



TEHRAN STARTS GULF WAR GAMES TO TEST SUB MISSILES

Iran touts options to skirt sanctions

Iran still holding up its end of nuclear deal

DUBAI, Feb 23, (RTRS): Iran said on Saturday it had many options to neutralise the reimposition of US sanctions on its oil exports, the semi-official Tasnim news agency reported, adding that Tehran's regional influence could not be curbed as demanded by Washington.

"Apart from closing Strait of Hormuz, we have other options to stop oil flow if threatened," Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani told Tasnim.

"Iran has plans in place that will neutralise the illegal US sanctions against Iran's oil exports," Shamkhani said. "We have many ways to sell our oil."

Tensions between Iran and the United States increased after US President Donald Trump pulled out of a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers last May, and then reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

The restoration of sanctions is part of a wider effort by Trump to force Iran to further curb its nuclear and missile programs as well as its support for proxy forces in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East.

Washington had been pushing governments to cut imports of Iranian oil to

zero. But, fearing a price spike, it granted waivers to eight Iranian oil buyers when the sanctions on oil imports started last November.

Iranian officials have threatened to disrupt oil shipments from the Gulf countries if Washington tries to strangle Tehran's oil exports.

Carrying one-third of the world's seaborne oil every day, the Strait of Hormuz links Middle East crude producers to key markets in Asia Pacific, Europe, North America and beyond.

"There are multiple ways to make that (blockage of Hormuz) happen. We hope we would not be forced to use them," Shamkhani said.

Iran — the dominant Shi'ite Muslim power which is in a rivalry with Saudi Arabia and the United States' other Sunni Arab allies — has been President Bashar al-Assad's most supportive ally against insurgents throughout the nearly eight-year Syrian civil war.

"We have achieved 90 percent of Iran's goals in Syria," said Shamkhani, a close ally of Iran's top authority Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"There will be important developments in promoting deterrence capability of the resistance front in Syria," said Shamkhani when asked about Israel's "possible future attacks" in Syria, according to Tasnim.

Iran often refers to regional countries and forces opposed to Israel and the United States as a "resistance axis".

Israel, increasingly concerned that its enemy Iran may establish a long-term military presence in neighboring Syria, says it has carried out over 200 attacks against Iranian targets in Syria in the last two years.

Threats

Defying Israeli threats that they might be targeted if they do not leave the country, Iran says it will continue to provide military advisers to Syria for as long as necessary in support of Assad's forces.

"Iran is capable of confronting any military threat ... Trump and Israel are well aware of Iran's military might," Shamkhani said. "They know that they cannot enter a war with Iran. That is why they publicly threaten Iran."

Iran on Friday began large-scale naval drills at the mouth of the Gulf, which will feature its first submarine cruise missile launches, state media reported, at a time of rising tensions with the United States.

More than 100 vessels were taking part in the three-day war games in a vast area stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Indian Ocean, the state news agency IRNA reported.

"The exercise will cover confronting a range of threats, testing weapons, and evaluating the readiness of equipment and personnel," navy commander Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, said in remarks carried by state television.

"Submarine missile launches will be carried out ... in addition to helicopter and drone launches from the deck of the Sahand destroyer," Khanzadi said.

Iran has remained within the key limits on its nuclear activities imposed by its 2015 deal with major powers despite growing pressure from newly reimposed US sanctions, a report by the UN nuclear watchdog showed on Friday.

The International Atomic Energy Agency is policing the deal, which lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on Tehran's atomic activities aimed at increasing the time Iran would need to make an atom bomb if it chose to.

Iran has stayed within caps on the level to which it can enrich uranium, as well as its stock of enriched uranium, the IAEA said in a confidential quarterly report sent to its member states and obtained by Reuters.



Aerial view of Green Island. — Mohammad Alhadhoud-KUNA

In reversal US to keep 400 troops in Syria

NewsWatch

RIYADH: Gulf Cooperation Council army, navy and air forces are taking part in the two-week "Joint Peninsula Shield 10" military drills held in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Region, the Saudi military said on Saturday.

The exercises aim to improve coordination, exchange expertise and raise efficiency between the neighbouring Gulf states' militaries, Joint Forces Commander Maj Gen Abdullah Al-Qahtani told Saudi news agency SPA.

Kuwait's military had announced on Wednesday that its units departed the country to join its Gulf counterparts.

The "huge and advanced exercises," which include academic and wartime scenario-based training, aim to prepare the troops in handling different situations in order to ensure regional and global security and stability, added the commander. (KUNA)

MUSCAT: Oman and Britain on Thursday signed a joint defense agreement aiming at promoting bilateral relations and strategic partnership between both countries.

The agreement was signed by Omani Minister Responsible for Defense Affairs Sayyid Badr Al-Busaidi and British Secretary of Defense Gavin Williamson.

Following the signing of the deal, Williamson said in a press statement that the agreement would strengthen his country's relations with one of its most important partners.

He added that the deal reflects Britain's commitment to the common defense of the two countries.

The British secretary considered that the security of the Gulf region is an extension of his country's security. (KUNA)

WASHINGTON: The US hosted Thursday consultations on the "political and security pillars" of the Middle East Strategic Alliance in the nation's capital, where the consultations included "formative exchanges on the strategic objectives of the alliance, with particular emphasis on political and security-related topics."

The Department of State said in a statement that "senior officials from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) came together to discuss the alliance, a whole-of-government initiative to advance regional stability, security, and prosperity through enhanced multilateral cooperation in the political,

economic, energy, and security spheres." It added that "defensive in nature, the alliance's structure is intended to advance participating nations' common objectives and address threats to regional stability, security, and prosperity."

"The United States looks forward to continuing these positive discussions in order to leverage synergy and more effectively address existing and emergent challenges to our shared, vital interests in the region," the statement concluded. (KUNA)

RABAT: Britain's Prince Harry and his pregnant wife Meghan will begin a three-day visit to Morocco on Saturday during which they will show their support for rural girls' education in the Atlas mountains.

The visit at the request of the British government is the second to the Kingdom in recent years by a member of the royal family, following a trip by Prince Charles in 2011. Queen Elizabeth visited Morocco in 1980.

It is expected to be the final royal overseas trip before the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are due to become parents this spring, according to British media.

The couple arrive in Casablanca on Saturday evening. The next morning they will fly to the Atlas mountains where they will meet girls at a boarding house run by Education for All, an NGO that builds dormitories near schools to reduce school drop-out rates among girls aged 12 to 18, the UK embassy said.

"This visit will help give international publicity to the work we do and will help us raise money to build more boarding houses," Michael McHugo, founder of Education for All, told Reuters by phone. (RTRS)

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump announced Friday that he has selected Kelly Craft, the US ambassador to Canada, as his nominee to serve as the next US ambassador to the United Nations.

Trump said in a pair of tweets that Craft "has done an outstanding job representing our Nation" and he has "no doubt that, under her leadership, our Country will be represented at the highest level."

Two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters had told The Associated Press that Trump had been advised that Craft's confirmation would be the smoothest of the three candidates he had been considering to fill the job last held by Nikki Haley. (AP)

WASHINGTON, Feb 23, (Agencies): The United States will leave about 400 US troops split between two different regions of Syria, a senior administration official said on Friday, a reversal by President Donald Trump that could pave the way for US allies to keep troops in Syria.

Trump had ordered the withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops Syria in December after he said they had defeated Islamic State militants in Syria. The abrupt decision sparked an outcry from allies and US lawmakers and was a factor in Jim Mattis' resignation as defense secretary.

But Trump was persuaded by advisers on Thursday that about 200 US troops would join what is expected to be a total commitment of about 800 to 1,500 troops from European allies to set up and observe a safe zone being negotiated for northeastern Syria, the official told reporters.

About 200 other US troops will remain at the US military outpost of Tanf, near the border with Iraq and Jordan, the official said. Until now, European allies have balked at providing troops unless they received a firm commitment that Washington was still committed to the region.

Despite the shift, Trump told reporters on Friday "I'm not reversing course" on Syria, arguing the remaining troops would be "a very small, tiny fraction" of the forces who would ensure that Islamic State does not regroup.

Officials said the numbers agreed on this week were not firm and could still change.

"We don't want to see a resurgence of ISIS," the official said, using an acronym for Islamic State.

Leaving even a small group of US troops in Syria could pave the way for European allies to commit hundreds of troops to help observe a potential safe zone in northeastern Syria.

Marine General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has been in talks with European counterparts about the safe zone in northeastern Syria.

But on Monday, US officials concluded that Europeans would not be willing to go it alone without some American participation, the official said. The combat-ready US and European forces will help keep the peace between Kurdish forces, who supported the fight against Islamic State, and Turkey, which fears attacks from militant groups, the official said.

'Microsoffers' protest HoloLens use for war

REDMOND, Feb 23, (AP): A group of Microsoft workers is demanding the company cancel a contract supplying the US Army with HoloLens headsets that they say would turn real-world battlefields into a video game.

Microsoft's head-mounted HoloLens displays augmented reality, which means viewers can see virtual imagery superimposed over the scenery in front of them.

A letter signed by more than 50 Microsoft employees Friday and circulated on an internal messaging board said the technology could help soldiers spot — and kill — adversaries on the battlefield.

They say they "refuse to create technology for warfare and oppression."

"We did not sign up to develop weapons, and we demand a say in how our work is used," the letter says. It asks Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and President Brad Smith to cancel a \$480 million contract the Army announced in November.

Microsoft said in a statement Friday that it is committed to working with the military, including the Army under the HoloLens contract.

Microsoft pointed to an October blog post by Smith saying those who defend the US should have "access to the nation's best technology." The company added it will continue to address "important ethical and public policy issues relating to (artificial intelligence) and the military."

Military bidding documents say the new technology — which the Army calls its Integrated Visual Augmentation System — will be used for both training and warfighting. The Army's stated aim is to bring more situational awareness to troops so that they become more lethal and mobile.

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