

Biden Proposes Five-Year Extension of Nuke Deal to Russia



Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden during their meeting in Moscow March 10, 2011.

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has proposed to Russia a five-year extension of a nuclear arms treaty that is otherwise set to expire in February, the White House said Thursday.

Biden proposed the extension even as he asked the intelligence community to look closely into Russia’s cyberattacks, its alleged interference in the 2020 election and other actions, press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters.

Russia has said for some time that it would welcome an extension of the New START treaty, which limits the number of U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons. The Trump admin-

istration made a late bid to extend the treaty, but its conditions were rejected by Russia.

U.S. allies, particularly in Europe, are sure to applaud Biden’s proposal, which also provides an early signal of his intent to pursue arms control,

Psaki noted that a five-year extension is permitted by the treaty and it “makes even more sense when the relationship with Russia is adversarial as it is at this time.”

She called the treaty, which is the last remaining arms control pact between Washington and Moscow since the Trump administration withdrew from two others, “an anchor of strategic sta-

bility between our two countries.”

Despite the extension proposal, Psaki said Biden was committed to holding Russia “to account for its reckless and adversarial actions,” such as its alleged involvement in the Solar Winds hacking event, 2020 election interference, the chemical poisoning of opposition figure Alexei Navalny and allegations that Russia may have offered bounties to the Taliban to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon’s chief spokesman, John Kirby, said allowing the treaty to lapse would have weakened U.S. understanding of Russia’s nuclear forces.

“Extending the treaty’s limitations on stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons until 2026 allows time and space for our two nations to explore new verifiable arms control arrangements that could further reduce risks to Americans,” he said. “And the department stands ready to support our colleagues in the State Department as they effect this extension and explore those new arrangements.”

Biden’s national security adviser Jake Sullivan was to convey the extension proposal to Russia’s ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, on Thursday afternoon, according to one official familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private diplomatic conversations.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg earlier Thursday called on the United States and Russia to extend the treaty and to later broaden it.

Republicans Grapple With Dark Legacy of Trumpism



Supporters of President Donald Trump wave a flag during an election watch party on Nov. 3, 2020 in Chandler, Arizona.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- For the first time in more than a decade, Republicans are waking up to a Washington where Democrats control the White House and Congress, adjusting to an era of diminished power, deep uncertainty and internal feuding.

The shift to minority status is always difficult, prompting debates over who is to blame for losing the last election. But the process is especially intense as Republicans confront profound questions about what the party stands for without Donald Trump in charge.

Over the past four years, the GOP’s values were inexorably tied to the whims of a president who regularly undermined democratic institutions and followed a brash and inconsistent populism. The party now faces a decision about whether to keep moving in that direction, as many of Trump’s most loyal supporters demand, or

chart a new course.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, one of the few Republican elected officials who regularly condemned Trumpism, evoked President Ronald Reagan in calling this moment “a time for choosing.”

“We have to decide if we’re going to continue heading down the direction of Donald Trump or if we’re going to return to our roots,” Hogan, a potential 2024 White House contender, said in an interview.

“The party would be much better off if they were to purge themselves of Donald Trump,” he added. “But I don’t think there’s any hope of him completely going away.”

Whether the party moves on may come down to what Republicans such as Texas Sen. Ted Cruz do next.

Cruz spent weeks parroting Trump’s baseless claims of election fraud, which helped incite the deadly riot at

the U.S. Capitol.

Looking forward, Cruz said Trump would remain a significant part of the political conversation, but that the Republican Party should move away from divisive “language and tone and rhetoric” that alienated suburban voters, particularly women, in recent elections.

In the wake of the Capitol riot Jan. 6, a small but notable faction of high-profile Republicans is taking a stronger stance against Trump or seeking distance from him.

The Senate’s top Republican, Mitch McConnell, said on the eve of the inauguration that the pro-Trump mob that stormed the Capitol was “provoked by the president.” Even Mike Pence, Trump’s vice president and long considered his most devoted cheerleader, skipped Trump’s departure ceremony to attend Biden’s inauguration.

Trump has retreated to his South Florida club, where he has retained a small group of former White House aides who will work out of a two-story guest house on the Mar-a-Lago grounds. In addition to advisers in Washington, Trump will have access to a well-funded political action committee, the Save America PAC, that is likely to inherit tens of millions of dollars in donations that flooded his campaign coffers after his election loss.

Those close to Trump believe he will lay low in the immediate future as he focuses on his upcoming impeachment trial for inciting the riot. After that, he is expected to reemerge, likely granting media interviews and finding a new home on social media after losing his powerful Twitter bullhorn.

Trapped China Miners Have to Wait Another 15 Days

QIXIA, China (Reuters) -- Workers trapped in a gold mine in China since Jan. 10 may have to wait another 15 days before they can be rescued because of a blockage on their intended escape route, officials said on Thursday.

A total of 22 workers were trapped underground after an explosion at the Hushan mine in Qixia, a major gold-producing region under the administration of Yantai in Shandong province on the northeast coast.

One is confirmed to have died, while 11 are known to be alive. The remaining 10 are missing.

Rescuers were drilling new shafts on Thursday to reach 10 of the men in the middle section of the mine, more than 600 meters from the entrance, who have been sent food and medical supplies. Another survivor has been found in a different section.

The shafts include one 711-mm (28-inch) diameter shaft that rescuers hope to use to bring the survivors to safety.

However, at least another 15 days may be needed to clear obstacles, Gong Haitao, deputy head of Yantai’s propaganda department, told a news conference at the headquarters

of the rescue operation.

A “severe blockage” 350 meters down was much worse than feared, officials said, adding that it was about 100 meters thick and weights some 70 tonnes.

Thick smog, reeking of chemicals, hung over the muddy road leading up to the mine site and a row of ambulances on standby in a carpark, reducing visibility to a few hundred meters.

Police have sealed off the road to the mine, cutting through muddy apple orchards and warehouses, to ensure rescue efforts are not hampered. Health workers in white protective gear took temperatures beside mounded earth and tents as part of COVID-19 precautions.

About 600 people are involved in the rescue, with as many as 25 ambulances waiting at the scene, as well as neurosurgeons, trauma specialists and psychologists.

A Reuters team saw fire trucks and cars coming and going through a checkpoint on an approach road.

China’s mines are among the world’s deadliest. It has recorded 573 mine-related deaths in 2020, according to the National Mine Safety Administration.

HRW Urges Probe Into French Airstrike on Wedding in Mali



French warplanes reportedly hit a wedding party in the village of Bounti on January 3, killing about 20 people.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- Human Rights Watch (HRW) urged France and Mali to “promptly and impartially” investigate a recent airstrike that residents say targeted a wedding party attended by civilians.

The rights group reported on Thursday that according to residents, and an association promoting the Fulani ethnic group, the French airstrike hit a wedding party in the village of Bounti on January 3, killing about 20 people.

The French military has disputed the claim, saying a fighter jet struck a takfiri group at a location north of the village, killing several dozen combatants.

Three Bounti residents told HRW that male wedding guests had gathered separately from women because of gender-segregation rules imposed by takfiris operating in the area.

“They said that the wedding had been planned over a month earlier and that people had come from other towns and villages to attend,” HRW said in a statement.

One of the men, who is 68, said: “I heard a powerful detonation, boom, and then another detonation. “When I woke up, my foot was bleeding because of shrapnel, and all around me

were wounded and dead bodies.”

Jonathan Pedneault, a researcher with the conflict and crisis division at the New York based rights group, said “serious allegations that any civilians were killed in airstrikes need to be promptly investigated to determine the legality of the strikes under the laws of war.”

Two other rights groups, the International Federation for Human Rights and the Malian Association of Human Rights, have also called for an investigation.

The 13,000-strong United Nations’ peacekeeping force in Mali, known as MINUSMA, has already launched its own inquiry.

Mali has been struggling contain a takfiri insurgency that broke out in the north of the country in 2012, before spreading to the centre and neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger.

French, a former colonial power across Africa, sent troops in 2013 to purportedly drive back the takfiris, but the attacks have only intensified. France currently has 5,100 troops deployed across the Sahel region in its Operation Barkhane.

Thousands of civilians are estimated to have been killed in the fighting and more than a million have been displaced.

EU Lawmakers Seek Review of Relations With Russia



The logo of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project is seen on a pipe at Chelyabinsk pipe rolling plant owned by ChelPipe Group in Chelyabinsk, Russia, February 26, 2020.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) -- European Union lawmakers passed a resolution on Thursday calling for the bloc to stop the completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to take Russian natural gas to Europe, in response to the arrest of blogger Alexei Navalny.

Navalny was detained at the weekend and later jailed for parole violations after flying back to Russia for the first time since allegedly being poisoned.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has continued to back the pipeline between Germany and Russia despite criticism elsewhere in the EU, said on Thursday her view of the project had not changed despite the Navalny case.

Lawmakers in the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly to block the pipeline construction work, with 581 votes in favor, 50 against and 44 abstentions, calling on the EU to review relations with Russia in light of Navalny’s arrest.

“The European Parliament ... calls on the EU and its member states to criti-

cally review cooperation with Russia in various foreign policy platforms and on projects such as Nord Stream 2, the completion of which the EU must stop immediately,” the resolution said.

Separately, Germany’s regulator said on Thursday it is awaiting details for complaints against Nord Stream 2 after environmental groups filed a challenge to construction.

Nord Stream 2 is designed to double capacity of the existing undersea Nord Stream gas pipeline from Russia to Germany to 110 billion cubic meters per year, more than half of Russia’s overall pipeline gas exports to Europe.

Led by Russia’s Gazprom with Western partners, the pipeline is more than 90% complete and scheduled to operate from this year. The United States is fiercely against Nord Stream 2, imposing sanctions on a ship involved in construction work.

The project has split the EU, with some members saying it will undermine traditional gas transit state Ukraine and increase the bloc’s energy reliance on Russia.

News in Brief

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) -- India is set to send a team of military specialists to Russia, where they will receive training on the S-400 air defense system, which New Delhi plans to purchase from Moscow despite U.S. threats of sanctions. Russian ambassador to India, Nikolay Kudashev, said that the military’s team’s upcoming departure is a “remarkable occasion” that will usher in “a new stage in our strategic partnership.” Kudashev defended a \$5.4 billion deal that was signed between New Delhi and Moscow in October 2018, for India’s purchase of five long-range surface-to-air missiles, from Russia. The first batch of the S-400s is expected to be delivered by the end of this year and all deliveries will be completed in a five-year period.

Kudashev also said Moscow was “successfully moving towards implementation” of several other arms deals with India.

WASHINGTON (AP) — Seven Democratic senators on Thursday asked the Senate Ethics Committee to investigate the actions of Republican Sens. Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley “to fully understand their role” in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump. Thousands had gathered that day as Congress voted to formally certify President Joe Biden’s victory over Trump in November. Hawley and Cruz led objections in the Senate to Biden’s victory, despite the widespread recognition that the effort would fail. In the end, Congress certified Biden’s Electoral College victory, but not before thousands marched to the Capitol at Trump’s urging, overwhelmed security and interrupted the proceedings. In the end, the violence led to five deaths, injured dozens of police officers and caused extensive damage to the Capitol. Two Florida men, including a self-described organizer for the Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, were arrested Wednesday on charges of taking part in the siege of the U.S. Capitol, authorities said.

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Google on Friday threatened to make its search engine unavailable in Australia if the government went ahead with plans to make tech giants pay for news content. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison quickly hit back, saying “we don’t respond to threats.” “Australia makes our rules for things you can do in Australia,” Morrison told reporters in Brisbane. “That’s done in our Parliament. It’s done by our government. And that’s how things work here in Australia.” Morrison’s comments came after Mel Silva, the managing director of Google Australia and New Zealand, told a Senate inquiry into the bill that the new rules would be unworkable. “If this version of the code were to become law, it would give us no real choice but to stop making Google search available in Australia,” Silva told senators. The mandatory code of conduct proposed by the government aims to make Google and Facebook pay Australian media companies fairly for using news content they siphon from news sites.

PUNE, India (AP) — At least five people were killed in a fire that broke out Thursday at a building under construction at Serum Institute of India, the world’s largest vaccine manufacturer, officials said. The company said the blaze would not affect production of the COVID-19 vaccine. Murlidhar Mahol, mayor of Pune city in southern Maharashtra state, said five bodies were found in the rubble after the flames were extinguished by firefighters. Mahol said the victims were probably construction workers. He said the cause of the fire had not been determined and the extent of damage was not immediately clear. Serum Institute of India’s CEO, Adar Poonwala, said he was “deeply saddened” by the loss of life. He said there would be no reduction in vaccine manufacturing because the company has other available facilities.

BANGUI/NEW YORK (Reuters) -- Central African Republic declared a state of emergency on Thursday to help it crack down on armed groups, as the United Nations’ envoy to CAR called for the deployment of many more peacekeepers in response to a recent surge in attacks. The CAR army, backed by UN, Russian and Rwandan troops, has been battling rebels that are seeking to overturn a Dec. 27 vote in which President Faustin-Archange Touadera was declared the winner. The state of emergency, which will last 15 days, lets the authorities fast-track arrests by allowing the military to detain suspects without going through a prosecutor, government spokesman Albert Yaloke said in a statement. The escalation comes as UN envoy Mankeur Ndiaye asked the UN Security Council for a substantial increase in the number of peacekeepers to give the mission greater mobility on the ground.

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) -- German carrier Lufthansa has asked Argentina for authorization to operate two flights from Germany to British-occupied Malvinas Islands, in a move Buenos Aires says indicates the recognition of Argentina’s sovereignty over the island. The remote South Atlantic archipelago, known as the Falklands in the United Kingdom (UK), has been a source of dispute between Argentina and Britain for almost two centuries. The two fought a 10-week war over the archipelago in 1982. The Foreign Ministry of Argentina confirmed Lufthansa’s request for a flyover permission. “The relevance of Lufthansa’s request presented to the Argentine authorities is highlighted as it implies the recognition of the Malvinas Islands as part of Argentine territory,” said the ministry.