

NUCLEAR THREAT FROM NORTH KOREA

Trump weighing broad sanctions

REUTERS, Washington
The Trump administration is considering sweeping sanctions aimed at cutting North Korea off from the global financial system as part of a broad review of measures to counter Pyongyang's nuclear and missile threat, a senior US official said on Monday.
The sanctions would be part of a multi-pronged approach of increased economic and diplomatic pressure - especially on Chinese banks and firms that do the most business with North Korea - plus beefed-up defenses by the United States and its South Korean and Japanese allies, according to the administration official familiar with the deliberations.
While the long-standing option of pre-emptive military strikes against North Korea is not off the table - as reflected by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's warning to Pyongyang during his Asia tour last week - the new administration is giving priority for now to less-risky options.
The policy recommendations being assembled by President Donald Trump's national security adviser, HR McMaster, are expected to reach the president's desk within weeks, possibly before a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in early April, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. North Korea is expected to top the agenda at that meeting.
It is not clear how quickly Trump will decide on a course of action, which could be delayed by the slow pace at which the administration is filling key national security jobs.
The White House declined comment.
Trump met McMaster on Saturday to discuss North Korea and said afterward that the country's leader, Kim Jong Un, was "acting very, very badly."



A wounded displaced Iraqi girl and her family who had fled their homes wait to enter Hammam al-Alil camp south of Mosul, Iraq, yesterday. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Monday after talks with President Donald Trump that the new US administration appears more focused on the fight against terrorism than its predecessor.

SYRIA WAR

Rebels launch fresh assault on capital

All sides in conflict will attend peace talks: UN
AFP, Damascus
Rebels and jihadists launched a fresh assault on east Damascus yesterday, just two days before another round of UN-backed peace talks were set to get underway in Switzerland.
Clashes raged between regime forces on one side and opposition fighters and allied jihadists from the Fateh al-Sham Front, formerly al-Qaeda's branch in the war-ravaged country.
The renewed fighting in Damascus came two days after Syrian government forces repelled the largest rebel incursion into the capital in years.
An AFP journalist in east Damascus reported a large explosion at sunrise yesterday followed by fierce clashes, shelling and government air strikes on opposition positions.
Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the blast was likely caused by a rebel car bomb attack on a regime position between Jobar and Qabun districts.
The official SANA news agency said 12 people were wounded in rebel shelling.
Rebels hold half of the eastern neighbourhood of Jobar, a few kilometres (miles) from the city centre, and are seeking to link it to the besieged northern district of Qabun.
Syria's air force responded to the renewed rebel assault with raids on their positions while opposition fighters shelled the Abbasid and Tijara neighbourhoods near Jobar, the Observatory's Abdel Rahman told AFP.
Clashes on Sunday and Monday killed at least 72 people, including 38 government force members and 34 rebels and jihadists, according to the Observatory.
Repeated peace talks over the years have failed to bring about a political solution, but another round of negotiations is due to begin in Geneva on Thursday.
A UN spokeswoman told reporters in the Swiss city that "all invitees who had already attended" talks in February had confirmed they would take part.

NEWS IN brief



Former IRA fighter McGuinness dies

AFP, London
Martin McGuinness, a one-time Irish Republican Army commander who later helped negotiate an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland, has died of a rare heart condition aged 66. His Sinn Fein party, which opposes British rule in Northern Ireland and was long considered the political arm of the IRA, announced the death in a statement on Tuesday, expressing "deep regret".



Ivanka Trump has White House office

CNN ONLINE
Ivanka Trump will work out of an office in the West Wing, a White House official told CNN on Monday. The official also confirmed Trump will seek a security clearance and government-provided communication devices, although she will not be a government employee. The move places President Donald Trump's eldest daughter at the center of his administration, following weeks during which she held no formal role but appeared alongside the President and senior staffers in major meetings with world leaders and business figures.

TERROR THREAT USING ELECTRONIC DEVICES

US bans laptops, tablets from Middle East flights

AFP, Washington
The United States yesterday warned that extremists plan to target passenger jets with bombs hidden in electronic devices, and banned carrying them onto flights from 10 Middle East airports.
Senior US officials told reporters that nine airlines from eight countries had been given 96 hours, beginning at 3:00am, to ban devices bigger than a cellphone or smartphone from the cabin.
Laptops, tablets and portable game consoles are affected by the ban -- which applies to direct flights to the United States -- but they may still be stowed in the hold in checked baggage.
Passengers on approximately 50 flights per day from some of the busiest hubs in the Middle East, Turkey and North Africa will be obliged to follow the new emergency ruling.
"The restrictions are in place due to evaluated intelligence and we think it's the right thing to do and the right places to do it to secure the safety of the traveling public," one US official said.
CNN quoted a US official as saying the ban was believed to be related to a threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, known as AQAP.
The airports touched by the ban are Queen Alia International in Amman, Jordan; Cairo International in Egypt; Ataturk in Istanbul, Turkey; King Abdulaziz International in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; King Khalid International in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Kuwait International; Mohammed V International in Casablanca, Morocco; Hamad International in Doha, Qatar; and the Dubai and Abu Dhabi airports in the United Arab Emirates.
No US carriers make direct flights from these airports, so they are unaffected by the ban, which will hit Royal Jordanian, EgyptAir, Turkish Airlines, Saudi Airlines, Kuwait Airways, Royal Air Maroc, Qatar Airways, Emirates and Etihad Airways.

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL POLLS: FIRST TV DEBATE

Le Pen comes under attack

AFP, Paris
French far-right leader Marine Le Pen came under assault from all sides in a presidential election debate that provided a test of centrist Emmanuel Macron's ambitions to be leader.
Le Pen and Macron, the two leading candidates according to opinion polls with just over a month to go before voting begins, traded barbs in the televised debate watched by nearly 10 million people on Monday.
Commentators agreed, however, that neither landed a knockout blow.
Macron, the 39-year-old former economy minister who is untested at the ballot box, had the most to lose in his first major debate -- and the first ever of the main candidates before the first round of voting -- but he held his ground.
It was Le Pen, 48, who was repeatedly thrust onto the defensive as Macron, the conservative nominee Francois Fillon, the Socialist Party's Benoit Hamon and fifth-placed leftist radical Jean-Luc Melenchon all tore into her protectionist, anti-immigration programme.
Former frontrunner Fillon, who is trying to refocus attention on his politics after becoming embroiled in a host of scandals, said Le Pen's proposal to ditch the euro and bring back the franc would cause "economic and social chaos".
She accused him of "scaremongering".
Le Pen is hoping to ride the wave show that she would be handily beaten in the May 7 runoff by either Macron or Fillon.
Le Pen was playing to her support base when she accused Macron of being "in favour" of the burkini, a full-body swimsuit worn by some Muslim women that was banned by several coastal French towns last year.
He bridled at the suggestion, accusing her of "lying" by "twisting the truth" and seeking to "divide the French" over the issue.
A total of 11 candidates, spanning the spectrum from the Trotskyist left to the far right, are running for president. Six other candidates currently with low polling numbers were excluded from Monday's debate but are expected to take part in the next one.



Migrants wait to be rescued from a sinking dingy off the Libyan coastal town of Zawiyah, east of the capital, on Monday, as they attempted to cross from the Mediterranean to Europe.

ABUSE OF POWER SCANDAL

S Korean ex-president Park interrogated

AFP, Seoul
South Korea's ousted president Park Geun-Hye was questioned by prosecutors yesterday about the corruption and abuse of power scandal that brought her down, after using executive privilege to avoid them for months while in office.
Park apologised to the public as she arrived at the prosecutors' office in Seoul, adding: "I will undergo the investigation sincerely."
The nation's first female president was impeached by parliament in December as millions took to the streets to demand her removal over the sprawling scandal, which has exposed the links between politics and business in Asia's fourth-largest economy.
Her dismissal was confirmed by the country's top court earlier this month.
Questioning by prosecutors is a key step in South Korea's judicial process before a suspect is charged. It can last for many hours, late into the night, and can be repeated if officials deem it necessary.
Park faces multiple charges ranging from abuse of power and coercion to bribery. She is the fourth former South Korean leader to be probed or jailed over corruption scandals.



EU to hold special Brexit summit April 29: Tusk

Scottish lawmakers debate new independence referendum
AFP, Brussels
The EU's remaining 27 member states will hold a special summit on April 29 to decide the political objectives for Brexit talks, president Donald Tusk said yesterday.
Tusk's announcement came a day after London said Prime Minister Theresa May would trigger the two-year process for Britain's departure on March 29.
"Time will now be limited for Britain to negotiate the terms of its departure and a future trade deal by the deadline of March 2019."
Meanwhile, Scottish lawmakers yesterday begin a two-day debate on First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's call for an independence referendum -- a major headache for Prime Minister Theresa May as she prepares to launch Brexit.
The Scottish parliament is expected to vote today to endorse Sturgeon's call for a second vote, less than three years after Scots rejected independence in a 2014 referendum.

China snubs India

Says will push Silk Road projects after UNSC endorsement

PTI, Beijing
China has said it will give a global push to its ambitious Silk Road initiative after a UN Security Council resolution called for its implementation by member-states, notwithstanding India's sovereignty concerns in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.
China's official assertion came as the state media here asked India to adopt a "more pragmatic" approach towards the initiative, claiming global support for President Xi Jinping's pet project whose stated aim is to link China with Euro-Asia through a maze of connecting rail, road and port projects.
Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying told reporters here yesterday that in the Resolution 2344 unanimously adopted by the 15-member UNSC on March 17, the concept of building a community of shared future for mankind was incorporated for the first time, reflecting global consensus over the project.
"The resolution urged all parties to further advance the Belt and Road Initiative and raised specific requirements on strengthening security safeguards," Hua said.
The resolution called for strengthening economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours through Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and Chabahar port project between Afghanistan, India and Iran, and



ONE ROAD, ONE BELT
The multi-billion 'One Belt, One Road' initiative is the official name of the Silk Road or the Belt and Road project. It includes the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to connect China with ports across the world as well as the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) - which passes through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir - and the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic (BCIM) corridor.
While the work on CPEC is rapidly progressing, there isn't any official update yet on the rest of the OBOR projects.
India has protested to China over the CPEC - which connects western China's restive Xinjiang region with Pakistan's southern port of Gwadar through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir - and has reservations over the Maritime Silk Road as it impacts the Indian Ocean which is vital to India's security interests.
However, New Delhi has backed the BCIM and is actively supporting it, according to Indian officials.
The official Chinese media says the inclusion of the OBOR in the UNSC resolution is an endorsement of the initiative by the world body.
"Despite concerns from India, broader support has been given to the OBOR from the international community," said an article in the ruling Communist Party-run Global Times.