren Boebert because of the Republican’s anti-Muslim comments.

After a discussion with House Speaker Pelosi, she’s quite sure that Pelosi will deliver definitive action next week. Omar told media outlets on “State of the Union.”

She stated Boebert must be disciplined for her bigoted, anti-Muslim speech addressed at Omar. On the third day of the dispute created by Lauren Boebert, she said she “can’t wait” to contest the matter against Rep. Ilhan Omar during the airing of a primetime Fox News show.

Yes.

That’s exactly what Lauren Boebert said.

Omar believes it’s crucial for Congress to announce that racist remarks, that kind of language, this type of hatred will never be approved in the House of Representatives. They must sanction and discipline Boebert by remov-



ing her from the Congressional committees she belongs to, reprimand her rhetoric by utilizing everything they can to deliver a precise and definitive communication to Americans that if the GOP will not be grown-ups, and denounce that language, that the Dems will do it instead.

Numerous media outlets have attempted to reach Pelosi’s team for comment.

Omar further described Boebert’s remarks as “shocking and unacceptable.” Omar continued to say it’s improper of a congresswoman to practice this hostile, threatening, provoking rhetoric against an associate.

Omar demanded that Boebert issue a public apology for her nasty words during a phone conversation. Boebert declined to give one, mentioning later in a social media post that she will proceed to place America first and never commiser-

ate among terrorists.

Omar proceeded to speak against the inability of House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy since he opted not to punish Boebert, a fellow member of the GOP. She described McCarthy as a coward and a liar. Further stating [McCarthy] can’t denounce the sort of Islamophobia, bigoted, and anti-Muslim speech that a colleague is delivering. “This is who they are. And we have to be able to stand up to them, and we have to be able to push them to reckon with the fact that their party right now is normalizing anti-Muslim bigotry.”

House Approves The Bill Granting \$770 Billion In Pentagon Funding And Settling Defense Policy

by Henry Nicholas



The National Defense Authorization Act, the yearly legislation which establishes the policy schedule and approves \$770 billion for the Department of Defense, received approval from the House of Representatives this week.

The bill advances to the Senate, where it will have to be voted on (and passed) by the Senate and later signed by President Joe Biden.

The bill won with robust **bipartisan** backing, with 169 Dems and 194 GOPs voting yes for the bill and a conclusive vote of 363-70. However, 19 Repubs and 51 Dems decided against the bill. House Speaker Pelosi was the sole Congressperson not to vote.

The ultimate transcription of the bill, receiving support from leaders on both sides, includes modifications to the ways sexual harass-

ment and assault get handled and prosecuted inside the military, a 2.7 percent pay raise for Defense Department civilian employees and military service members, plus \$300M in military assistance for the Ukrainian Security Assistance Initiative, totaling \$50 million more compared to what was suggested in the budget offer, reports of the bill's writing via the House and Senate Armed Services Committees declared.

The comprehensive bill spots points that have sat on the top of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's mind following his taking the reigns of the department in January, from the approach of sexual harassment and assault in the military to modifications to discrimination training and bias for each military branch.

The bill further creates a multi-year autonomous Afghanistan War Commission to investigate

the War in Afghanistan following the US military's August 2021 departure, comprising the war's 20 years.

This bill defines sexual harassment as a crime in the Uniform Code of Military Justice for the first time. "Each allegation of sexual harassment shall be ordered to be examined by an objective investigator apart of the chain of command," the bill review declares.

The bill additionally sets an "office, organizational structure, and provides authorities to address unidentified aerial phenomena," also known as UFOs.

Although the bill is seen as a thorough bipartisan resolution since leaders in both chambers and both parties accepted the text prior to the House vote last Tuesday, not all members were satisfied with the ultimate outcome.

CDC Raises the Travel Warning for Four European Countries to Level 4

BY AMBER ERWIN

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has recently raised the travel warning to level 4 or “very high” in three European countries, Iceland, Guernsey, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The CDC has advised Americans to avoid traveling to these countries due to an alarming rise in Covid-19 cases. Several other popular European countries have made the list recently, including the Netherlands, Croatia, and Norway.

The Covid pandemic is still a threat globally, and the CDC continues to monitor cases levels around the world to determine each country's Health Notice Level. The CDC defines the levels based on the incident rate or the number of cases over the last 28 days per 100,000 people. A country receives a level 4 status if it reports 500 or more new covid cases every day and the case trajectory. The CDC evaluates a country when it reaches a new travel health notice level, and if it remains there for 14 days or more, they decide to change the notice to the new level. The CDC updates the list for travel recommendations every week.

In an effort to curb the sudden rise in Covid-19 cases, the Czech Republic has tightened Covid restrictions to curb the increase in cases after they reached levels close to previous waves. They are considering a new lockdown and



stricter rules for people who remain unvaccinated for Covid 19, similar to the measures taken in Austria. The government met, and the board is suggesting no longer accepting antigen tests for events and outings.

Over 70 countries remain in Level 4, including many favorites for European Travel, such as the United Kingdom and the British Virgin Isles. The CDC lowered several destinations to Level 1: low, including Japan, India, Pakistan, Liberia, Gambia, and Mozambique. A low level indicates there are fewer than 50 reported cases in a day. Even with the lowered number of cases, the CDC still recommends holding off on travel until you are fully vaccinated.

The adjustments to the travel health level notices come just as international travel is beginning to pick back up. The United States has just recently opened its borders to fully vaccinated international trav-

elers. Travelers must provide proof of vaccination and provide a negative covid-19 test taken at least three days before travel. Many places have seen their numbers of daily Covid cases begin to fall. There are many countries experiencing record outbreaks.

Even with the rise in Covid-19 cases, holiday travel is expected to increase. Airports are preparing for travelers in numbers close to pre-pandemic numbers. Americans traveling who are unvaccinated should be prepared for new tighter testing requirements for travel that recently rolled out on November 8th.

The CDC continues to recommend limiting or avoiding international travel until you are fully vaccinated. Although they warn that even fully vaccinated people should take care when traveling internationally. They still run the risk of getting and spreading variants of Covid-19.

Will Build Back Better Pass Before New Year? Time is Running Out...Democratic Hopes Reach All-Time

LOW BY DANIELLE MOORE

Time is dwindling away as Democrats' in the Senate scurry to pass President Joe Biden's \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better plan before the arrival of the new year. It is unclear if the Senate Democrats will be able to acquire all 50 votes necessary to pass the social spending bill, but it is clear who is causing delays in the passing of the legislation. Joe Manchin, a moderate Democrat senator from WV, has continuously stated his support for the bill but wants to ensure the cost of the spending bill does not exceed \$1.75 trillion.

It's rumored the senator is against the extended child tax credit payments, but he has openly stated he's always been in favor of the child tax credits and has voted for it many times. President Biden and Manchin have met several times to discuss Manchin's hesitation of support, but nothing has been resolved at the moment. Biden continues to reiterate his belief in the passage of this bill but accepts the bill may not be passed before 2022.

"I believe that we bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan, even in the fact of fierce Republican opposition," says Biden.

Because Manchin's full support of the bill is crucial for the passage of the bill, Senate Majority Leader,



Chuck Schumer, isn't quite ready to concede and let the Senate adjourn for the upcoming Holiday break. He still plans on voting on the economic bill and has been discussing with other democratic senators about a possible voting rule change. "Schumer is hoping the small group working on voting rights rules change will find a path forward in the coming days," says NBC News.

Senate democrates are hoping to change the rules to allow a 50-vote majority.

Many Democrats are scared this stalled voting legislation may cause a political fallout for upcoming elections because they were unable to deliver on their promise to protect democracy and get rid of restrictive voting measures. The growing frustration between Democrats in the Senate and Senator Manchin was made clear Thursday when senators did not hold back their frustrations about Manchin's

hesitation to this legislation. Although, Manchin does not seem to be shaken by the democratic uproar.

"No one pressures me. I'm from West Virginia," said Manchin in response to a CNN reporter when asked if he was feeling pressure from his colleagues about his viewpoint on the child tax credit.

Parents start to wonder if this was the last child tax credit payment they'll receive since no bill has been passed yet. Parents use the money given through this program to feed, clothe, and keep their children and their families protected and healthy in the face of these unprecedented events.

Congressional sources have shared that a vote on the bill could possibly be delayed until March. Mainly because of Manchin's hesitation and unfinished negotiations about the ramification of the bill.

Trump allies are gunning for election positions all over the ballot, which may have consequences in 2024

BY HENRY NICHOLAS

While former President Donald Trump plans for a possible revival attempt in 2024, his allies are gathering to election roles the entire way down to the municipal sphere in crucial battleground states, establishing fresh stresses that the election administrators who denied Trump's attempts to reverse the 2020 election won't hold those same positions in the 2024 election.

Even Trump has supported candidates for attorney general and secretary of state — statewide races which perform a crucial function in managing elections — who helped broadcast his myths regarding 2020. However, in extension to statewide offices, Trump's followers are stalking neighborhood election stations, running all the way to the precinct level, and trying to win notable positions in state legislatures and GOP parties before the 2024 presidential campaign launches.

For example, in Michigan, many fresh Republican representatives to county canvassing boards who previously announced they would not have approved 2020 election results are ousting the GOP comrades who did support the election result. In addition, one representative within Macomb County advised Trump following the vote to request the Insurrection Act



and halt the Electoral College gathering to establish military courts to examine the election fraud allegations.



Michigan is a sample of a larger, national plan given out via Trump collaborators such as Steve Bannon. Bannon has pushed for Trump's followers to penetrate local Republican Party offices in addition to election posts.

"We're conquering the [GOP] via the precinct committee strategy. We're conquering h of the elections," Bannon stated on a recent episode of his "War Room" podcast last month.

"We will get to the foundation of this past November, and we will get to remove those electors," he maintained. "And you will witness a constitutional crisis. And you know what else? We're a

large and mighty nation, and we will manage that; we are going to handle that. So we'll push over that."

Bannon mentioned that he views his podcast as an apparatus for self-organizing among the Trump diehards. He regularly invites guests who are initiating regional exercises encouraging Trump followers to be included in election-related jobs, reach for influential positions within their municipal parties, or campaign for greater offices.

Earthquake swarm continues off US Pacific Coast

By Mandilee Hecht

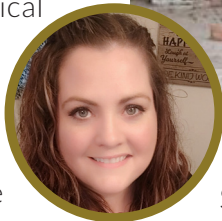
The earthquake swarm off the Oregon coast has continued, with about 100 quakes in the last 48 hours, but scientists say there is no need for concern.

The main concern with large earthquakes distant from land is the possibility of tsunamis, albeit “the quakes that have occurred thus far in the swarm should not create detectable tsunamis,” according to the US Geological Survey.

Furthermore, the Blanco Fracture Zone, where the swarm occurs, travels side to side and is not the sort of megathrust fault that displaces ocean water to generate tsunamis. On neighboring fault lines, such tsunami-producing earthquakes are more likely.

According to the survey, the most significant tsunami hazard for the Pacific Northwest is the Cascadia subduction zone, which is 360 kilometers (220 miles) to the east of this series. Meanwhile, the Blanco Fracture Zone shaking might last for days to weeks or end abruptly at any time.

The quakes, which began early Tuesday morning and persisted into Thursday, are located between 200 and 250 miles west of the coastal town of Newport, Oregon – far enough away to go unnoticed on land.



According to an Oregon State University investigation, the Blanco Fracture Zone is more active than the iconic San Andreas Fault in California, has caused more than 1,500 earthquakes of magnitude 4.0 or more since the 1970s.

The most notable aspect of this week's tremors is that the swarm contained at least nine earthquakes measuring between 5.0 and 5.8 on the Richter Scale, most of which occur at a shallow depth of roughly 10 kilometers (6.2 miles).

According to the USGS database, magnitude 5.0 or more significant earthquakes in the region have more than quadrupled since 1980. There were further swarms in June and July of 2008 and in August of 2009, UGS adds.

Though the Blanco Fracture

Zone, the site of this week's swarm of quakes, is among the most seismically active in North America, it seldom results in devastating earthquakes.

The fault is 275 miles west of the Oregon coast and about 200 miles west of the Cascadia Subduction Zone, producing the most significant and deadly Northwest earthquakes.

According to seismologist Dr. Lucy Jones, there have been more than 133 quakes of magnitude 5.0 or more on the Blanco Fracture Zone since 1980, but none have been followed by something on land.

Although there have been a significant number of magnitude 5.5+ quakes in a short period, experts claim this is not frightening, but more so seismologically intriguing.

Federal Government Makes a New Investment in Small Businesses Owned by Women



BY ATHENA NAGEL

After two years of devastation for small businesses and revealing the obstacles still facing this fastest-growing group, the Small Business Administration is now putting more emphasis on women business owners. Small businesses that are owned by women, particularly those of color, have seen the fastest growth, but still face the greatest obstacles to accessing capital or support.

More women have left the workforce in the last two years than ever before. This has been accompanied by a growing work movement, which has seen more people quit their jobs to start their own businesses. Some cities and states have relaxed regulations regarding at-home businesses during the pandemic. This has allowed more people to start a business and encouraged people of color and women to look into that option due to lower entry costs.

Despite the fact that there are 12 million women-owned businesses across the United States, almost all of them are small. Ac-



ording to data from SBA, 90 percent of these companies have no employees. Women-owned startups still struggle to access capital and bank loans. They receive between 2 and 3 percent in venture capital funds. Because of the long-standing difficulties such as established banking relationships, even new programs like the Paycheck Protection Program have not been able to reach women's businesses.

Guzman's priorities include improving access to capital, counseling, and training, as well as federal contracts. The new office role will allow for more flexibility and help business owners in creative ways.

Recent legislation has been designed to expand small business opportunities for women. This Fall's \$1 trillion infrastructure bill includes \$37 Billion in federal contracts through the Department of Transportation, which are specifically designed for small and

disadvantaged businesses. The SBA will also continue its largest expansion in its history, opening new Women's Business Centers within underserved communities. This will provide personalized, on-the-ground support for women entrepreneurs.

Guzman stated that this focus and the elevation for women's business was an independent decision made by the SBA. However, it is also part of President Joe Biden's equity directive. It will be in tandem with the White House Gender Policy Council equity strategy which directs government agencies towards promoting equity for women, LGBTQ+, and girls.

This strategy aims to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation that reduces gender discrimination in business and opens up more capital opportunities for women-owned businesses.

The Justice Department Suing Texas to Halt Redistricting

BY RANDY WHITEHEAD



Believing that the state's plans for redistricting would put minority voters at a stated disadvantage, the Justice Department has sued Texas. Filed in Texas' Western District, the lawsuit claims that the state's plans for redistricting are in direct violation of the second section of the Voting Rights Act.

At a news conference addressing the lawsuit, Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta said that the new plans will "deny Black and Latino voters an equal opportunity in the voting process and to elect representatives of their choice...[we allege] that several of those districts were drawn with discriminatory intent."

The Department of Justice has called out several districts by name in the lawsuit. The voting population of Texas' 23rd District is 50% Latino, but the lawsuit claims that Republican district-makers have "swapped out" regularly-voting Latino populations with low-voting Latino populations, a move that would theoretically work to lessen their representation.

In the 24th District, the new voting map has lowered the Latino



voting-age population from 40% to 23%. The state has also been accused of using the political affordability of voting districts to pair urban, minority communities with rural, White communities that live up to 100 miles away.

This is not the first time that Texas has been accused of similar acts. Earlier this year, the state's Republican party came under fire for drawing allegedly discriminatory voting districts that split populations of color into smaller groups, leading to less congressional representation for them. Known as gerrymandering, the practice is nothing new. Elected officials have been drawing voting districts with party intention for years.

This is the fourth lawsuit that the Justice Department has filed against Texas since President Joe Biden took office. The state has

actually been under a lot of political fire this year: their immigration enforcement policies, new voting law, and new abortion law have all been consistent sources of political conflict for the state.

Of course, the Justice Department's claims have not gone unchallenged. Texas' Attorney General Ken Paxton has called the lawsuit yet another one of Biden's "ploy[s] to control" voters in Texas. Believing that the lawsuit is an attempt to "sway democracy," Paxton is confident that the new districts will be considered wholly lawful, and that voting will go on as usual in Texas.

Although this would not be the first time something like this has happened in the United States, it will be up to the courts to decide the fate of the lawsuit, and perhaps even decide Texas' political future.

US Jobs Report Demonstrates Mixed Signals as COVID Pressures Continue

BY LIAM FLYNN



The US Bureau of Labor Statistics November Jobs report was released on Friday, December 3rd showing an overall reduction in unemployment, but falling short of economists' predictions. According to the report, the US economy added 210,000 jobs in November bringing the unemployment rate down by 0.4%.

While most economists suggest the report is positive, they acknowledge that November was the slowest growth in jobs in the calendar year. In fact, November's job report fell significantly short of predictions. Economists expected November to follow the trend seen in October where the US economy added 531,000 jobs. Despite disappointing numbers, the overall labor participation rate increased to 61.8% the highest level since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

COVID-19 cases continue to surge in the United States while the delta wave continues. At the same time, the new omicron variant has been detected in 17 U.S. states creating more uncertainty in industries that were most notably deterred by the pandemic.



Industries that require face-to-face contact saw the most significant impact, suggesting that COVID may be one of the factors slowing the recovery. For example, the retail industry is the only sector where jobs decreased in November, with a reduction of 20,400. Meanwhile, in the leisure and hospitality industry, jobs growth was a modest 23,000 jobs compared with 170,000 in October.

By contrast, the business and professional services industry saw the largest growth with 90,000 jobs added in October.

Labor analysts believe there is still room for employment growth, with many American workers still not returning to the workforce. Despite relatively low growth in November, experts suggest the service industries are the areas where employment still lags

pre-pandemic levels.

The Biden administration's economic recovery has faced increased scrutiny as inflation impacts both consumers and small businesses. According to a poll by CNBC, only 34% of small business owners approve of the administration's handling of the economy citing inflation and supply chain as their top concerns. While Biden officials believe they have made significant strides with the economy, they acknowledge that many members of the middle class may not feel it.

Officials from the Fed believe that the economy has recovered in terms of GDP, which may result in a change in monetary policy that would increase interest rates. While the policies have yet to roll out, November's job report may indicate the slowdown of job growth going into 2022.

U.S. unemployment claims reach 52-year low



BY MANDILEE HECHT

WASHINGTON – The number of Americans asking for unemployment benefits fell to its lowest level in 52 years last week, providing more indication that the United States' labor market is rebounding from the slump created by last year's epidemic, which hit hard in the U.S. beginning March 2020.

In the week ending Nov. 27, less than two million Americans were receiving regular unemployment benefits. Weekly claims, a proxy for layoffs, have been consistently declining for most of the year. They have already fallen below the 220,000-per-week level that was usual before the coronavirus epidemic hit the U.S. economy.

Employers shed a stunning 22.4 million jobs in March and April of last year.

Massive government support and the introduction of vaccinations contributed to the revitalization of the job market. Since April of last year, the United States has restored 18.5 million employments. However, the economy is still 3.9 million jobs short of where it was in February 2020, and its prospects are still



vulnerable to COVID variations such as omicron.

Last Monday, the Labor Department announced that businesses created a lackluster 210,000 jobs in the previous month. However, the poll found that the unemployment rate had dropped to a historic low of 4.2 percent, down 0.4 percent from October.

In addition, the Department of Labor said on Wednesday that firms advertised a near-record 11 million job opportunities in October. It also stated that 4.2 million individuals resigned from their employment in September, which is less than the September record of 4.4 million, indicating that they are confident enough in their prospects to hunt for something better.

Until Sept. 6, the federal government bolstered state unemployment insurance systems by paying an additional \$300 per week and extended benefits to

gig workers and individuals who had been out of work for six months or longer. As a result, including government programs, the number of Americans getting unemployment assistance reached over 33 million in June 2020.

The Labor Department said that unemployment claims fell by 43,000 to 184,000 last week, the lowest level since September 1969. In addition, the four-week moving average slipped below 219,000, the lowest level since the epidemic struck the United States in March 2020.

According to Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpont Securities, seasonal volatility contributed to last week's dip as the Labor Department modified the data to reflect employment market variations around the holidays.

Biden warns Putin over Ukraine



BY HENRY NICHOLAS

Washington — The White House announces President Joe Biden showed Russian President Vladimir Putin last Tuesday how the U.S. government is ready to implement decisive economic actions if Russia invades Ukraine — indicating that those specific actions would deal a heavier blow than the sanctions declared in 2014 that did not stop Russia from seizing Crimea.

“As the President stared Putin in the eye and told him today, I, too, will look you in the eye and say the actions we failed to take in 2014 are ready to be used now,” national security adviser Jake Sullivan stated to journalists Tuesday following Biden’s talk with Putin.

During the past handful of months, Russia has established supply lines, such as fuel and medical units, which might support a drawn-out fight if Moscow chooses to attack Ukraine, per experts close to the situation in eastern Europe. Current U.S. intelligence conclusions suspect Russia might launch a military invasion on Ukraine within a few months as the country amassed up to 175,000



soldiers at the border. Yet, Sullivan stated that the administration believes Putin has not chosen to begin a military attack into Ukraine.

Sullivan refrained from going into details but attached that the U.S. speaks with European allies “at a profound point of specificity.”

He stated Biden was straightforward and candid with President Putin, as [Biden] “always is,” next saying that “both sides had lots of give and take. Neither person scolded the other, but Biden was very explicit regarding where the United States holds on each of the points.”

Simultaneously with the economic consequences discussed on the call, Sullivan stated Biden conveyed that the U.S. is ready to support defense capacities in the area.

“[Biden] reemphasized America’s backing for Ukraine’s independence and national integrity. Furthermore, he told President Putin immediately that if Russia further attacks Ukraine, the United States, and our European allies will counter with robust economic steps,” Sullivan declared.

The other choice, Sullivan replied, is diplomacy and de-escalation.

The two leaders delegated their separate teams to follow up on the talks, and the U.S. will organize with allies and partners.

Iran has no obligation to make nuclear talks easier after Donald Trump

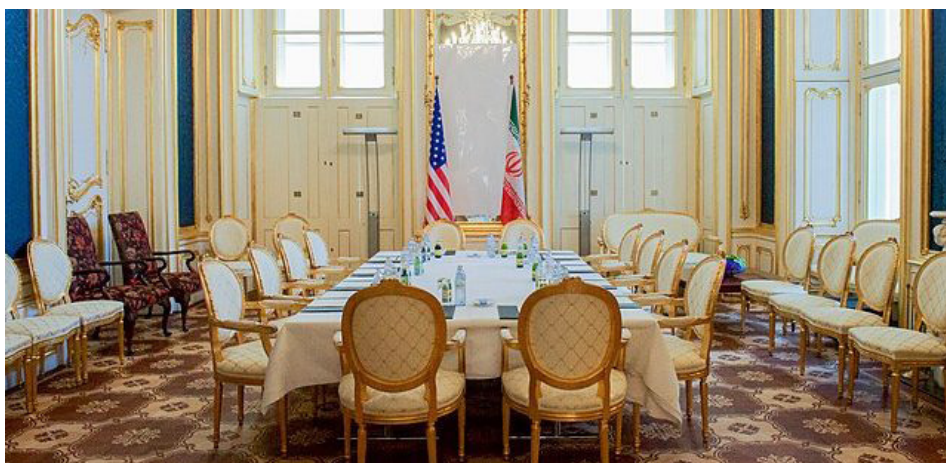


BY TRENT NELSON

When Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the historic Iranian Nuclear Deal, known also as the JCPOA, the media downplayed the long-term ramifications of the decision far more than they played up the immediate effects. A “major promise” of the 2016 Trump Presidential Campaign had been addressed, and a campaign of “maximum pressure” against Iran was begun in earnest, but the long game was left well alone in this moment, for the most part at least.

Yet that is all changing now, because while Donald Trump is no longer the President of the United States, his actions still haunt this nation, its people, and its current leadership. While the administration of Joe Biden would very much like Iran to pretend as though the last four years did not happen, so as to come back into agreement upon the previous parameters hashed out nearly a decade ago, that is simply not possible, and to pretend that it should be is politically naive and unrealistic given the contemporary and historical circumstances at play here.

Iran is under no obligation to save Washington from a circumstance that it has previously created for itself, and for them to oblige the United States in this way would be



far more generous than America has been to them over the last 40 years. While this currently means that the international negotiations might crumble, for Iran, this is less of a concern because Iran has already been stripped bare after signing the original JCPOA.

For Iran as well, in terms of what is known as RealPolitik, what they are doing is a no brainer; for Iran to capitulate now, after having been treated so poorly by the previous administration, would damage the regional prestige of Iran in real, potentially existential ways for one, and would create the domestic impression that Ebrahim Raisi is no more able to steer Iran through this than Hassan Rouhani was. While threats exist from Israel, Europe and the United States currently, again, that is nothing entirely new for this nation, and so cannot create anywhere near the same volition that it might have helped to create at some point in the recent past.

No, Iran must go about these negotiations in Vienna with determination and persistence, as there

are real issues that the United States must address in this nuclear agreement that were not as pressing or relevant when the administration of Barack Obama was in power. While Iran does not want to go too far and blow any chance to reconstruct this deal, the world in 2021 is not anywhere near the same world of 2013 or 2015; how it is pushing back against America and its allies should be understood as a natural reaction to the treachery that was unleashed upon them, for no good reason mind you, in May of 2018.

Joe Biden and his entire team will have to figure out how to **tactfully** address these issues, as well as the demands of the Iranians, with and in good faith; his administration, and the administrations of the other world parties, must accept that it is not the past, and that serious innovations have occurred since then that will preclude any future deal from looking so similar to the previous one. Ultimately, to be sure, even with the posturing of both sides understood, it is in the interests of

all parties for this new deal to be agreed to as quickly as possible.

“Politicians are not born; they are excreted.....” – Marcus Tullius Cicero

There are at least two, perhaps even three or four real, considerable problems that jump out right away when appraising the circumstances surrounding the negotiations this time, as opposed to last time. For one, the United States bailed on the previous multilateral deal while Iran was not in violation of the deal as it had been previously agreed. This should probably be considered the largest of the three to four issues, if for no other reason than because the other very large problems derive from that central condition; removing the US from the JCPOA was not only in poor taste in terms of diplomatic etiquette and precedence, but the shock move leaves a scar upon the American foreign policy body of work too, where previously the body had appeared, for the most part, clean as it were.

In the years that have passed since Donald Trump removed the United States from the JCPOA, external conditions have not only changed, but the direct consequences of that decision as it relates to America remains a central problem in resolving the current conundrum that the 45th President left the United States, as well as the greater world, to solve in his stead. The first issue that stems from the action of removing the United States from the JCPOA, therefore, is a basic problem of trust.

Before Donald Trump reneged America from its involvement in this multilateral endeavor, the

United States had not, in quite a few decades at least, reneged from anything of that nature or scope in such a capricious manner. While some historically minded folks might point to incidents like the Geneva Conference, and eventual Accords, of 1954 regarding Viet Nam, or even the foundation of the League of Nations after the first world war, there are certain differences that do exist here, including the position of the United States vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

Regarding the League of Nations in the aftermath of the First World War, Woodrow Wilson was not ever able to get the American congress to agree to join this league before he had a stroke and fell incapacitated for the rest of his second Presidential term. To be sure, the international community was disappointed in the ultimate choice that the Americans made, but the United States was also not thought of as highly in the community of nations as it is thought of today; America did not leave the League of Nations, because it had never technically been in the League of Nations at all.

Geneva in 1954 on the other hand, might genuinely be the best example prior to the recent Trumpian example of Iran. In that instance, the Eisenhower administration disregarded an agreement that all parties had signed onto, to hold free elections across Viet Nam that would unite an unofficially separated nation by democratic means. When the Eisenhower administration realized that Ho Chi Mihn was going to win in a landslide in both the designated northern and southern portions, no election was allowed to be

held.

Yet here, while there were internationally disappointed parties, there was not the bulwark of international agreement that exists even in this circumstance. On the contrary, France was still aggravated that they lost their hold in the nation, while the United Kingdom was simply happy that the United States was getting involved in this colonial issue that they saw as having greater geopolitical implications regarding capitalism and communism.

In this modern case, however, the United States pulled out of the JCPOA while **literally** every other involved nation begged for Donald Trump to keep the US in it, including the likes of China, Russia, the United Nations as an institution, as well as the traditional European allies of America. Yet he chose not to listen to them, breaking a long spell of confidence that many other nations had in the United States in regards to that nation's reliability vis-a-vis deals that it makes with other countries.

To put it another way, before Trump broke the JCPOA, a US foreign policy agreement with the United States was pretty well trusted by most of the world, even those that do not particularly like us very much. But after this blunder, there is a really fresh memory available for all nations to draw from, of the United States demonstrating in an open setting its untrustworthiness in this way. Iran has, therefore, demanded that the United States make assurances that it can back up that no future administration will unilaterally withdraw American cooperation in this deal without real, actual, and verifiable fault by Iran.

This is an entirely reasonable request, and one that has not had to be addressed within this context, simply because no nation had ever experienced this type of behavior from the Americans; after all, even Viet Nam, for better and worse, gets along well with the United States now. And so, the United States must prove itself and assure that it can be trusted in this setting and in negotiations with Iran, of which the rest of the world waits with bated breath for. While these are unfortunate innovations that will have to be addressed in regards to not only Iran, but the rest of the world as well, recognizing them leads still further into greater issues that threaten to make reconciliation more difficult than it was when last it was attempted.

“When the final result is expected to be a compromise, it is often prudent to start from an extreme position.” – John Maynard Keynes

It was previously acknowledged in the earlier portions of this essay that while Joe Biden might want for Iran to treat him as though it was still 2015, he knows that is not possible. And so, with this understood and acknowledged once again, he must stop acting as though Iran is behaving out of bad faith when they use the leverage that they have cultivated across the diplomatic landscape to try to secure a better deal for their nation and people.

It was always understood that the search for a better deal from the Trump administration, like that search for the holy grail or el dorado, was never possible because, in the way that the administration went about attempting for a better deal, no better deal was ever

actually possible. In the way that Donald Trump went about the entire Iran circumstance, he could never do anything but create the foundation for a deal that is much worse for the United States than the previous one was.

With this noted, when Donald Trump made his decision, it freed Iran to act as a nation that was not treated in good faith. They are clean in regards to this, as they did not break the agreement, which has been noted by all parties, even as Washington now wishes to act with incredulity that Iran has flouted the terms of a deal that ceased to function because of American choices, not Iranian choices. They have developed their nuclear capabilities much further than they had in the lead up to the first JCPOA, signed by Barack Obama during his time in office, and with the leverage gained by this advancement, as well as the other global circumstances that have unfurled in the years since, demand better than they had once demanded in return for their amiability and cooperation.

Iran would like to sell more oil than it has been able to since before the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, on top of the guarantees from the Biden administration that no funny business will be pulled by a Republican President in the years to come. They would like sincere help and recognition with their COVID-19 and refugee crises, as well as their longstanding economic and opiate crises too. While the Biden administration has said that they will not repeal sanctions reinstated by the last American President that has made all of these horrors more extreme, Iran has said that it will not

consider returning to any type of deal, the same, similar, or reconceived, unless sanctions are once again removed as they had previously been.

The sanctions, to me anyway, were and remain an avoidable error by the Biden administration that they likely have maintained as a way to demonstrate strength or consistency across two, opposing Presidential administrations; right now, they continue to breed more distrust than do they create positives in the entire matter. Yet those bits regarding diplomatic protection and economic cooperation should be what one might consider “happy problems” for Joe Biden, as they are those that can be worked on and configured in ways that leave all sides in a positive light.

Working more closely with Iran can help to recreate some of the trust that has been severed in recent years, and the United States must certainly think of the Iranian population for once and look to relieve them, as they remain, thanks to the international community as well as their own government, woefully mistreated and endangered; years of mistreatment, after all, does have consequences, internally, as well as externally.

“A diplomat who says “yes” means “maybe”, a diplomat who says “maybe” means “no”, and a diplomat who says “no” is no diplomat.” – Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord

Which brings us to one of the inevitable consequences of all three of the previous problems, that being that Iran grew tired of waiting for moderate reform, as so often happens when change does not

visit a society fast enough. And, thanks in large part to the will of the Ayatollah and his Guardian Council, different change has been delivered to the nation, as a recourse to the observed and perceived failures of the Rouhani years. This evolving landscape is different from the one that Donald Trump walked into over four years ago, and is, at least partially, a result of his malevolent efforts.

With the election of Ebrahim Raisi, as well as the gaggle of Principlist politicians over the last several years, Iran is more difficult to negotiate with than ever before; if Obama was lucky to have Rouhani after initially breaking through with his mercurial predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then Joe Biden should be considered profoundly unlucky that Donald Trump not only set the stage for this diplomatic nightmare, but for Ebrahim Raisi to be that leader with which Biden will have to figure out and reconcile this entire situation with.

This will be no easy task, for while Hassan Rouhani was a legendary intellectual and diplomatic figure within Iran, as well as a competent politician, Ebrahim Raisi is not necessarily considered any of those things, even in his own nation. During the election cycle, it was mentioned that Raisi was perhaps not the most brilliant of candidates, and he has had to deal with the questions over his intellectual and religious merits in the past as well.

While Raisi will wish to help his own legacy by reconstructing the old JCPOA in ways that will bring it back to life while benefiting Iran better than the old one did, especially in his hopes to one day

ascend to the position that Ali Khamenei currently holds, he will have to contend with an American President who has been put, by seemingly every one of significance in this conversation, into a real proverbial pickle of sorts.

Joe Biden has to simultaneously get a new JCPOA worked out, which all parties wish for, including a majority of American and Iranian civilians, while dealing with a reactionary leader of Iran, leading a largely reactionary government, while American reactionaries continue to threaten, cajole, and do everything in their own power to stop any new deal from happening. These reactionaries, aligned with the reactionaries in Israel and, somehow even Iran, will continue to rage that Iran will be given the nuclear weapons if a new JCPOA is signed, even as Iran has developed nuclear capabilities much faster in the time since the previous nuclear agreement was torn up.

Yet Joe Biden needs to assure Iran that these people will not destroy any deal that he looks to cement, as they did last time, otherwise no deal can ever be realized anyway. The 46th American President has to weigh the options of taking flak at home for signing the new agreement, flak at home for not remaking the past agreement, as well as flak from the international community who also will be affected by whatever comes to occur, even as they routinely receive minimal consideration by American media and diplomatic analysts.

This is what Joe Biden and his administration are up against currently, and what they will have to fight through should they wish to go down in history in the same

or similar light as his Democratic predecessor has since in regards to this particular area. It will not be an easy success, should success be found or conjured up, and, to be sure, Iran has absolutely no obligation to make this any easier than it will end up being; Iran has to look out for Iran, and as evidence demonstrates, they can be held at fault for things that there is not even any real evidence for.

Therefore, they cannot act with the same niceties that they may have once acted with, because there is little evidence, as there once was, actually, that acting in these amiable ways will produce any greater or more positive effect than this tougher posturing might. But for American conservatives, reactionaries and citizens of this nation in general, there will be little need, after a new JCPOA has been somehow realized, to lament the state of the new deal as a shortcoming of the President or his administration.

The blame will rest squarely on Donald Trump and his administration, not those of Joe Biden, Ebrahim Raisi, or even Hassan Rouhani, and the people of America, this time at least, should understand that in ways which they did not in previous years. If Joe Biden can fix the mess that Trump left the world in, however, there is a real chance that he will receive not any blame for having done the right thing in regards to Iran and their fate within the international community of nations, but credit from all parties for having held the line towards accomplishing a major innovation of foreign policy with Iran, for the second time in less than a decade.

Is America Leaving the Middle East for Good?



BY RANDY WHITEHEAD

It's no secret that the Middle East has had to endure America's inconsistent foreign policy over the past couple of decades. Now, as President Joe Biden is trying to renegotiate President Donald Trump's renegotiation of President Barack Obama's nuclear deal with Iran, many countries in the region are feeling the effects.

In fact, the United Arab Emirates — after years of the contrary — is now making an attempt to control its own long-standing tensions with Iran. This sudden move towards intra-regional diplomacy suggests that some countries in the Middle East may be taking steps to safeguard their future.

Because of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, many US allies in the Middle East are wondering about their own political futures. During a Q&A at Bahrain's International Institute for Strategic Studies conference, Farhad Alaaldin, chairperson of the Iraq Advisory Council, told US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin that "[America's] partners on the scene are worried, and some of them are starting to run for cover."



Indeed, US allies in the Middle East fear a complete American extraction from the region. Because America has had a continuous presence in the Middle East for the past two decades, many are worried about the potential ramification of a full American extraction.

The Biden administration has previously voiced a desire to extract the United States from the Middle East entirely, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken saying that he imagined the new administration doing "less not more" in the region. However, Defense Secretary Austin assured Alaaldin — along with the rest of the conference panel — that America would not be abandoning their allies in the Middle East, saying "we're not going to abandon these interests going forward."

In fact, White House Middle

East coordinator Brett McGurk and Biden's Iran envoy Robert Malley attended alongside Austin in an effort to reach out to allies in the region. However, it's likely that the gesture didn't do much to assuage regional worry. Nonetheless, Austin committed the Biden administration to future action, stating that the country is "committed to a diplomatic outcome of the nuclear issue."

At any rate, Brian Katulis — a vice president at the Middle East Institute — described Biden's Middle East administrative policy as "treading water," adding that the region's inherent turbulence can sometimes make it "all but impossible to keep afloat." Certainly, America's withdrawal from the Middle East could decide the political future of both the region and the world.

Air Force looking for smarter ways to deploy

BY THE EDITOR

Air Force deployments could before long start to appear to be somewhat unique as the help advances to another schedule for preparing and dispatching forces all across the world.

On August 2021, Airforce Chief of Staff Gen. Charles “CQ” Brown Jr. stated that after non-stop combat rotations to U.S. Central Command spanning over 20 years, a modern approach will help squadrons prepare to go when required and steer clear of short staffing.

In a report published by Defense News Under the newly made arrangement, airmen would go through a year on neighborhood and enormous scope preparing prior to opening up to head abroad. Arrangements as a component of defense secretary-coordinated activities, customary pivots through Air Force military center points in different nations, or other ready-response forces would last an additional a half year – like typical deployments now.

Airmen would then get back for



a final 6 months of reconnecting with families, top to bottom airplane fixes and upgrades, and catching up on basic abilities and skills.

The refreshed power age model could be prepared for primetime as soon as October 2022. How every squadron’s stages will be lunched throughout the year to stay away from airplane deficiencies – especially among more modest armadas like the 20 B-2 Spirit bombers or the 16 E-8C Joint STARS ground target-tracking planes.

It dovetails with different ideas underway, including the “lead wing” work to assemble squadrons groups to prepare and design

a plan and get trained throughout an year, and an upgrade of maintenance of fighter jet.

The assistance is breaking its enormous aircraft maintenance units into small fighter generation squadrons, aiding fighter bases pivot all the more easily through training, activities and reconstitution after organization. One of those phases can be focused upon by the Squadron commanders at a time rather than supervising people at all of the three stages as well.

By summer 2022, all fighter wings are scheduled to get aboard.

Meeting the B-21 Raider: 2022 to bring new bomber’s eagerly awaited rollout

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

Guest Post - By Stephen Losey, Defensenews

WASHINGTON — The coming year will see the U.S. Air Force’s

most anticipated new aircraft rollout in recent memory as the service debuts its next stealth bomber.

But 2022 will also bring what are

expected to be tough choices and retirements as part of the upcoming budget proposal for the following fiscal year.

The B-21 Raider will be rolled out to the public in 2022, though there is no concrete date. Several months afterward, the Raider will make its first test flight.

“We’ll do something special as we bring out the B-21,” such as a ceremony for the unveiling or the follow-on first flight, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. CQ Brown said in September during Defense One’s online State of Defense conference.



This will be the first public unveiling of a new Air Force bomber in more than three decades, since Northrop Grumman’s B-2 Spirit bomber was revealed to the public at Air Force Plant 42 in Palmdale, California, in November 1988. The B-2’s first public flight took place the following year, in July 1989.

But Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall on Dec. 9 suggested the Air Force may continue to play its cards on the Raider close to the vest, even into 2022.

“You’re not going to get to see much of it,” Kendall said during an online Defense One panel. “We don’t want to give our enemies a head start on any of this. We’re going to acknowledge that we’re doing this, let the public be aware, let the Congress be aware of it. But we’re not going to say a lot more about what we’re doing in the public.”

Kendall said at the Air Force Association’s Air, Space and Cyber Conference in September that five



B-21s were in various stages of production at Plant 42.

Todd Harrison, an aerospace and defense budget expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, expects the Air Force’s fiscal 2023 budget request – coming early next year – to also yield more details on the B-21. Harrison said Dec. 10 that could include more information on the service’s procurement plan as well as hints on how quickly the aircraft could be fielded.

“2022 is going to be a big year for the B-21,” Harrison said.

But the 2023 budget request could also include some difficult trade-offs for the Air Force as it seeks to retire more aging aircraft to free up resources. The upcoming budget is expected to be a tight one, leaving little room for the service to modernize as quickly as needed. Kendall and other Air Force leaders have recently increased their calls for Congress to allow the service to retire aging aircraft they say won’t be of much use in a high-end fight against a foe like China.

And with the lessons the Air

Force garnered from a series of force-planning exercises under its belt, the upcoming budget submission could include more sweeping changes to force structure than previous budget requests.

“As we look at [FY]23, this is where I’m really focused,” Brown told Defense News in a November 2020 interview.

The Air Force’s effort to acquire an aerial refueling tanker to bridge the gap between the KC-46A Pegasus and the next-generation tanker could gather steam next year as well. The Air Force in June released a sources-sought solicitation for the KC-Y, or bridge tanker, program.

Three months later, Lockheed Martin revealed its LMXT aerial refueling tanker – a modified version of the Airbus A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport plane – that will compete against the KC-46 to produce up to 160 bridge tankers.

In an interview with Defense News on Dec. 4, Brown said the timing of the competition for the bridge tanker is still to be determined, but that the process had started.

Iran Gunning for a Missile Range Increase



BY RANDY WHITEHEAD

Though they have been high for a long time, tensions between Iran and Western Europe are on the rise, especially with regard to missile defense. Earlier this month, the Iranian government fired a missile above a nuclear facility in the Isfahan province known as Natanz. Taking place at 9pm, the sudden explosion surprised and frightened the locals, and conflicting reports were presented by local media outlets.

After the incident, Iranian security officials stated that the event was a “controlled explosion” on the part of the country’s air defense system, adding that citizens had “nothing to worry about.” However, this is not the first occurrence of a surprise incident at Natanz.

The facility experienced a major fire in July 2020 and then experienced an explosion in April 2021 that actually caused the facility to be shut down. Some believe that these incidents are deliberate attempts to sabotage Iran’s missile defense program, citing tension with Israel and other surrounding



countries. However, many observers believe that this latest incident was a nuclear test, suggesting that Iran is attempting to bolster its nuclear defense program — a move that will likely escalate already-existent tensions.

This latest Natanz incident was preceded by a seventh round of failed attempts to reach an agreement on nuclear matters in Vienna. This failure — coupled with recent events in Iran — seem to have rendered the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action virtually ineffective in curbing Iranian nuclear defense development.

However, in the long run, defense discussions may not matter at all. Mostafa Khoshcheshm, an expert in Iranian international affairs, has said that Iran needs to increase the range of its nuclear missiles up to 4,000 kilometers. He believes that by creating missiles that can

reach Western Europe, Iran will be able to use their nuclear program as protection and leverage in future negotiations — and to protect themselves from unwanted war.

Khoshcheshm went further, stating that the Americans need to “lift the sanctions” against Iran’s nuclear missile development program, believing that if the sanctions are not lifted, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will fully dissolve. Such a dissolution would only serve to increase tension.

The truth is simple: it’s highly unlikely that America will lift the sanctions, and it’s also unlikely that Iran will cease their development of nuclear missiles. And unless an agreement can be made, it’s both possible and probable that the simmering tensions could fully boil over.

Omar and 3 Senators introduce resolution to block arms sale to Saudi Arabia

BY AMBER ERWIN

Despite Saudi Arabia's importance as a partner in the Middle East, the U.S. Democratic Representative of Minnesota, Ilhan Omar, introduced a joint resolution to block and ban the sale of missiles and other weapons to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Since filing her legislation on November 12th, three other senators, Rand Paul (R-KY.), Mike Lee (R-Utah), and Bernie Sanders (I-VT.) have put together a Bipartisan effort to file their own joint resolution with the aim of preventing another humanitarian crisis in the Middle East.

The Saudi arms deal valued at \$650 million, announced by the Biden Administration on November 4th, included the sale of 280 air-to-air, 596 missile launchers, and other support equipment and services. This is the first major arms deal made with Saudi Arabia since the Biden Administration has been in office. Raytheon Technologies produced the missiles being sold.

"As the Saudi government continues to wage its devastating war in Yemen and repress its own people, we should not be rewarding them with more arms sales," Sanders said in a statement regarding the arms deal.

If passed through the Senate, it will prohibit the sale of \$650 missiles and other services and systems being sold to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



"We should never be selling human rights abusers weapons, but we certainly should not be doing so in the midst of a humanitarian crisis they are responsible for. Congress has the authority to stop these sales, and we must exercise that power," Omar said.

"It is simply unconscionable to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia while they continue to slaughter innocent people and starve millions in Yemen, kill and torture dissidents, and support modern-day slavery,"

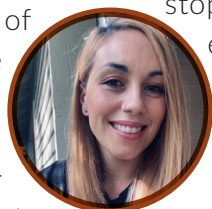
President Joe Biden publicized the end of US support for Saudi Arabia's offensive operations in Yemen, immediately following the previous administration's arms deal and bonhomous relationship with Riyadh. For this reason, some lawmakers were surprised to learn about the \$650 million deal made between the U.S and Saudi Arabia.

According to the Biden Admin-

istration, in defense of the sale, they continue to be "fully consistent with the administration's pledge to lead with diplomacy to end the conflict in Yemen." Hartung, the director of the Arms and Security Program, has asserted this sale consisted mainly of defensive weapon systems. The missiles were sold to make certain "Saudi Arabia has the means to defend itself from Iranian-backed Houthi air attacks," he said.

Some have argued these weapons could be used as both defensive and offensive in a time of war. The U.S. has often refused to approve military sales to Saudi Arabia without a guarantee its weapons would not be used to harm or kill any civilians.

Approval from the State Department does not suggest the contract for this deal has been signed or that an agreement has been reached between the two parties.



Concerns Over Iran's Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons Invokes Reactions Across the Region and in Washington DC

BY KATHY MALOUF

In the most recent quarterly report the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran has “continued to increase” its stockpile of elements necessary to build nuclear weapons, and other violations of the commitments made to the international community, including hampering efforts of inspectors attempting to monitor sensitive sites.

On December 5th, in an effort to ease concerns regarding their lack of cooperation, Iran's officials in Tehran agreed to allow inspectors to “service” surveillance cameras located in Iran's nuclear sites.

After meeting for talks in Cairo this month, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and Saudi Arabia's Prince Faisal bin Farhan confirmed their agreement on many issues of security in the region. Following the meeting, at a joint press conference, Prince Faisal expressed his appreciation for Egypt's stand on confronting the actions of Houthi militia forces in Yemen. He also stated there is a definite need for cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Egypt to work closely to counteract terrorism in the region. The two nations agreed to “expand the volume of cooperation and consultation.” Prince Faisal also repeated the importance of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. He stated that there had been no meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia during the previous week, but that his country remains open to discussions.



Meanwhile in Washington, Speaker Psaki stated on Thursday, December 9th, that President Biden continues to be committed to preventing Iran's development of nuclear weapons, but by doing so diplomatically. Psaki did go on to commend that due to Iran's rapidly advancing programs, the Administration is prepared to protect National security interests if diplomacy ceases.

Upon taking the reins of the US government, the Biden Administration revisited the treaty (JCPOA), restarting talks with Iran starting in April 2021 in Vienna. Diplomats participating in the talks believed initially that some progress was being made, however, Iran recently demanded the US immediately remove all sanctions. Both sides are currently deadlocked. Psaki refused to elaborate upon what specific condition or time frame to occur before the US considers the negotiations to have failed.

When pressed, she did confirm that the US has a diplomatic plan in place, although the timeline has not been established for its use.

Authorities are currently evaluating the last conversations regarding nuclear advancement, and hope to continue as they have been. At the moment, the US is not in any danger, the Administration is simply preparing to play defense if needed.

State Department spokesperson Ted Price reported it would take some time to see if Iran would drop their demand for removal of all sanctions, and to see if they are willing to be flexible. Ultimately, Washington hopes to enforce and support JCPOA and go beyond that agreement to further restrict its nuclear ambitions and address the missile program, while continuing efforts to destabilize the region.

This is also what National alliances in the Middle East are looking for. Israel's defense authority Benny Gantz and Prince Faisal agreed last week that restoring JCPOA is not enough. Minister Gantz is suggesting joint military readiness in the region in the event that Iran actually does achieve its nuclear aspirations.

Non-Lebanese Supporters of al-Wefaq Group Set to Be Expelled from Lebanon

BY KATHY MALOUF

Al-Wefaq, a group which formed to oppose the Shiite majority party in Bahrain, was declared to have terrorist ties and to be undermining the government and was outlawed in the country in 2016. There are still active members, however, who most recently held a news conference in Lebanon, south of the capital of Beirut. The purpose of the news conference was to present the group's annual human rights report. However, the Al-Wefaq group used the opportunity to criticize Bahrain's human rights record. Al-Wefaq claimed documented evidence of over 20,000 detainees in Bahrain from 2011 to the present. That number includes hundreds of questionable arrests and forced disappearances in 2019 and 2020.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, meeting in Riyadh, described the news conference as held by "a terrorist organization with support from the terrorist Hezbollah" and called for supporting Bahrain in "any measures it takes to protect its security and stability." Monarchies in the Gulf have been wary of and concerned by the increasing influence and power of the armed and Iranian backed Hezbollah group. The rivalry for influence in the region is nothing new between the Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia and the Shi'ite country of Iran.

The country of Bahrain formally protested Lebanon allowing such events which spread false information which defames their coun-



ty and called on Lebanon to bar such events which "are not harmonious with

brotherly relations." Lebanon's Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi responded this week by ordering the deportation of all non-Lebanese members of Al-Wefaq. Minister Mawlawi stated that Lebanon would not be used as a "platform for spreading hatred or hostility" towards Gulf and Arab countries. It has not yet been made clear how many members of the group will be affected by the deportation order, likely in an attempt to calm parties in a heated and rarely seen rift in the region.

There have been strong tensions in the region since October 2021, resulting in a diplomatic dispute between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. At that time, Lebanese (now former) Minister George Kordahi made remarks criticizing the Saudi-led war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Lebanon and requested Lebanese envoys to leave their

capitals and return to their country.

Bahrain and the UAE recalled their citizens from Lebanon. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has banned all Lebanese imports into the kingdom.

Even before his appointment of George Kordahi as Lebanon's Information Minister, videos were shared online showing him making critical remarks about the Iran-backed Houthis "defending themselves ...against an external aggression" in Yemen. He was critical of the long-running war and called for it to end. Kordahi resigned his post as minister after weeks of resistance. However, the diplomatic crisis has continued, rooted in the belief of Saudi Arabia (and the other objecting countries) that Iran has been influencing the militant Hezbollah and its supposed ally Al-Wefaq. It is believed Kordahi's resignation this month was a condition mandated before French President Macron's visit to the region to discuss restoring ties between Lebanon and France.

U.N. warns of ‘colossal’ collapse of Afghan banking system

BY CHRISTINA LEVANDOWSKI

Monday’s United Nations call for urgent action to support Afghanistan’s banks. They warn that an increase in Afghans who cannot repay loans, lower deposits, and a cash liquidity crisis could lead to the financial system collapsing within months.

The U.N. Development Programme stated, in a report of three pages on Afghanistan’s financial system and banking, that “the economic impact of a collapsed banking system – and the consequent negative social effect – would be “colossal.”

The abrupt withdrawal of all foreign development assistance after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan on August 15th from the Western-backed government has caused the economy to plunge into chaos. This has put a strain on the banking system, which established weekly withdrawal limits to prevent a bank run.

Afghanistan’s banking and financial systems are in total chaos. To improve Afghanistan’s limited production capabilities and to prevent the bank system from collapsing, the bank-run issue must be addressed quickly.

International sanctions against Taliban leaders make it difficult to find a way to avoid a collapse.

“We must find a way that we can



ensure that if support the banking sector, we do not support the Taliban,” Abdallah al Dardari (head of UNDP in Afghanistan), told Reuters.

He said, “We are in such dire circumstances that we need to consider all options and we must think outside of the box.” “What was three months ago impossible has become possible now.”

Before the Taliban took power, Afghanistan’s banking system had been already in danger. However, development aid has dried up and billions of dollars worth of assets in Afghanistan and have been frozen overseas. The United Nations and other aid groups are now struggling for cash to enter the country.

The UNDP proposes to save the banking sector by creating a deposit insurance program. This program will work to provide liquidity to meet short- and long-term financial needs. Credit guarantees are also included.

UNDP stated in its report that coordination with the International Financial Institutions (with their vast experience of Afghanistan’s financial system) would be crucial to this process.

Since the Taliban took control, the United Nations has warned up to the fact that Afghanistan’s economy was at risk of collapse. This would likely fuel the refugee crisis. UNDP stated that it could take many decades to rebuild the banking system if it fails.

According to the UNDP, “40% of Afghanistan’s deposit stock will disappear by the end of this year due to withdrawal restrictions and current trends.” According to the UNDP report, banks stopped issuing new credit and non-performing loans nearly doubled to 57% by September 2020.”

“Banks may not be able to survive if the rate of non-performing loans continues,” al Dardari said. And I am being optimistic,” al Dardari said.

On deterring Russia and China, Pentagon officials walk a fine line

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

Guest Post - By Stephen Losey, Defensenews

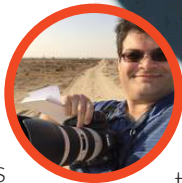
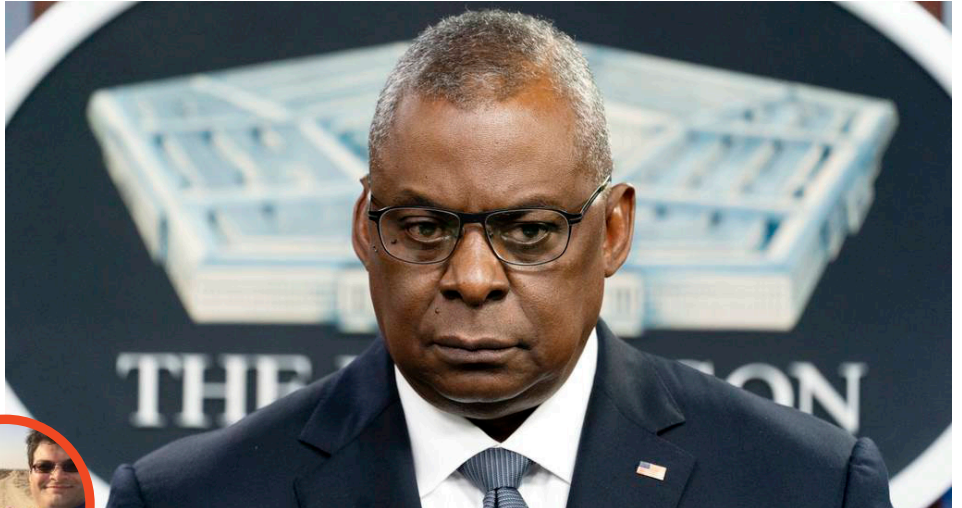
SIMI VALLEY, Calif. — Although Saturday's Reagan National Defense Forum had no shortage of concerned statements from senior military officials about potential Russian or Chinese aggression, details — or even hints — on what the Pentagon might do to deter or respond were hard to find.

The cautious tone reflects the delicate balance being struck by Pentagon officials as they try to signal potential adversaries shouldn't act — while attempting not to inflame already high regional tensions, inadvertently provoke a reaction or back President Joe Biden into a corner.

"You heard the president say yesterday he's looking at a number of initiatives [on how to assist Ukraine], so I won't get out in front of my boss," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a discussion with Fox News journalist Bret Baier.

But some Republicans want to see more concrete moves or signals from the administration making it clear to Russia or China they will pay a price for aggressive actions.

"This is a moment in time where we need to show leadership," Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, said at a panel earlier that day. "We need to push back and say, 'Putin, you can't do this.'"



In his keynote address to attendees at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Austin previewed his concept of "integrated deterrence" to counter China, which aims to ensure the military works with the rest of the U.S. government, allies and partners to make "the folly and cost of aggression very clear."

He stressed that the while U.S. will work with allies in the region to strengthen free and stable international systems based on rules and free from coercion, it doesn't seek to build an "anti-China coalition" or "an Asian version of NATO."

And he said his integrated deterrence concept would leverage American technology and operational concepts — including artificial intelligence and nanotechnology — to dissuade aggression.

Austin sought to lower the temperature surrounding the debate over China, emphasizing the strength of American industry and innovation.

"We're clear-eyed about the challenge China presents," Austin said. "But China's not 10 feet tall. This is America."

At the same time, Austin tried not to downplay the seriousness of the geopolitical situation. He said China's efforts to rapidly develop military capability and actions in the region — such as October's flight of 52 fighters and bombers toward Taiwan in a major show of force — are worrying. He said the Pentagon will continue to speak out against them.

"It looks a lot like rehearsals," Austin acknowledged of the flights near Taiwan. He said the U.S. is "doing a lot to support Taiwan right now" and would look for ways to do more, but wouldn't detail what that might mean.

With China and Russia attacking U.S. satellites with lasers and jamming devices, and even a widely-condemned Russian anti-satellite missile test that flung dangerous debris in orbit, space is

becoming an increasingly contested environment, Austin said.

Asked about the potential for adversaries to go too far and cross the line into acts of war in space, Austin cautioned, "I've always found that it's never a good idea to publish red lines."

Pressed on what the U.S. might do if Putin ordered an invasion of Ukraine, Austin declined to elaborate, saying that would be speculating.

The possibility of a looming Russian invasion of Ukraine also hung over the conference — but as with China, officials were hesitant to lay their cards on the table.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville said on the panel with Ernst he is "very, very concerned" about intelligence reports indicat-

ing some 95,000 to 100,000 Russian soldiers are positioned on the border with Ukraine. McConville said he doesn't know what Russia might do, but said that posture gives them "a lot of options" and could deal a blow to stability and security in Europe.

Austin said the U.S. would ensure Ukraine has what it needs to protect its sovereignty and has already provided weapons and non-lethal equipment. Previous military aid has included Javelin anti-tank weapons, mortars and others. Austin wouldn't say if Ukrainian assistance would include advisers or additional equipment.

Ernst again urged the administration to be aggressive with Russia to deter them from taking actions like they did in Georgia and Crimea.

McConville said a "whole of gov-

ernment ... and whole of Europe" effort would be needed to deter Russia, but deferred to more senior officials to lay out how that might happen.

"It's peace through strength," McConville said. "The way you deter is you impose some type of cost to make sure the cost is worth more than the benefit. It may be even a global effort, making sure people understand, you can't just go into a sovereign country and conduct malign activities without having some type of cost."

But throughout the conference, officials' desire to find a middle ground was clear — as was the trickiness of that task.

"We're in a competition with China, but we don't have to be in a conflict," Austin said.

Omicron spreads to 57 countries but too early to tell if variant more infectious, WHO says

BY LINAH ALSAAFIN AND USAID SIDDIQUI

Guest Post - By Linah Alsaafin and Usaid Siddiqui, Al Jazeera

The Omicron variant of Covid-19 has now been reported in 57 countries and continues to spread rapidly in South Africa, the World Health Organization (WHO) says.

But the latest epidemiological report from WHO says given the Delta variant remains dominant, particularly in Europe and the US, it is still too early to draw any conclusions about the global impact of Omicron.



The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has predicted that the Omicron variant could become the dominant variant in Europe within months.

For now, though, the Delta variant continues to dominate cases, and more data is needed to determine Omicron's infectiousness and severity, WHO says.

"While there seems to be evidence that the Omicron variant may have a growth advantage over other circulating variants, it is unknown whether this will translate into increased transmissibility," the WHO report said.

Of 899,935 Covid-19 test samples sequenced and uploaded to the global Covid database in the last 60 days, 897,886 (99.8%) were confirmed to be Delta, while 713 (0.1%) were Omicron.

The WHO report said South Africa reported 62,021 cases of the variant between 29 November and 5 December – an 111% rise from the previous week.

The country also had an 82% increase in hospital admissions due to Covid-19 during the week to 4 December – 912 admissions compared with 502 the week prior. But it is not yet known how many of these cases were due to Omicron.

Omicron seems to be spreading rapidly in South Africa despite high rates of past infection with Covid. Estimates suggest between 60% and 80% of the population have previously been infected. Vaccination rates are low, at about 35%.

Data is still too limited to know with certainty whether Omicron changes the severity of the illness. As of 6 December, all 212 confirmed Omicron cases across 18 European Union countries were classed as asymptomatic or mild.

But WHO said "even if the severity is equal or potentially even lower than for Delta variant, it is expected that hospitalisations will increase if more people become infected".

"Further information is needed to fully understand the clinical picture of those infected with the Omicron variant," the report said.

WHO said that preliminary data suggests the mutations in the Omicron variant may reduce the ability of natural immunity to protect against reinfection after infection with the virus.

Omicron carries mutations which may reduce the ability of the antibodies resulting from natural immunity to protect against the virus, but further studies are needed to confirm its ability to reinfect previously confirmed cases or vaccinated people.

The report concluded many questions about the Omicron variant remain unanswered, but that more information will emerge in the coming weeks.

Pharmaceutical company Pfizer this week reported results from preliminary studies that suggested two doses of its Covid-19 vaccine have a significantly reduced ability to neutralise the Omicron variant, and that three doses may be needed.

A small study from South Africa, which is not yet peer reviewed, also suggested that antibody neutralisation is reduced about 40-fold against Omicron compared to the original virus.

Dr Deborah Cromer, a senior research fellow at the University of NSW's Kirby Institute, said in the past day "a swathe of preliminary data has emerged showing the drop in immunity against the Omicron variant".

She said this data has come from studies looking at blood from people who have recovered from Covid-19 and/or have been vaccinated against the disease.

"All studies show less immunity against Omicron than against the original virus strain, however the reported drops vary widely," she said.

"The estimates we have seen to date of people's immunity against Omicron range from half to one-fortieth of the immunity present against the original strain.

"Regardless of the number, it is clear that increased levels of immunity will be required to provide protection against Omicron, and therefore booster shots are now more important than ever to help achieve this."

The first known laboratory-confirmed case of Omicron was identified from a specimen collected on 9 November in South Africa, with the variant reported to WHO on 24 November.

Biden's 2022 Foreign-Policy To-Do List

BY STEPHEN M. WALT

Guest Post - Stephen M. Walt,
Foreignpolicy

Even if you don't like his policies, you ought to admire U.S. President Joe Biden's pluck. Just imagine how he felt his first day in the Oval Office. The country was in the throes of a global pandemic, and it narrowly survived a failed coup most Republican leaders are still refusing to condemn. The Liar-in-Chief whom Biden vanquished in 2020 was (and still is) refusing to acknowledge he lost fair and square. The country was mired in an unwinnable war, and there was no way to get out of it neatly or cleanly. The Democratic Party held razor-thin margins in Congress, giving individual Senators a level of influence far exceeding their judgment or integrity. And if that weren't enough, the ecosystem all life on Earth depends on is seriously out of whack.

Given the challenges Biden faced and the poor cards he was dealt, Biden hasn't done that badly. Yet despite some genuine foreign-policy successes, 2022 won't bring him much of a respite. COVID-19 remains a serious problem, U.S. adversaries are growing frisky, and the United States' allies seem increasingly fractious. Meanwhile, a substantial percentage of Americans now live in alternate universes filled with false narratives and made-up "facts."

But since it's the holidays, let's



start on an upbeat note and take one potential flash point off the table. Although the issue of Taiwan will continue to complicate Sino-American relations, I'll go out on a limb and say we won't see a serious crisis or military confrontation over Taiwan in 2022. Both Beijing and Washington have been quietly working to lower the crisis's temperature and actively cooperating to decrease energy prices and address climate concerns in recent months. A faceoff over Taiwan is the last thing either country needs right now.

Biden's team will remain heavily focused on long-term competition with China, and it would be helpful if emerging bipartisan consensus on this issue was translated into effective policies to strengthen the United States at home. (You know: like Building Back Better.) Even so, I don't see matters coming to a boil in the next 12 months. I hope I'm right because several other issues are likely to fill the administration's inbox in 2022.

Russia and Ukraine. Unlike a few doomsayers in the West, I do not think Russia will launch a major invasion intended to subjugate all of Ukraine. Not only would this trigger powerful economic sanctions and lead NATO to reinforce its eastern members militarily (something Russian President Vladimir Putin does not want), reoccupying all of Ukraine would force Moscow to try to govern some 43 million angry Ukrainians. Stubborn and resentful nationalism was one of the reasons the old Soviet empire broke up, and these same forces would make any attempt to reintegrate Ukraine a costly running sore Moscow can ill afford.

If Russia does opt to use force, I'd expect a more limited incursion ostensibly designed to "aid" pro-Russian proxies in Ukraine's eastern provinces—and perhaps an additional buffer zone to protect these areas. This approach would be similar to the "frozen conflicts" Putin waged in Georgia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and elsewhere and be consistent with

his tendency to undertake actions that may have been unexpected but also were relatively low risk. Because the stakes would be smaller, a “limited aims” strategy is less likely to provoke a strong and unified response from the West. The big question for me is how much damage Putin will try to inflict on Ukraine in the process. He may be tempted to “teach them a lesson” (and warn others against getting too close to the West), but punishing Ukraine also increases the risk of a harsher Western response.

Biden is in a no-win situation here. There’s little appetite for a shooting war in an area far away from the United States and right next door to Russia, and sending more arms to Kyiv won’t tip the balance of power enough to deter a limited Russian foray. Yet hard-liners would condiment any diplomatic deal that defused the issue as the worst sort of Neville Chamberlain-like appeasement.

This unappealing situation is a reminder that open-ended NATO expansion is ideologically appealing but strategically myopic. Its proponents blithely assumed that 1) expansion would create a “vast zone of peace,” 2) Moscow would readily accept NATO assurances that expansion posed no threat, and therefore, 3) any commitments NATO made or implied would never have to be honored. Alas, that ship has sailed: The challenge Biden (and NATO) face now is figuring out how to preserve Ukrainian independence without appearing to succumb to Russian blackmail. It would have been easier (though far from simple) to reach an agreement on Ukrainian neutrality back in 2014; it will be

much harder to do so today.

Israel and Iran. If your name isn’t former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton and you don’t work for a hawkish lobby like the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, you probably understand that Trump’s decision to leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran was one of the most boneheaded foreign-policy decisions of the past 50 years. And that is saying something. Iran has more highly enriched uranium now than it would have possessed had Trump not unilaterally torpedoed the deal. It has a larger number of even more sophisticated centrifuges in operation, plus a more hard-line government, developments that are either wholly or partly the result of Trump and Pompeo’s witless “maximum pressure” campaign. Biden pledged to reinstate the JCPOA once he took office, but his respect for the power of the Israel lobby led him to dither until it was too late.

Instead of a breakout time of a year or more (as it was under the JCPOA), Iran may soon be able to put a bomb together in a matter of weeks. Not surprisingly, this situation—almost entirely the result of prior U.S. actions—has led to renewed chatter about the United States or Israel taking military action against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. Bombing cannot destroy Iran’s ability to get a nuclear bomb, however—it can only delay it (and probably not by that long). Attacking Iran in this way will only reinforce its desire to have a more reliable deterrent against attack, strengthen hard-liners in Tehran even more, and eventually per-

suade them to go beyond nuclear “latency” and become the next openly nuclear-armed country.

Thanks to Trump’s blunder, the options today are not appealing. Looking ahead, it is a safe bet Israel and its supporters in the United States will spend 2022 hinting about the possibility of an Israel preventive strike and trying to get Uncle Sam to shoulder the burden instead. I hope Biden doesn’t listen, and he makes it clear that any country that wants to start a war with Iran will have to do it on their own and cannot count on U.S. protection. What all this means is even if Biden wants to focus on Asia and climate change and COVID-19 while devoting less time and attention to the Middle East, he won’t be able to ignore it entirely.

Concerns about credibility. Biden will also have to figure out how to address the United States’ credibility problem, but he must first understand exactly what that problem is. Contrary to what most public accounts suggest, this isn’t an issue because Biden is weak-willed or because the Afghan withdrawal was more chaotic than one might have hoped. As I and others have argued repeatedly, commitments are most credible when potential challengers recognize that a great power has a clear interest in defending a given issue or area and the capability to impose significant costs on an attacker. When interests are less than vital or necessary capabilities lack, convincing others you’re willing to go to the brink or beyond is much harder to do.

The United States has a credibility problem today for two main

reasons. First, the United States is overcommitted, which means it is hard to fulfill all of its security guarantees simultaneously. In theory, a country might try to solve this problem by fighting fiercely every time it is challenged (in the hope of discouraging future probes), but over time, that approach drains resources and political will. For this reason, U.S. credibility is somewhat lower today not because Biden is irresolute but because the country as a whole is tired of pointless wars. And it is war-weary in part because it kept fighting stupid wars to preserve its credibility! Thus, the hawks who shouted “appeasement” whenever someone tried to end one of these conflicts ended up exacerbating the very problem they claimed to want to solve.

Second, U.S. credibility today is undermined as much by domestic polarization and political dysfunction as by its responses to any specific international situation. Why should other states adjust their policies to the United States’ when they suspect the next president might turn on a dime and head in the opposite direction? Why coordinate costly plans with a country that has trouble passing budgets, managing a pandemic, or implementing a much-needed infrastructure plan? Diminishing faith in the United States’ basic ability to get things done effectively inevitably erodes U.S. credibility: Even when the will is there, convincing others you can deliver on your promises matters too.

The next humanitarian crisis. I don’t know where the next humanitarian crisis will erupt—Afghanistan? Venezuela? Myanmar?

Lebanon? Sub-Saharan Africa?—but a combination of environmental pressure, persistent violence, and economic collapse is likely to trigger new heartaches for a global community exhausted by past tragedies and a stubbornly persistent pandemic. Whenever it occurs, it will immediately consume the scarcest of all presidential resources: time. If I were advising Biden, I’d tell him to reserve a bit of slack for dealing with the unexpected. He’ll need it.

Setting priorities and sticking to them. When you’re compiling a list like this, it is child’s play to add more items, such as Ethiopia’s expanding civil war, the ongoing migration and refugee crisis, the possibility of a macroeconomic meltdown, or environmental disaster. For those now charged with conducting U.S. foreign policy, therefore, the final challenge for 2022 will be resisting pressures to get involved in the latest crisis du jour. When it erupts (see No. 4 above), Biden and his team will face relentless pressure from local client states, well-funded lobbies, crusading journalists, human rights activists, corporate interests, and lord knows who else to move today’s hot spot up the presidential priority list. The administration’s desire to prove “America is back” could make it especially vulnerable to these pressures, which increases the risk that the administration will get blown off course by unexpected events. If this happens, it will join the long list of recent administrations that tried too much and did most of it badly.

Now, for the bad news. As I gaze forward at 2022, none of the issues identified above strike me

as anywhere near as important to the United States’ future—and Americans’ lives for the rest of this century—as the challenges the country faces at home. Serious students of civil conflict—such as my former student Barbara Walter—are now warning the United States’ current condition and trajectory create a very real risk of civil war, a possibility that seemed unimaginable a few short years ago. Even if widespread violence does not materialize, it is easy to imagine a series of contested elections, “elected” governments that do not represent the popular will and lack widespread legitimacy, and government institutions’ growing inability to perform basic functions effectively. In addition to threatening basic liberties and Americans’ quality of life, domestic divisions of this sort will make it nearly impossible to conduct an effective foreign policy—accelerating the United States’ decline.

For these reasons, Biden’s main challenge in 2022 has not changed since he took his oath of office. For the United States to succeed on the world stage, the partisan insanity eating away at the foundations of its democracy must end. To be frank, achieving this goal may be beyond anyone’s abilities at this point. To be even franker, I am increasingly convinced that only far-reaching constitutional reforms will suffice to stop the rot, but a major reform effort is bound to be fiercely resisted by groups—most notably the Republican Party, which currently benefits from the existing political order’s anti-democratic features.

And on that note, I wish you all a happy new year.

3 Challenges for Chinese Foreign Policy in 2022

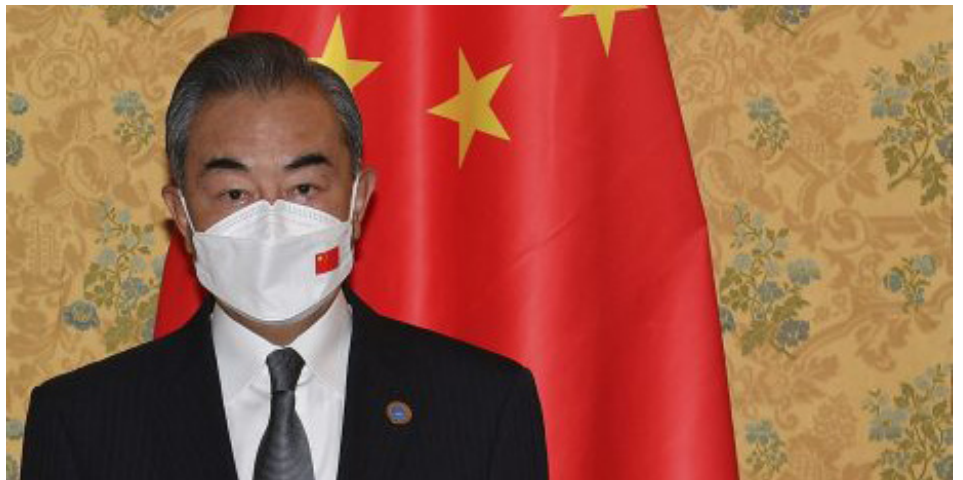


BY DINGDING CHEN

Guest Post - By Dingding Chen,
The Diplomat

2021 was a largely successful year for Chinese foreign policy, due to China's effective control of the COVID-19 crisis domestically, stable economic growth, and active participation in global governance, particularly in the area of climate change. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently commented in his overview of the year, "We celebrated the centenary of the Communist Party of China and embarked on a new journey for the second centenary. Drawing strength from its achievements in the past century, China's diplomacy has forged ahead bravely in the game of chess and written a new chapter in major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics."

Nonetheless, looking ahead in 2022, China also faces three major challenges that, in theory, could slow down China's seemingly unstoppable rise to global center status if not managed well. The first major challenge is how to create a trustable and lovable international image. This is now a particularly serious issue as China continuously narrows its gap with the only superpower, the United States, in many aspects such as



economy, technology, and military prowess. As Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out in a major work conference on international communication in June 2021, the task is "to explain and promote more fine culture with Chinese characteristics, Chinese spirit and Chinese wisdom to the world. We should keep the tone right, be open, confident and modest, and strive to create a credible, lovable and respectable China."

This is difficult, though. As many polls conducted by international agencies like the Pew Research Center show, China's image in Western countries has sharply deteriorated over the last couple of years, though the reasons behind the decline are complicated. Regardless of the reasons, how China can maintain a delicate balance between being respected and being feared by other regional and global players will be a long-term issue.

The second major challenge is how to deepen China's participation in global governance. Top global issues include the

COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and global poverty, among others urgent crises. In 2021 China did a reasonably good job in all three aspects, but the international community will demand more from the country in 2022. China now is seen as a global leader, especially when the United States is deeply entangled in various difficult domestic issues, and thereby unable to provide an effective international leadership role in many areas. The still ongoing COVID-19 crisis is a case in point.

But can China lead the global climate change agenda after a solid performance at COP26 in November 2021? On the one hand, China continues to be the global leader in renewable energy output, with a share of almost 50 percent of global capacity in 2021. On the other hand, China's heavy reliance on coal for power generation will not change much, even by 2030. Hence China faces a dilemma between international climate pressures and economic growth and stability at home. More generally, the international demand for China to provide more and more

collective international goods will only grow in coming decades, and it is up to China to decide how to balance international obligations and domestic needs – no small task for leadership countries.

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Still, the most difficult challenge facing China is 2022 and beyond arguably is how to effectively manage the unstable China-U.S. relations. Although there were a few positive signs in the bilateral relationship in 2021, led by the increasing number of warm interactions between the two presidents, ending in a substantive virtual meeting in November 2021. On the whole, China-U.S. relations have stabilized a bit in 2021, particularly compared to the free-fall trajectory in the last year of the Trump administration. But high

risks and flashpoints remain very worrisome, the most serious being the Biden administration's seeming "salami-slicing" approach toward the Taiwan issue. For whatever reasons, the Biden administration, or some senior officials within it, seem to believe the United States can gain some strategic advantages against China by playing the "Taiwan card." This is a very serious mistake. Both the U.S. and China could easily fall into a spiral in which small incidents lead to large incidents and eventually even a military clash.

Of course, behind the Taiwan issue is the larger context of the new U.S. strategy toward China – a strategy often described as "strategic competition," but the contents of which were never clearly articulated by administration officials or major U.S. think tanks. In the end, the United States still needs to define the

end game of strategic competition as competition is simply, in the final analysis, a tool that must meet a purpose. Facing increasing competition from the U.S., China's task becomes more difficult as it still needs the United States' cooperation on many fronts before China becomes a true number one power. How to stabilize China-U.S. relations in 2022 and not let things deteriorate more thus will be a huge challenge for Chinese foreign policy.

That being said, there are good reasons to believe that Chinese foreign policy will do a good job in 2022. For example, China's economy will continue to grow around 5-6 percent, the battle against COVID-19 might achieve an eventual victory in 2022, and, above all, the Chinese leadership will be cool-headed and not make major strategic mistakes.

Gulf Arab summit calls for action, not words from Iran

BY YOUSEF SABA

RIYADH, Dec 14 (Reuters) - A Gulf Arab summit in Saudi Arabia urged Iran on Tuesday to take concrete steps to ease tension while reiterating a call to include the region in talks between global powers and Tehran aimed at salvaging their nuclear agreement.

Saudi Arabia's crown prince had told the annual gathering of Gulf leaders before the final communique was issued that the nuclear and missile programmes of long-standing adversary Iran should be handled "seriously and effectively".



Indirect talks between Iran and the United States to revive the 2015 nuclear pact started in April, but stopped in June after the election of hardline President Ebrahim

Raisi. After a five-month hiatus, Iran's negotiating team returned to Vienna with an uncompromising stance.

"So far the reports show there is some stalling by Iran and we hope this will turn to progress in the near future," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud told a press conference after the Gulf summit.

He said that while Gulf states prefer to be part of the talks they would be "open to any mechanism" that addresses their concerns, which also include Iran's regional proxies.

Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite Iran are vying for influence in a rivalry that has played out across the region in events such as Yemen's war and in Lebanon, where Iran-backed Hezbollah's rising power has frayed Beirut's Gulf ties. [read more](#)

Riyadh and the United Arab Emir-

ates are both engaging with Iran in a bid to contain tensions at a time of deepening Gulf uncertainty over the U.S. role in the region, and as the oil producing states focus on economic growth.

Prince Faisal said the talks had seen no "real change on the ground" but that "we are open, we are willing".

Iran's president has said his foreign policy priority would be improving ties with Gulf neighbours.

SOLIDARITY

The Saudi crown prince toured the Gulf in a show of solidarity ahead of the summit, which took place nearly a year after Riyadh put an end to a 3-1/2-year Arab boycott of Qatar.

Saudi Arabia and non-Gulf Egypt

have restored diplomatic ties with Doha but the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have yet to do so, though Abu Dhabi has moved to mend fences.

The four boycotting states had accused Qatar of supporting Islamist militants, a charge Doha denied.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have shifted away from hawkish foreign policies to a more conciliatory approach as they vie to lure foreign investment, and win over U.S. President Joe Biden.

The UAE has acted faster to improve ties with Iran and Turkey, while also re-engaging with Syria after forging relations with Israel last year.

UN-backed investigator into possible Yemen war crimes targeted by spyware

BY STEPHANIE KIRCHGAESSNER

Guest Post - by Stephanie Kirchgaessner, Theguardian

The mobile phone of a UN-backed investigator who was examining possible war crimes in Yemen was targeted with spyware made by Israel's NSO Group, a new forensic analysis of the device has revealed.

Kamel Jendoubi, a Tunisian who served as the chairman of the now defunct Group of Eminent Experts in Yemen (GEE) – a panel mandated by the UN to investigate possible war crimes – was targeted in August 2019, according to an



analysis of his mobile phone by experts at Amnesty International and the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto.

The targeting is claimed to have occurred just weeks before Jendoubi and his panel of experts released a damning report which concluded that the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen war had committed “serious violations of international humanitarian law” that could lead to “criminal responsibility for war crimes”.

Jendoubi’s mobile number also appears on a leaked database at the heart of the Pegasus Project, an investigation into NSO by the Guardian and other media outlets, which was coordinated by Forbidden Stories, the French non-profit media group.

The leaked list contained numbers of individuals who were believed to have been selected as potential surveillance targets by NSO’s government clients.

The data suggests that Jendoubi was selected as a potential surveillance target by Saudi Arabia, which was a longtime client of NSO before it was dropped earlier this year after allegations that it abused the surveillance tool.

In a statement in response to questions about Jendoubi’s case, an NSO spokesperson said: “Based on the details you have provided us we can confirm that Kamel Jendoubi was not targeted by any of our current customers”.

Jendoubi, a human rights de-

fender and opponent of former president Ben Ali’s regime in Tunisia, was appointed by the Office of the UN high commissioner for Human Rights to lead a group of international experts to investigate human rights violations in 2017.

The UN mandate to investigate the possible war crimes came to an abrupt halt this October, after the members of the Human Rights Council voted to end the investigation.

Citing political and diplomatic experts with close knowledge of the matter, the Guardian reported earlier this month that Saudi Arabia used “incentives and threats” as part of a lobbying campaign to shut down the UN investigation.

Yemeni Red Crescent workers remove the body of a casualty following a Saudi-led airstrike in Dhamar.

Saudis used ‘incentives and threats’ to shut down UN investigation in Yemen

Jendoubi told the Pegasus Project that the targeting of his phone marked the actions of a “rogue state”.

“There are no other words. As international investigators, we are supposed to be at least protected. But I am not at all surprised. I’ve been apprehensive about this since 2019,” he said.

“We knew that we [the panel] could be potentially targeted since the publication of our 2018 report.

That report had created a shock in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They did not expect such findings.”

Jendoubi added: “They used all their propaganda, their media ... to defame us and discredit our work. Everything you would expect from them. Until the 2021 vote that ended our mission.”

The investigator said he did not believe that his work had been compromised on the targeted phone because he had used another device to conduct his investigations. He said the targeting of his phone was indicative of a state that did not care about “commitments and minimum international rules”.

Melissa Parke, an expert investigator on the GEE and former Australian MP, said in response to the news of Jendoubi’s targeting: “If only this extraordinary technology and energy could be applied for the benefit of the people of Yemen, instead of the reverse. The calls for accountability for crimes committed in Yemen will only increase in the wake of these revelations.”

The Pegasus Project approached Jendoubi after it was confirmed that his mobile number was listed in the leaked database.

Experts at Amnesty International’s Security Lab and Citizen Lab, who research sophisticated digital surveillance attacks, found traces of Pegasus on Jendoubi’s mobile phone, which also correlated to a timestamp in the database that

indicated when the number was selected.

The experts said the forensic analysis showed that a client of NSO had attempted to hack the device.

There was no clear evidence that the mobile had successfully been hacked or data exfiltrated, however, because that data could not be retrieved.

What is Pegasus spyware and how does it hack phones?

If a phone is infected with NSO's signature spyware, called Pegasus, operators of the spyware have total access, including the ability to intercept phone calls, read text messages, infiltrate encrypted apps and track an individual's physical location. The spyware can also turn a mobile into a listening device by remotely controlling the mobile's recorder.

NSO has staunchly denied that the leaked database at the heart of the Pegasus Project is in any way connected to the company or its clients. NSO has also said that its government clients are only meant to use its surveillance tools to fight serious crime and terrorism and that it investigates credible allegations of misuse.

A spokesperson for the Saudi embassy in Washington did not respond to a request for comment.

The revelation that Jendoubi's phone was targeted drew a tepid response from the office of UN secretary general António Gu-

terres. A UN spokesperson said Jendoubi was an independent expert and that the UN would leave it to him to comment more specifically on his own situation.

"More generally, regarding Pegasus, the UN has been in touch with relevant parties to ensure that our communications are protected. We take very seriously the need to uphold the security of all our communications and have been following up on all reports of potential hacking," said Farhan Aziz Haq.

Rupert Colville, spokesperson for Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said: "The targeting of human rights defenders, journalists and politicians is just another example of how tools allegedly meant to address security risks can end up being weaponised against people with dissenting opinions."

Agnes Callamard, the secretary general of Amnesty International, who previously served as a UN special rapporteur, called the news of Jendoubi's alleged targeting "shocking and unacceptable".

"That he was targeted in the course of inquiry into violations by all parties to an armed conflict and at the hands of a lead party to that conflict? That alleged conduct demonstrates far more than cynicism and callous disregard for the principle of accountability, although it certainly does that," Callamard said.

"It suggests further reprehensi-

ble evidence of the Saudi authorities' utter disregard for international law, their willingness to do anything to maintain their impunity, and it demonstrates yet again a complete disrespect for the United Nations, multilateral instruments and human rights procedures."

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