

West Steps Up Military Spending: Report



U.S. President Donald Trump will likely press European states to spend even more on military technology at a NATO conference in April.

MUNICH (Dispatches) - The United States led a rise in Western military spending in 2018 as it moved to keep ahead of Chinese and Russian pushes into advanced military technology, a report said on Friday.

And U.S. President Donald Trump will likely press European states to spend even more at a NATO conference in April, the International Institute for Security Studies (IISS) said. European powers would together have to find an extra \$102 billion to meet his latest demands, it added.

But “China perhaps represents even more of a challenge, as it introduces yet more advanced military systems and is engaged in a strategy to improve its forces’ ability to operate at distance from the homeland,” it added.

China’s stated ambition to modernize its People’s Liberation Army by 2035 was “supported by defense spending that has been on a relentlessly upward trajectory”.

“Chinese naval capability is entering a new phase,” as it launched cruisers and began sea trials for its first indigenous aircraft carrier, the report said.

Beijing was also improving its air force and pushing into new technologies including very high speed cruise missiles and artificial intelligence.

Western states “still retain an edge over adversaries, but the gap is narrowing. The pace of change may mean that in the future, advantages - if they exist at all - may be held only fleetingly, before the other side catches up.”

Trump would probably keep up his pressure on NATO allies to increase their military spending to 2 percent of their gross domestic product, the report said.

“As of late 2018, doing this would mean that NATO European states would have to find an extra \$102 billion, on top of the amount they currently spend,” it added.

Major U.S. and European arms makers that would benefit from any increase include Lockheed Martin, Airbus and Rheinmetall.

Cuban Government Reveals: U.S. Moving Special Forces Closer to Venezuela



Venezuela’s President Nicolas Maduro (R) is flashing the V-sign next to the commandant of the Armed Forces Strategic Command Operations during a rally on January 30, 2019.

HAVANA(Dispatches) -**The Cuban government said on Thursday the Trump administration is moving special forces closer to Venezuela “in preparation for a military adventure under the guise of a ‘humanitarian intervention.’”**

In a statement, Cuba denounced the steps that President Donald Trump and his allies have taken to oust President Nicolas Maduro—particularly National Security Advisor John Bolton and Republican Sen. Marco Rubio.

“Between February 6 and 10 of 2019, several military transport aircraft have flown to the Rafael Miranda Airport in Puerto Rico, the San Isidro Air Base in the Dominican Republic, and other strategically

located Caribbean Islands, most certainly without the knowledge of the governments of those nations,” it said.

“These flights took off from U.S. military facilities where Special Operation Troops and U.S. Marine Corps units operate. These units have been used for covert operations, even against leaders of other countries.”

Cuba said the U.S. intends to “fabricate a humanitarian pretext in order to launch a military attack on Venezuela and, by resorting to intimidation, pressure, and force, is seeking to introduce into this sovereign nation’s territory alleged humanitarian aid.”

“It is worth recalling that similar behaviors and pretexts were used

to by the U.S. during the prelude to wars it launched against Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya, which resulted in tremendous human losses and caused enormous suffering.”

The warnings out of Cuba come after opposition leader Juan Guaidó vowed on Tuesday that foreign aid—which has already begun arriving along the border with Colombia and Brazil—will enter Venezuela on Feb. 23 in spite of objections from Maduro, who has also characterized offerings of aid as part of a “political war of American empire” and “warmongering in order to take over” Venezuela.

Since Trump recognized Guaidó as Venezuela’s leader last month, he has appointed war hawk Elliott Abrams as a special representative to the country, repeatedly threatened military action if Maduro doesn’t turn over power to Guaidó, and seized billions of dollars in Venezuelan oil assets. In its statement on Thursday, Cuba charged U.S. actions are “causing serious humanitarian damage and harsh deprivation” to the people of Venezuela.

During a press conference late last month announcing the sanctions on Venezuela’s state-owned oil company, Bolton—in a move that critics said was “likely not an accident”—held up a notepad on which he had written “5,000 troops to Colombia.”

A few days later, Bolton suggested that if Maduro keeps refusing to leave office, he could find himself locked up in a U.S. military prison at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Station in Cuba.

Spain Calls for Snap Election Amid Catalonia Crisis

MADRID (AP) - **Spain’s prime minister on Friday called an early general election for April 28 that will likely highlight the deep political divisions in the country.**

The news that Spaniards are having to go to the polls for the third time in less than four years came after the minority Socialist government, led by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, lost a budget vote in Parliament.

Sanchez, who was already under pressure from within his own party ranks to cut his term short, lost the budget vote after Catalan separatists joined opposition lawmakers to vote down his government’s spending plans for 2019.

“Between doing nothing and continuing without a budget, or giving the chance for Spaniards to speak, Spain should continue looking ahead,” Sanchez said in a televised appearance from the Moncloa Palace, the government’s seat, after an urgent meeting of his Cabinet.

“I have proposed to dissolve parliament and call elections for April 28th,” he added at the end of a speech during which he highlighted the deeds of his eight months in power.

The 46-year-old prime minister ousted his predecessor Mariano Rajoy in June last year, when he won a no-confidence vote triggered by a damaging graft conviction affecting the conservative Popular Party (PP).

But the simple majority of Socialists, anti-austerity and regional nationalist parties that united at the time against Rajoy has crumbled in the past week after Sanchez cut off talks with separatists over Catalonia’s self-determination.

Without mentioning Catalonia directly, Sanchez said he remained committed to dialogue with the country’s regions as

long as their demands fell “within the constitution and the law,” and blamed the conservatives for not supporting his negotiations.

Rajoy’s successor at the helm of PP, Pablo Casado, celebrated what he called the “defeat” of the Socialists, attacking Sanchez for yielding to some of the Catalan separatists’ demands.

Opinion polls indicate that the April vote is not likely to produce a clear winner, a long shot away from the traditional bipartisan politics that dominated Spanish politics for decades.

Though Sanchez’s Socialists appear to be ahead, their two main opponents —PP and the center-right Ciudadanos (Citizens)—could repeat their recent coalition in the southern Andalusia region, where they unseated the socialists with the help of the far-right Vox party.

India Threatens Pakistan After Attack Kills 44 Police



Indian soldiers examine the debris after an explosion in Lethpora in south Kashmir’s Pulwama district on Feb. 14, 2019.

NEW DELHI/SRINAGAR (Dispatches) - **India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi warned Pakistan on Friday to expect a strong response to a bomb attack in the disputed region of Kashmir that killed 44 paramilitary policemen, ratcheting up tension between the nuclear-armed neighbors.**

The car bomb attack on a security convoy on Thursday was the worst in decades of insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim majority state.

“We will give a befitting reply, our neighbor will not be allowed to destabilize us,” Modi said in a speech, after meeting security advisers to discuss options.

The attack comes months before an Indian general election.

The Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) claimed responsibility soon after a bomber rammed an explosives-laden car into a bus carrying police personnel.

India has for years accused Pakistan of backing separatist militants in divided Kashmir, which the neighbors both claim in full but rule in part.

Pakistan denies that, saying it only offers political support to the Himalayan region’s suppressed Muslim people.

India claimed it had “incontrovertible evidence” of Pakistani involvement in the attack. The Pakistan government

responded with a stiff denial, calling the attack a matter of “grave concern.”

As outrage and demands for revenge flooded Indian social media, Arun Jaitley, one of the most senior figures in the Hindu nationalist-led government, told reporters India would work to ensure the “complete isolation” of Pakistan.

The first step, he said, would include removing most favored nation (MFN) trade privileges that had been accorded to Pakistan - though annual bilateral trade between the countries is barely \$2 billion.

The last major attack in Kashmir was in 2016 when Jaish militants raided an Indian army camp, killing 20 soldiers. Weeks later, Modi ordered a surgical strike on suspected militant camps across the border in Pakistan Kashmir.

When he swept to power in 2014, Modi vowed to pursue a tough line with mostly Pakistan. The two countries have gone to war three times since independence from Britain in 1947, twice over Kashmir.

Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale summoned Pakistan’s ambassador, Sohail Mahmood, and issued a demarche demanding Pakistan take verifiable action against the Jaish.

The escalating tension risks overshadowing a visit to the region by the Saudi crown prince, who is due in Islamabad over the weekend and New Delhi next week, with both governments hoping to attract Saudi investment.

Japan Begins Referendum Campaign on U.S. Base



Demonstrators hold a rally in Nago, Okinawa Prefecture on Feb. 14, 2019, calling for people to vote “oppose” in a referendum on whether to move the U.S. Futenma base in Ginowan, also in the prefecture, to the Henoko area of Nago.

TOKYO (AFP) - **Campaigning began on Thursday ahead of a referendum in Japan’s Okinawa on the controversial relocation of a U.S. military base to a remote part of the island.**

The non-binding vote will be held on February 24, with Governor Denny Tamaki campaigning against the relocation of the Futenma airbase. The base is currently located in a densely-populated part of the southern island, and has caused frictions with local residents over everything from noise to accidents.

In a bid to resolve the long-running tensions, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government has backed a plan to move the base to a coastal area, reclaiming land for part of the proposed new site.

But residents opposed to the move want the base moved out of Okinawa altogether, arguing that the region bears a disproportionate burden when it comes to hosting U.S. military troops in the country.

Okinawa accounts for less than one percent of Japan’s total land area, but hosts more than half of the approximately 47,000 American military personnel stationed in Japan. Noise,

accidents, and crimes committed by military personnel and civilian base employees have long angered Okinawans, many of whom want other parts of the country to house bases instead.

But the archipelago’s location near Taiwan has long been viewed as having huge strategic importance for U.S. forward positioning in Asia. And Abe’s government has shown little sign of willingness to consider relocating Futenma to another part of the country or otherwise changing the spread of U.S. military forces in Japan.

Tamaki, elected in September after campaigning against the relocation plans, has urged residents to vote. “It is a very significant opportunity for people in Okinawa prefecture to directly show their will. Please go to polling stations and cast a precious ballot,” he told reporters earlier on Thursday.

The governor is required to “respect” the vote’s outcome if approved by at least a quarter of eligible voters -- around 290,000 votes. But the referendum is not binding on the central government, and spokesman Yoshihide Suga said Thursday that there were no plans to halt the relocation plan.

MADRID (AP) — Hundreds of Chinese have protested outside a Spanish bank in Madrid, claiming they are being unfairly denied access to their accounts while the bank insists it’s merely complying with money-laundering laws. Spanish media report that the protesters are demanding access to their money. The protesters yelled “Justice now; No to racism” and held Spanish and Chinese flags. BBVA says in a statement that money-laundering laws require customers to properly identify themselves and demonstrate that their taxable income is compatible with the amount entering their bank account. The statement said if those conditions aren’t met the bank must take action, regardless of the client’s nationality. It said the bank is taking steps to speed up procedures and deal with complaints. No other Spanish banks have been the target of Chinese protests.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress lopsidedly approved a border security compromise that would avert a second painful government shutdown. But a new confrontation has been ignited — this time over President Donald Trump’s plan to bypass lawmakers and declare a national emergency to siphon billions of dollars from other federal coffers for his wall on the Mexican boundary. Money in the bill for border barriers, about \$1.4 billion, is far below the \$5.7 billion Trump insisted he needed and would finance just a quarter of the 200-plus miles (322 kilometers) he wanted. The White House said he’d sign the legislation but act unilaterally to get more, prompting condemnations from Democrats and threats of lawsuits from states and others who might lose federal money or said Trump was abusing his authority.

LONDON (AP) — Chanting “Save our Planet!” thousands of students around Britain are rallying to demand that Britain’s Conservative government take action on climate change. The demonstrators, many in their school uniforms, skipped class and are refusing to take exams, hoping to gain the attention of political leaders. The group, Youth Strike 4 Climate Change, says students in some 60 communities are taking part in the UK. Similar demonstrations involving hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of student protesters, also took place outside the Swiss Parliament in Bern, the Bundestag in Berlin and other cities across Europe. Climate strikes also took place in Australia last year. Roseanne Steffen, 21, says “we need to react urgently.” British Prime Minister Theresa May’s office says while it’s important to engage, the disruption to lessons is damaging.

TOKYO (AFP) -- Japan’s government introduced a bill Friday to recognize the country’s ethnic Ainu minority as an “indigenous” people for the first time, after decades of discrimination against the group. The Ainu people -- many of whom live in northern Hokkaido -- have long suffered the effects of a policy of forced assimilation, and while discrimination has receded gradually, income and education gaps with the rest of Japan persist. The bill is the first to recognize the Ainu as “indigenous people” and calls for the government to make “forward-looking policies”, including measures to support communities and boost local economies and tourism. The Ainu have long suffered oppression and exploitation, and the modern Japanese government in the late 19th century banned them from practising their customs and using their language. The Ainu traditionally observed an animist faith, with men wearing full beards and women adorning themselves with facial tattoos before marriage.

PARIS (Reuters) -- French authorities are investigating allegations that the Vatican’s ambassador to France molested a junior official in Paris’ City Hall, a City Hall official said on Friday. The official told Reuters that Archbishop Luigi Ventura, 74, who has held the post in Paris for the past decade, was suspected of having touched the buttocks of the male junior staffer during Mayor Anne Hidalgo’s New Year address. A judicial source confirmed a preliminary investigation against Ventura was underway. The Vatican did not respond to requests for comment. Pope Francis has come under fire over the Roman Catholic Church’s handling of a long-running sexual abuse crisis. While much of the recent focus has been on the United States, Australia and Chile, the trial last month of the Archbishop of Lyon put the spotlight on Europe’s senior clergy again. Cardinal Philippe Barbarin is charged with failing to act on historic allegations of sexual abuse of boy scouts by a priest in his diocese. A verdict is due on March 7.

YANGON (Reuters) -- Myanmar’s government under Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has used repressive laws to prosecute peaceful critics, dashing hopes that its first democratic leader in decades would safeguard free speech, Human Rights Watch said on Friday. Freedom of expression has been deteriorating since her administration came to power in 2016, with prosecutions creating a “climate of fear” among journalists, the rights group said in its report, “Dashed Hopes: The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Myanmar”. “Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy promised a new Myanmar but the government still prosecutes peaceful speech and protests and has failed to revise old oppressive laws,” Linda Lakhdhir, Asia legal adviser at Human Rights Watch and the report’s author, said in a statement.