

Governing Catalonia from Belgium!

AFP, Barcelona
Catalonia's former leader Carles Puigdemont, who was sacked by Madrid over his attempt to break from Spain, yesterday said he can govern the region from Belgium as he eyes a comeback after scoring big in elections. "There are only two options: in prison I would not be able to address people, write, meet people... The only way is to continue doing it freely and safely," Puigdemont, who is in self-imposed exile in Belgium and risks arrest if he returns to Spain, told Catalunya Radio.

May, Macron strike border security deal

AFP, Sandhurst
Prime Minister Theresa May and her French counterpart Emmanuel Macron agreed a new border security deal on Thursday, through which the UK will pay more to France to stop migrants trying to reach British shores. While the two countries cooperate closely in numerous areas, including intelligence and defence, differences over migration have often strained ties. The UK-France summit came as Britain tries to strengthen bilateral ties before leaving the European Union in March 2019.

Chinese county bans schoolchildren from mosques

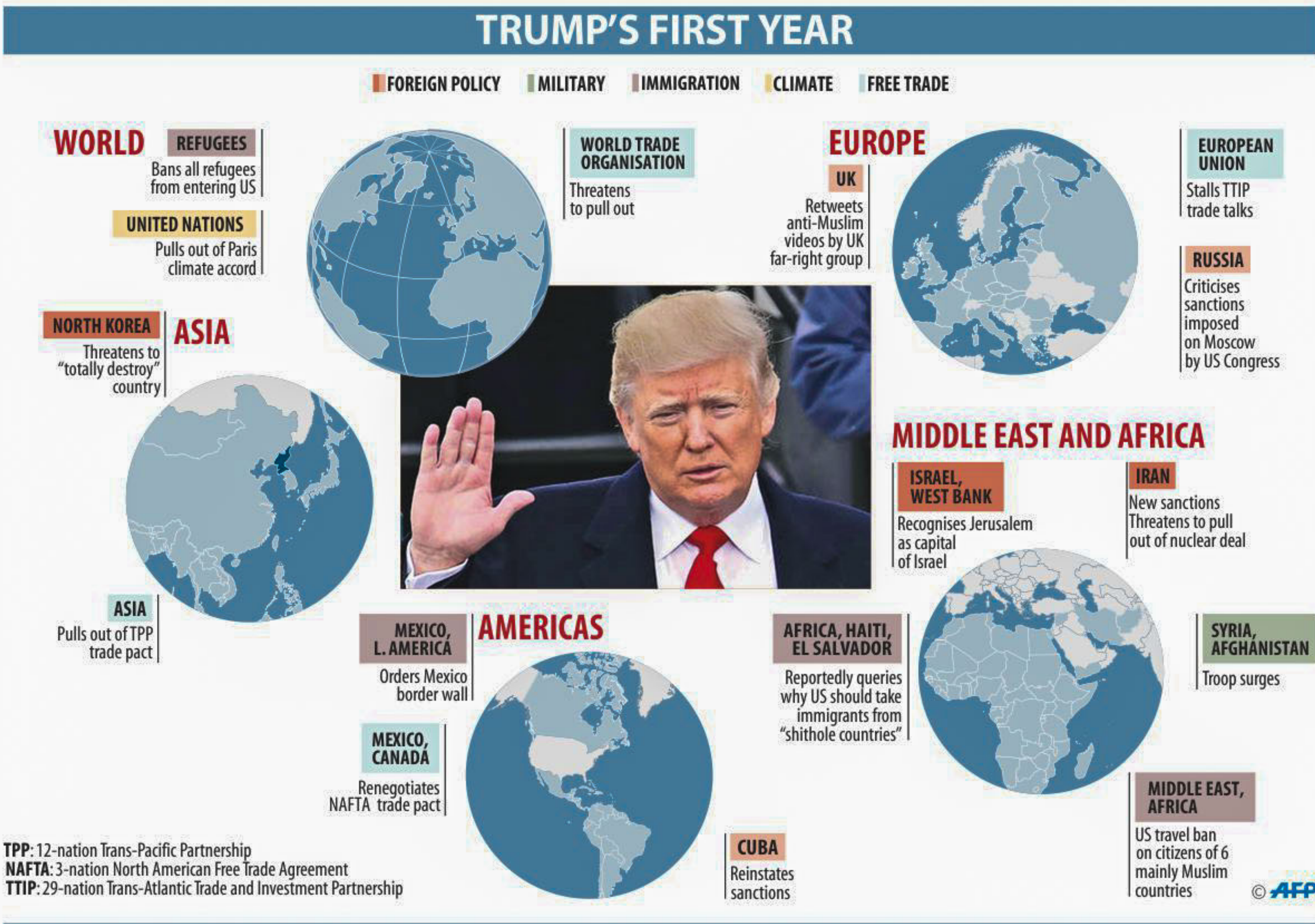
AFP, Beijing
Authorities in a Muslim-majority county in north-western China have banned schoolchildren from going to mosques during their winter holidays, a state-run daily reported yesterday, the latest tightening of regulations on religious freedoms. The decision was outlined in a notice sent to all high schools, primary schools and kindergartens in Gansu province's Guanghe county, according to the Global Times.



Xi's thought to be enshrined into China constitution

REUTERS, Beijing
China's ruling Communist Party will enshrine President Xi Jinping's political thought into the country's constitution, state media said yesterday, further solidifying his power following its addition last year to the party constitution. The arguably more important party constitution was amended at the once-in-five-years party congress in October to include Xi's political thought. The party unanimously passed an amendment then to add "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" as one of its guiding principles.

Following a two-day meeting in Beijing, the party has now proposed writing the same theory into the state constitution, state news agency Xinhua said. Because the amendment is of the state constitution, it needs parliament to formally approve it, probably when it holds its annual session in March, though it could happen before. Whether Xi was able to have his name "crowned" in the party constitution had been seen as a key measure of his power, elevating him to a level of previous leaders exemplified by Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory. No other leader since Mao has had an eponymous ideology included in the document while in office. Deng's name was added after his death in 1997.



TPP: 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership
NAFTA: 3-nation North American Free Trade Agreement
TTIP: 29-nation Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

Will build infrastructure
Says aggressive China after satellite photos show new constructions

NDTV, New Delhi

China yesterday justified its construction activities in Doklam as "legitimate" and said that India has no business to comment on what it does on its territory. Satellite images revealed a full-fledged Chinese military complex being built within Doklam, but India maintained that status quo has not been altered in Doklam, where Indian and Chinese troops were locked in a standoff for over two months last year.

"Our attention has been drawn to some reports that question the accuracy of the position stated by the government in respect to the situation in Doklam," Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Ravesh Kumar said.

Almost five months after India and China ended a 70-day standoff in Doklam or Doka La that lies to the east of Sikkim, the latest images show massive structures in Doklam, as close as 81 metres to the point of face-off between Indian and Chinese troops.

"I don't know who offers such kind of photos. I don't know the detailed information," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang said, according to news agency IANS.

Indian soldiers had stopped the Chinese army from constructing a new road in the remote Doklam in mid-



June, saying it would give China access to a strategically crucial narrow strip of land or "Chicken's Neck" that links it to its northeastern states.

China had retaliated, insisting that it has every right to build roads on its territory, but later the two countries agreed to "disengage" their troops in

late August, just ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China for the high-profile BRICS summit.

News reports, however, suggested that China continued to build extensive Chinese infrastructure in the tiny Doklam Plateau.

"You must be quite clear. Donglong (Doklam) always belonged to China and is always under China's effective jurisdiction. There is no dispute in this regard," Lu said.

He added, "China is exercising its sovereignty in its own territory. It's legitimate and justified. Just as China will not make comments about Indian construction of infrastructure on India's territory, we hope other countries will not make comment on China's construction of infrastructure on its territory."

However, the army, which is aware of China's expansion activities in the region post-Doklam standoff, doesn't see this as "serious trouble". The forces are prepared for any exigency, army chief General Bipin Rawat said.

Last 3 years hottest on record: UN

AFP, Geneva

The last three years were the hottest on record, the United Nations weather agency said Thursday, citing fresh global data underscoring the dramatic warming of the planet.

Consolidated data from five leading international weather agencies shows that "2015, 2016 and 2017 have been confirmed as the three warmest years on record", the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said.

It added that 2016 remains the hottest year ever measured, due to the warming effect of El Nino, while 2017 was the warmest non-El Nino year beating out 2015 by less than one hundredth of a degree.

US slumps in global leadership survey

CNN ONLINE, Reuters

A year into Donald Trump's presidency, global confidence in US leadership has fallen to a new low, according to an opinion survey conducted across 134 countries.

The Gallup poll puts global approval of US leadership at just 30%, slightly behind China on 31% and only three points ahead of Russia. Germany is now the top-rated global power in the world, with an approval rating of 41%, according to the survey.

The US rating is down nearly 20 points from the 48% approval rating in the last year of President Barack Obama's administration, Gallup said. It's also four points lower than the previous low of 34%, seen in the final year of George W. Bush's presidency.

By comparison, in Obama's last year in office the United States led Germany by seven points, China by 17 points and Russia by 22 points, according to Gallup.

"This year marks a significant change in our trends," said Jon Clifton, global managing partner at Gallup.

"Only 30% of the world, on average, approves of the job performance of the US's leadership, down from 48% in 2016. Since becoming president, Trump has pushed an 'America First' policy which has seen the United States pull back from global pacts and alliances on trade, the environment and defense.

Meanwhile, testimony to the US Congress by the head of a political research firm indicates that the Trump Organization's sales of properties to Russian nationals may have involved money-laundering, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee said on Thursday.

The panel released the transcript of a Nov 14 closed-door interview with Fusion GPS founder Glenn Simpson, whose firm hired a former British spy to research then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's campaign ties to Russians and

Sales of Trump properties to Russian nationals suggestive of money-laundering: political research firm



produced a dossier.

"Those transcripts reveal serious allegations that the Trump Organization may have engaged in money laundering with Russian nationals," Representative Adam Schiff said.

In his testimony, Simpson said that his firm closely examined sales of condominiums in Trump properties in New York, Miami, Panama City and Toronto.

"There were a lot of real estate deals where you couldn't really tell who was buying the property," Simpson said. "And sometimes properties would be bought and sold, and they would be bought for one price and sold for a loss shortly thereafter, and it really didn't make sense to us."

"We saw patterns of buying and selling that we thought were suggestive of money-laundering," he continued.

The Trump Organization dismissed the allegations as unsubstantiated.

Another Democrat on the Republican-controlled committee, Representative Jim Hines, sought to temper Schiff's comment, telling CNN that Simpson "did not provide evidence and I think that's an important point. He made allegations."

Mattis unveils US defence strategy

AFP, Washington

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis yesterday said that America is facing "growing threats" from China and Russia, and warned that the US military's advantages have eroded in recent years.

Mattis's assessment came as he unveiled the Pentagon's vision for the future detailed in a document called the national defense strategy.

"We face growing threats from revisionist powers as different as China and Russia, nations that seek to create a world consistent with their authoritarian models," Mattis said as he unveiled the unclassified section of the document.

"Our military is still strong, yet our competitive edge has eroded in every domain of warfare -- air, land, sea, space and cyberspace -- and is continually eroding," he added.

President Donald Trump and his administration worry that the vast US military force is feeling the effects of years of budget shortfalls and atrophy, and needs a full reboot to restore it to an idealized strength.

Part wish list, part blueprint for the coming years, the Pentagon's national defense strategy seeks to increase the size of the military, improve its readiness and work with allies -- all while operating across multiple theaters including in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

The new defense strategy follows on from Trump's national security strategy that he released last month which, similarly, highlights the role of China and Russia in the global security environment.



Waves break on the sea port in Gaza City yesterday, during a storm. Nine people including two firefighters were killed Thursday as violent gales battered northern Europe, snapping air and train links. Train services in Germany and The Netherlands were coming back to life slowly as both countries reported significant damage.

PHOTO: AFP

'Unexpected but exciting'

New Zealand PM says she's having a baby

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday announced she is expecting her first baby, and is set to become the country's first leader to give birth while in office.

The 37-year-old, who was sworn in last October, made global headlines when she slapped down pre-election questions over whether she intended to start a family, insisting pregnancy had no bearing on a woman's career opportunities.

Ardern was all smiles Friday as she appeared with partner Clarke Gayford at their home to announce the "unexpected but exciting" news of their first baby.

"Clark and I are really excited to share...that in June we are looking forward to welcoming our first child," she told reporters.

The charismatic leader enjoyed a rapid rise to the top



ranks of politics, winning office last year just months after taking the helm of the centre-left Labour Party.

"We thought 2017 was a big year!" she tweeted.

"This year we'll join the many parents who wear two hats. I'll be PM and a mum while Clarke will be 'first man of fishing' and stay at home dad."

Ardern said she would take six weeks off after the birth of her child, with maverick Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters taking the reins of office.

She tweeted a picture of two large fishing hooks, one with a smaller hook inside it, in reference to Gayford's career as a television fishing show presenter.

While several male prime ministers have become parents in office, late Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto is believed to have been the first head of government to have given birth during her term, when she had a baby in 1990.

US GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN FEARS

Battle moves to Senate

AFP, Washington

A last-ditch battle to avert a looming US government shutdown moved to the Senate yesterday, where Democrats angered by the collapse of immigration talks have vowed to block a stop-gap funding bill.

With the federal government set to run out of money Friday at midnight -- the eve of the one-year anniversary of President Donald Trump's inauguration -- the bill cleared the House with a 230-197 vote.

But prospects appeared gloomy in the Senate, where Democrats eager for leverage on budget and immigration deals were intent on shooting it down.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat, said that if agreement is not reached by Friday night, there should be an even shorter-term funding measure of a few days that would "give the president a few days to come to the table."

Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican Majority Leader, said the House bill provides

for four weeks of funding, enough to allow talks to continue "without throwing the government into disarray for no reason."

House Speaker Paul Ryan called on Schumer to avoid a government shutdown, saying: "It is risky. It is reckless. And it is wrong."

In the event the funding dries up, federal employees for agencies considered non-essential are ordered to stay home until a budget deal is struck, at which point they are paid retroactively.

The most recent shutdowns -- in 1995, 1996 and 2013 -- saw about 800,000 workers furloughed per day.

Meanwhile, a bill was introduced in the US House of Representatives on Thursday aimed at tightening the terms of the Iran nuclear deal, despite Tehran's rejection of changes to the accord.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized the agreement aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear program, which was agreed under his predecessor Barack Obama's administration.

US lawmakers move to tighten terms of Iran nuclear deal