



AS OF 0500 HOURS, JUNE 25

OVERVIEW

The Pentagon plans to announce the repeal of its ban on transgender service members on July 1, *USA Today* reported, citing unnamed Defense Department officials. On Europe, the Pentagon said that Secretary Ash Carter called his United Kingdom counterpart to emphasize that the two nations' defense ties will "remain a bedrock of U.S. security and foreign policy" despite Britain's vote to leave the European Union. Also of note, ISIL militants reportedly abducted about 900 Kurdish civilians in Syria's Aleppo province over the past three weeks, forcing the captives to build fortifications for the extremists in retaliation for a Kurdish-led assault on nearby Manbij.

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0430

- Britain pressured for quick EU split as Brexit impact begins
- World Anti-Doping Agency suspends testing lab in Rio
- Pope Francis condemns Armenian 'genocide'
- China says has stopped communication mechanism with Taiwan
- At least 23 dead as floods devastate West Virginia
- Two killed, 100 homes destroyed by fast-moving California wildfire
- Google, Facebook move toward automatic blocking of extremist videos – report
- U.S.-born Auston Matthews taken by Maple Leafs with No. 1 pick in NHL draft

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Daily Star*: Thirty-three killed in renewed clashes across Yemen
- *Times of Israel*: Hezbollah brushes off U.S. sanctions, says money comes via Iran
- *Yonhap*: South Korea, U.S., Japan vow to coordinate against North Korea missile threats

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1996 – A truck bomb attack carried out by Iranian-backed Saudi militant group Hezbollah al-Hejaz kills 19 U.S. Air Force personnel at the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia

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Washington Examiner Online, June 24 | Jamie McIntyre

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter has called British Defense Minister Michael Fallon to reassure his U.K. counterpart that the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Great Britain will not change because of the vote to leave the European Union.

3. Islamic State captures 900 Kurdish civilians in north Syria in three weeks

Associated Press, June 24 | Bassem Mroue

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EUROPE

4. U.K. Vote Sets Off Shockwaves

Wall Street Journal, June 25, Pg. A1 | Stephen Fidler, Valentina Pop and Jenny Gross

The U.K.'s fateful vote to leave the European Union sent convulsions across the region, precipitating an immediate political crisis in Britain and shifting the trajectory of a European project created to bind a continent torn by World War II.

5. Obama Acknowledges Loss but Says ‘Special Relationship’ Will Continue

New York Times, June 25, Pg. A11 | Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Landler

President Obama on Friday sought to assure Britain and the European Union that the United States would not pick sides once the two are divorced. But he acknowledged, somewhat ruefully, that Britain's vote to leave the union, which he had publicly opposed, spoke "to the ongoing changes and challenges raised by globalization."

6. Brexit could pose major challenges tied to foreign policy for U.S.

Washington Post, June 25, Pg. A12 | Carol Morello

Britain's decision to leave the European Union could make it more difficult to maintain transatlantic agreement on sanctions on Russia over Ukraine, and distract Britain and the E.U. from other pressing foreign policy issues as they disentangle their ties, analysts said Friday.

7. US-UK security officials cement intelligence partnership after 'leave' vote

The Guardian Online (UK), June 24 | Spencer Ackerman

Brexit or not, a symbol of the durability of the US-UK security relationship is found on a Royal Air Force base set in the green rolling hills of the home counties around 70 miles north-west of London. The US is moving forward with consolidating its transatlantic intelligence analysis operations within a planned Joint Intelligence Analysis Complex at RAF Croughton, a priority for the US military's European Command (Eucom), which is the US's anchor in Nato.

8. Britain commits to European security, despite Brexit – NATO chief

Reuters, June 24 | Robin Emmott

NATO will experience a more fragmented, uncertain Europe with Britain outside the EU, the alliance's chief warned on Friday, but London had given assurances that it remains committed to upholding Western stability.

9. Despite Russia's Somber Facade, Glimpses of Joy Over E.U. Referendum

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia received the geopolitical equivalent of manna from heaven on Friday when British voters opted to leave the European Union, speeding his long-term goal of weakening the most powerful alliance confronting the Kremlin as it seeks to rebuild its superpower muscles. Officially, Moscow presented a somber facade, repeating its prevote stance that the British referendum was of little direct concern and that any consequences could be taken in stride.

IRAQ/SYRIA

10. US-backed Syria alliance pushes into Islamic State border hub

Agence France-Presse, June 25 | Maya Gebeily

US-backed Syrian fighters pushed further into the Islamic State group stronghold of Manbij on Saturday, seizing a key road junction and grain silos overlooking the city, a monitoring group said.

11. Islamic State snipers, car bombs await US-backed fighters in Syria's Manbij

Agence France-Presse, June 24 | Delil Souleiman

As a knot of US-backed Syrian fighters advanced gingerly into the Islamic State group bastion of Manbij, the crack of a jihadist sniper round forced them to take cover behind a bullet-riddled wall. One crouching fighter identified the source and shouted directions into a walkie-talkie. Immediately, his colleagues fired a barrage of bullets at the shooter from behind the wall.

12. Fight for Aleppo 'greatest battle' in Syria – Hezbollah chief

Agence France-Presse, June 24 | Rouba El Hussein

The head of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement said Friday that the offensive on the city of Aleppo was the "greatest battle" in Syria, pledging to dispatch more fighters to support Syrian regime forces.

13. Fallujah's Forever War

ForeignPolicy.com (Dispatch), June 24 | Jane Arraf

Khalil Mahmoud left Fallujah in the back of an ambulance after burying his daughters in the garden of the deserted city hospital. "We tried to leave, but when we reached the market a rocket landed on us," he tells me, his voice still edged with panic as he crouched next to his wounded 10-year-old son. "My wife and three daughters were blown apart."

MIDEAST

14. Turkey Boosts Military Powers in Fight Against Kurdish Militants

Wall Street Journal Online, June 24 | Emre Peker

Turkey's parliament has made it harder to prosecute soldiers for alleged human rights abuses committed during counterterrorism operations, a move that strengthens the government's hand in its fight against Kurdish insurgents.

AFRICA

15. Libyan forces clash with militants in Sirte, 14 dead – official

Reuters, June 24 / Ahmed Elumami

Libyan forces fighting Islamic State in its stronghold of Sirte said on Friday that four of their troops and 10 militants were killed in heavy clashes around the port area as militants tried to flee the city under siege.

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

16. After Obama decision, first U.S. airstrikes hit Afghan Taliban

Associated Press, June 24 / Amir Shah and Lolita C. Baldor

The U.S. military has launched its first airstrikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan since President Barack Obama's decision earlier this month to expand America's involvement against the insurgents, U.S. officials said Friday.

ASIA/PACIFIC

17. Washington hopes to wrap up anti-missile deal with South Korea

Agence France-Presse, June 24 / Thomas Watkins

The United States wants to wrap up discussions with South Korea on the deployment of a sophisticated defense system, the Pentagon said Friday, two days after North Korea's latest missile tests.

18. North Korea: We won't abandon nukes with U.S. gun to our head

Associated Press (Interview), June 24 / Eric Talmadge

The top North Korean official for U.S. relations told The Associated Press on Friday that his country is now a nuclear threat to be reckoned with, and Washington can expect more nuclear tests and missile launches like the ones earlier this week as long as it attempts to force his government's collapse through a policy of pressure and punishment.

AIR FORCE

19. Welsh Retires as Air Force Chief of Staff at Andrews Ceremony

Military.com, June 24 / Bryant Jordan

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh marked his retirement -- officially scheduled for July 1 -- with a ceremony Friday morning at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

20. USAF Weighing Replacement F-35 Ejection Seat

DefenseNews.com (Exclusive), June 24 / Aaron Mehta

The US Air Force is looking into the possibility of replacing the Martin-Baker ejection seat on the F-35 joint strike fighter with the United Technologies ACES 5 model, Defense News has learned.

ARMY

21. General: Army's training of men, women held up as example

Associated Press, June 24 / Susanne M. Schafer

Fort Jackson has become a guide for other military organizations trying to expand training for women now able to enter additional combat-related jobs, the post's departing commander said.

NAVY

22. U.S. Fleet Forces Will Focus Training, Fleet Experimentation on Distributed Operations

U.S. Naval Institute News, June 24 | Megan Eckstein

U.S. Fleet Forces Command will push its fleet experimentation and training towards a new distributed operations concept, in which deployed forces – surface ships, submarines, aircraft and more – are sufficiently linked together so that they can support theater-wide needs regardless of their physical location, the commander said Friday.

23. Benedict: Life Extension for Trident II Missile 'Is Essential'

SEAPOWER Magazine Online, June 24 | Otto Kreisher

While the Navy's top acquisition program is a replacement for the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, the admiral responsible for the Navy's strategic systems said Friday that his top priority is extending the service life of the Trident II missiles that arm the Ohios and will go into the first of their replacements.

24. Navy riverine boss fired for errors that led to sailors' arrest by Iran

NavyTimes.com, June 24 | David Larter

The head of 5th Fleet on Friday fired the commander of the task force in charge of the riverine squadron involved in a high-profile debacle that led to 10 sailors' arrest by Iran in January.

25. US Navy keeps electromagnetic cannon in its sights

Agence France-Presse, June 25 | Thomas Watkins

The US Navy is quietly pushing ahead with a radical new cannon that one day could transform how wars are fought, even though some Pentagon officials have voiced concerns over its cost and viability.

VETERANS

26. Few vets expelled under 'don't ask' seek remedy

Associated Press, June 24 | Jennifer McDermott

Less than 8 percent of veterans expelled from the military under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy have applied to upgrade their discharges to honorable or strip references to their sexual orientation from their record.

TARGETED KILLINGS

27. Officials: U.S. Report Will Say Drones Have Only Killed 100 Civilians

NBCNews.com, June 24 | Ken Dilanian and Courtney Kube

The Obama administration is preparing to announce as early as next week that it believes around 100 civilians have died in nearly 500 U.S. drone strikes since 2009, U.S. officials tell NBC News.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

28. A daunting new reality poses threats to US

Boston Globe, June 25, Pg. A14 | Editorial

For American policy makers, the impending exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union has introduced a long list of new headaches -- and a much shorter list of new opportunities. The best that the Obama administration can hope for may be to soften the economic and political blow from the British vote on Thursday while seizing this opportunity to shore up NATO and other international organizations.

29. Darkening skies over Bahrain

Washington Post, June 25, Pg. A18 | Editorial

When Bahrain announced a decision Monday to strip the citizenship of a leading Shiite cleric, Sheik Isa Qassim, it accused him of "creating an extremist sectarian environment" and claimed he had "encouraged sectarianism and violence." In fact, Bahrain's ruling monarchy and government are the ones fomenting division. In recent weeks, they also dissolved the main Shiite opposition group, al-Wefaq, of which Sheik Qassim was the spiritual leader. These and other repressive measures taken lately are likely to backfire. Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy in the Persian Gulf that hosts the U.S. 5th Fleet, has been cracking heads of the opposition ever since the Arab Spring broke out five years ago and has harshly repressed those who sought a greater political voice for the country's Shiite majority.

30. The Obama administration is failing to stop China's Pacific aggression

Washington Post Online, June 24 | Josh Rogin

This month, on their way from Taiwan to Japan, a group of U.S. senators inadvertently flew over a set of islands that both the Chinese and Japanese claim as their own. The Chinese government was incensed. I obtained a formal protest letter from the Chinese Embassy in Washington sent to the Senate Armed Services Committee this week demanding that no U.S. official ever again fly in a straight line from Taipei to Tokyo, which takes you over what the Japanese call the Senkaku Islands and the Chinese call the Diaoyu Islands.

TOP STORIES

1. Ban on transgender troops to be lifted July 1

USA Today Online, June 24 | Tom Vanden Brook

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon plans to announce the repeal of its ban on transgender service members July 1, a controversial decision that would end nearly a year of internal wrangling among the services on how to allow those troops to serve openly, according to Defense officials.

Top personnel officials plan to meet as early as Monday to finalize details of the plan, and Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work could sign off on it by Wednesday, according to a Defense official familiar with the timetable but who spoke on condition of anonymity because officials were not authorized to speak publicly about it. Final approval would come from Defense Secretary Ash Carter, and the announcement will be on the eve of the Fourth of July weekend.

The plan would direct each branch of the armed services over a one-year period to implement new policies affecting recruiting, housing and uniforms for transgender troops, one official said.

Carter announced last year that the ban, which affects a fraction of the military's 1.3 million active duty members, would be lifted unless a review showed that doing so would have "adverse impact on military effectiveness and readiness."

That phrase raised concerns on Capitol Hill where a key lawmaker questioned whether an "honest and balanced assessment" could be made of the effects on "military readiness, morale and good order and discipline" under Carter's guidelines for the review.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, the Texas Republican who chairs the Armed Services Committee, called on the Pentagon in a letter last July to provide a range of information on the impacts of repealing the ban.

Among the questions Thornberry asked:

"What would be the projected cost of changing the transgender service policy? To what extent would military barracks, ship berths, gym shower facilities, latrines, and other facilities have to be modified to accommodate personnel in various stages of transition and what would be the projected cost of these modifications?" Thornberry wrote.

He also asked about how far the Pentagon would go to provide medical treatment for transgender troops, "including behavioral health treatment, cross-hormone therapy, voice therapy, cosmetic or gender reassignment surgery and other treatments?"

Pentagon officials responded to Thornberry in September, said Eric Pahon, a department spokesman. The main focus of the Pentagon's review of the policy has been on the effect of repeal on the military's readiness to fight, Pahon said. More details about the review's findings are expected to be released soon, he said.

Thornberry was not happy with the timing of the announcement, he said in a statement Friday.

"If reports are correct, I believe Secretary Carter has put the political agenda of a departing administration ahead of the military's readiness crisis," Thornberry said. "The force is exhausted from back to back deployments and spending their home-station time scrambling to get enough equipment and training before they deploy again. My focus is on helping the troops now — to be the most effective, deployable force possible.

"Consistent with that philosophy, when we learned DOD was looking at new policies on the service of transgender individuals, the Committee posed a number of questions to DOD," he said. "In particular, there are readiness challenges that first must be addressed, such as the extent to which such individuals would be medically non-deployable. Almost a year has passed with no answer to our questions from Secretary Carter. Our top priority must be warfighting effectiveness and individual readiness is an essential part of that."

Several issues relating to repeal of the ban have proven to be contentious, according to officials familiar with the review but not authorized to speak publicly about it. One sticking point has been how long transgender service members would have to serve before being eligible for medical treatment to transition to the other gender.

The Pentagon commissioned a RAND Corp. report on transgender troops but has not released it. It estimated that there are fewer than 2,500 transgender service members, 65 of whom would seek medical treatment each year, according to The New York Times.

The military disqualifies transgender troops for medical reasons. The Pentagon has not tracked the number of troops dismissed under the policy.

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2. Carter reassures U.K. counterpart over Brexit

Washington Examiner Online, June 24 | Jamie McIntyre

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter has called British Defense Minister Michael Fallon to reassure his U.K. counterpart that the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Great Britain will not change because of the vote to leave the European Union.

"Secretary Carter emphasized that the United States and the United Kingdom will always enjoy a special relationship, one reflected in our close defense ties which remain a bedrock of U.S. security and foreign policy," spokesman Peter Cook said Friday.

Last month, Lt-Gen Ben Hodges, head of the U.S. Army in Europe, told the BBC he was "worried" the EU could unravel just when it needed to stand up to Russia.

"Anything that undermines the effectiveness of the alliance has an impact on us, and so if the EU begins to become unraveled there can't help but be a knock-on effect for the alliance also," Hodges said in an interview.

But Pentagon officials insisted the vote would have little effect on the strength of the NATO or Britain's participation in the alliance, and that the U.S. is confident that the U.K. would remain a "stalwart ally."

Great Britain is also a major partner in the F-35 joint strike fighter program, and has a commitment to purchase 138 of the next-generation fighter jets. The Pentagon expressed confidence the U.K. vote would have no impact on Britain's participation.

"This is a bilateral arrangement, of course, with the United Kingdom. Has no bearing on their status within the European Union, and so we would expect their participation in the F-35 program to continue," Cook said.

In the phone call, which was initiated by Carter, Fallon said United Kingdom would remain active in global security issues, and committed in particular to continue to work within NATO on efforts to accelerate the lasting defeat of the Islamic State, according to the Pentagon.

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3. Islamic State captures 900 Kurdish civilians in north Syria in three weeks

Associated Press, June 24 | Bassem Mroue

BEIRUT — Islamic State militants abducted about 900 Kurdish civilians in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo over the past three weeks, forcing the captives to build fortifications for the extremists in retaliation for a Kurdish-led assault on a nearby IS stronghold, activists said Friday.

Reports also emerged Friday that at least 26 of those abducted have been killed for refusing to follow IS orders.

The abductions come amid fierce fighting for control of Manbij — a key IS stronghold in Aleppo province — where the extremists are being routed from the town center by the predominantly Kurdish and U.S.-backed Syria Democratic Forces.

Some of the abducted Kurds have been pressganged into digging trenches and shelters for the IS, according to Kurdish media activist Rezan Hiddo, while others have been forced to wear IS uniforms and ordered to fight at the fronts.

On Friday, the mostly Kurdish SDF battled IS militants inside Manbij after having encircling the stronghold in a weeks-long offensive that has been backed by U.S.-coalition air strikes.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported that coalition jets struck targets around the town. The SDF has lost 89 fighters since launching its campaign for Manbij on May 31, according to the Observatory. Also, 463 IS militants have been killed.

The push by the SDF into Manbij has been slow as the U.S.-backed fighters first focused on capturing dozens of villages and farms near the town in the past weeks.

The town lies along the only IS supply line between the Syrian-Turkish border to the north and the IS extremist group's self-styled capital of Raqqa, which lies to the southeast, in the IS-held neighboring province of Raqqa.

If Manbij is captured, it will be the biggest strategic defeat for IS in Syria since July 2015, when the extremist group lost the border town of Tal Abyad.

The U.S. has embedded 300 special forces operators with the SDF. The White House says they are advisers. French special forces operators are also embedded with the group.

SDF spokesman Sherfan Darwish told The Associated Press that the IS militants began abducting Kurdish civilians in retaliation the offensive on Manbij.

"Whenever Daesh is defeated, they retaliate against civilians," Darwish said, using an Arabic acronym for IS, adding that there are whole families among those taken.

The abductions have been taking place mostly in areas under IS control, from the western Manbij countryside to the towns of al-Bab and al-Rai, according to Hiddo. He said the ongoing campaign has prompted families to flee the towns in fear.

The Observatory and Darwish said some of those taken captive have been forced to dig trenches in IS-held areas while others are imprisoned in IS-run detention centers. Darwish said all captured males above the age of 12 were sent against their will to the front lines to help fortify IS positions.

The militants have killed 26 of the captives for resisting detention or refusing orders, according to Hiddo. His report could not be independently confirmed and the Islamic State group made no immediate claim over the abductions or the killings.

Many of the civilians are being held in an IS prison in Qabasin, Hiddo said. Those forced into labor are digging fortifications underneath homes in al-Bab.

"They (IS) are digging a city underneath the town to protect themselves from air strikes," Hiddo added.

The IS has not engaged in any negotiations for the release of the Kurdish civilians, nor asked for any ransom, Hiddo said, speaking from the nearby Kurdish stronghold of Afrin.

The extremist group has a history of mass kidnappings in areas they control in Syria and Iraq and has mostly targeted Christians and Kurds in the past.

The Observatory also said that IS fighters stormed homes in several villages they control near al-Bab, including Arab, Qabaseen and Nairabiyeh, and took with them mostly men.

In 2014, IS abducted nearly 200 Kurdish students near Manbij as they were en route from the Kurdish town of Kobani near the Syrian-Turkish border to the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, the provincial capital, to take their exams. Most were later released.

In February 2015, IS kidnapped more than 200 Christians from northeastern Syria. The Christians were released over a period of a year, after IS collected millions of dollars in ransom.

--Associated Press writer Philip Issa contributed to this report from Beirut

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EUROPE

4. U.K. Vote Sets Off Shockwaves

World leaders grapple with impact of an EU exit by Britain; Cameron steps aside

Wall Street Journal, June 25, Pg. A1 | Stephen Fidler, Valentina Pop and Jenny Gross

The U.K.'s fateful vote to leave the European Union sent convulsions across the region, precipitating an immediate political crisis in Britain and shifting the trajectory of a European project created to bind a continent torn by World War II.

Prime Minister David Cameron, who had led the campaign to stay inside the 28-nation bloc, announced Friday he would stand down, setting off a leadership contest among his Conservatives. "I do not think it would be right for me to try to be the captain that steers our country to its next destination," he said.

Britain's decision, one of the most momentous by a Western country in the past half-century, reverses the course of expansion for the EU. It has grown over decades to include most of Europe, absorbing former dictatorships in Greece, Spain and Portugal, and the countries of the east, formerly under Soviet domination.

The U.K. would be the first member nation to leave, a step some leaders warned beforehand would diminish the global influence of the U.K. and the EU and risk setting in motion the European bloc's eventual disintegration.

Its decision weakens a bloc already strained by years of crises -- from the near-collapse of its peripheral economies to Greece's near-exit from the euro to the million-plus migrants that have poured onto the continent since last year. All have fueled populist discontent with Europe's pro-EU establishment and what are seen as the bloc's distant political institutions.

The vote also raised questions about whether the U.K. itself would split. After a large majority of Scots voted to remain in Thursday's referendum, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said the Scottish National Party would seek to hold a new referendum on secession. Sinn Fein, Northern Ireland's second-largest party, also renewed calls for a vote there on leaving the U.K. and joining the Republic of Ireland.

The reverberations of the British vote swiftly spilled into the American political arena, where they seemed to confirm that an era of unpredictability and populist ferment as illustrated by the anti-establishment presidential campaign of Donald Trump was underway on both sides of the Atlantic.

President Barack Obama, who had warned openly that an exit could bring unpleasant consequences, tried to put the best face on the outcome by stressing the "special relationship" between the U.S. and the U.K. would endure.

But he also acknowledged the vote reflected deep economic anxieties that transcend Britain. "Yesterday's vote speaks to the ongoing changes and challenges that are raised by globalization," Mr. Obama said Friday at an entrepreneurial event in California.

On the continent, political leaders reacted with a mixture of shock, sadness and anger, fretting about the possibility that the vote would provide fuel for burgeoning nationalist parties and tempt other countries to spin off from the bloc.

"It's a bitter day for Europe. We had hoped until the very end that U.K. citizens would decide differently," said German Foreign Minister Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier, visibly downcast as he entered an EU ministers' meeting in Luxembourg.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who said the day marked "a watershed for Europe," reacted cautiously and warned against "fast and simple conclusions from the referendum."

European governments set a series of high-level meetings among the 27 other countries to map out a response, including a meeting of their leaders on the second day of an already-scheduled summit next Tuesday and Wednesday.

There were immediate signs the divorce could be messy. Mr. Cameron and Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London who was a prominent campaigner to leave, both suggested that the U.K. could take its time before starting the talks over a departure.

They want time for the Conservative Party to choose its next leader, who Mr. Cameron said should be in place by October, and settle on what they want out of negotiations.

But many European politicians indicated they wanted the U.K. out as soon as possible. "It is very clear. You're either in or you're out. You can't have the cake and eat it," said Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders who led Friday's meeting of foreign and Europe ministers in Luxembourg.

Mr. Koenders said an "overwhelming majority" of EU governments wanted to start the negotiations as soon as possible, but acknowledged that legally, it was up to the U.K. to trigger the process.

That would open a two-year window to work out myriad issues, from single-market access for U.K. companies to Britain's sharing of EU security databases in the fight against terrorism.

French President Francois Hollande, under pressure from the anti-EU National Front, also took a tough line. "The U.K. will no longer be part of the EU, and the procedures in treaties will be quickly applied," Mr. Hollande said.

With less than a year to go to French presidential elections, opinion polls show National Front leader Marine Le Pen would easily get a larger share of the vote than Mr. Hollande.

Ms. Le Pen said Friday that if she is elected in May 2017 she would start negotiations for France to claw back powers from the EU. Then, like Mr. Cameron, she would hold a referendum on France's membership in the EU. "The U.K. has just initiated a movement that will not stop," she said.

The result of Britain's referendum opens up uncertainty over hundreds of economic and political accords agreed over more than 40 years that have intertwined the U.K. economy with the rest of Europe, renegotiations which will dominate politics on both sides of the English Channel for years.

"The EU institutions are going to be completely clogged up with this deal," said Fabian Zuleeg, chief executive of the European Policy Centre think tank in Brussels.

Governments on the continent have incentives to play tough with the U.K. with the aim of discouraging other countries from following suit. Yet taking too hard a line that raises barriers to trade with the U.K. risks further damaging their own economies.

--Fidler and Pop reported from Brussels; Gross reported from London

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5. Obama Acknowledges Loss but Says 'Special Relationship' Will Continue

New York Times, June 25, Pg. A11 | Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Landler

PALO ALTO, Calif. -- President Obama on Friday sought to assure Britain and the European Union that the United States would not pick sides once the two are divorced. But he acknowledged, somewhat ruefully, that Britain's vote to leave the union, which he had publicly opposed, spoke "to the ongoing changes and challenges raised by globalization."

Mr. Obama's first public reaction to the news from Britain came in a rather incongruous setting: the Global Entrepreneurship Summit at sunny Stanford University, 5,300 miles from London, where the president addressed a young, multicultural, tech-savvy audience that seemed worlds away from an older generation of Britons whose nationalist passions largely drove the vote.

"The world has shrunk," he told the entrepreneurs, adding that they embodied this trend. "It promises to bring extraordinary benefits, but it also has challenges, and it also evokes concerns and fears."

Rather than dwell on the wrenching change to come, Mr. Obama emphasized continuity. "One thing that will not change is the special relationship that exists between our two nations," he said. "That will endure." And, he added, "The E.U. will remain one of our Indispensable partners."

The president said he had spoken with Prime Minister David Cameron, who told him Britain's departure would be orderly, and with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, who will loom even larger as a partner for the United States in a European club that no longer has a Britain as a member.

But Mr. Obama's soothing words did not disguise how personal a setback the vote was for him. In April, while visiting Mr. Cameron in London and celebrating the 90th birthday of Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle, he implored Britons not to vote in favor of leaving. Britain, he warned, risked going "to the back of the queue" in negotiating trade deals with the United States.

The "Brexit" vote runs counter to Mr. Obama's vision of open, interconnected societies, and it illustrates the frustrating cycle of his engagement with the world: "America's first Pacific president," as Mr. Obama has called himself, who tried to pull the United States out of the Middle East, now finds himself, near the end of his presidency, confronting a crisis in Europe fueled in part by the refugees attempting to flee the Middle East.

As a practical matter, the terms of the divorce vote will consume Britain and Europe for at least two years, making both less valuable as trading partners and less reliable as allies in dealing with a dangerous world. It will also deal a blow to Mr. Obama's ambitious European trade deal, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which was already losing momentum on both sides because of growing anti-trade sentiment.

"From the start of the administration, we've wanted to work with them on all the big global challenges," said Philip H. Gordon, a former assistant secretary of European and Eurasian affairs. "If it's in the interest of the U.S. to work with the E.U. on Iran sanctions, on Russia sanctions, and on military interventions in the Middle East, then it's a major setback."

At the same time, Mr. Obama has had an ambivalent relationship with Europe during his presidency. His heavy emphasis on Asia -- a policy dubbed the pivot -- stoked suspicions in Europe that he was moving away from the continent to the faster-growing markets of the East. In his first term, the centerpiece of his Europe policy was an effort to "reset" relations with Russia.

Critics said the tendency to take Europe for granted predated Mr. Obama. "Since 2000, both the Bush and Obama administrations have acted as if Europe as a task had been solved and that we no longer needed to 'tend the garden' as George P. Shultz used to say," said John C. Kornblum, a former American ambassador to Germany, referring to Ronald Reagan's secretary of state. "The Europeans played their part by acting as if they didn't need us."

Even after Mr. Obama worked closely with Europeans on difficult issues like the NATO air campaign in Libya, there was a sense that he looked on the trans-Atlantic alliance with a gimlet eye. In April, he struck a nerve by suggesting that Britain and France had been "free riders" in that operation, leaving the United States to bear most of the military burden.

Some critics suggest Mr. Obama's reluctance to be more militarily involved in Syria had an indirect effect on the British vote because of the flood of refugees the civil war has sent to Europe, destabilizing the continent and firing

up nativist sentiment. Syrian refugees, however, account for far less of Britain's immigrant population than they do in Germany, for example.

Mr. Obama has a chance to demonstrate his support for Europe at a NATO summit in Warsaw next month. But there again, the loss of Britain as a member of the European Union will be felt. Britain has historically been one of NATO's strongest boosters. It has resisted initiatives like a joint European military headquarters because it could compete with NATO. European officials said Germany and France might revive the proposal as a way to reinforce Europe's unity in the wake of the British vote.

Britain's decision to leave Europe just as Mr. Obama was putting on an extravagant celebration of entrepreneurship and engagement in Silicon Valley undercut his message that innovation, open borders and free trade can improve people's lives. It is the same assertion that has also underpinned his efforts to forge a new dynamic in the Middle East.

In his Cairo speech in 2009 promising a "new beginning" in the Middle East, Mr. Obama first proposed to host entrepreneurship summits to explore ways to strengthen relationships between the United States and the Muslim world. The annual conferences proceeded as he envisioned, but the broader strategy has not been as simple to implement.

Mr. Obama acknowledged that much of the upheaval gripping American voters -- an angst that is propelling the campaign of Donald J. Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee -- is driven by fear of technology-driven globalization and anger at job losses prompted by automation. Mr. Trump has exploited such fears, Mr. Obama told National Public Radio in December, calling them "justified, but just misdirected."

On Friday, even as he held a Google-sponsored virtual conference with entrepreneurs in Britain, Iraq, South Korea and Mexico, the president conceded that interconnectivity still makes many people uncomfortable.

"We are better off in a world in which we are trading, and networking, and communicating and sharing ideas," Mr. Obama said before a panel discussion with Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook founder, on Friday.

"But that also means that cultures are colliding," he added, "and sometimes it's disruptive, and people get worried."

--Mark Landler contributed reporting from Washington

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6. Brexit could pose major challenges tied to foreign policy for U.S.

Washington Post, June 25, Pg. A12 | Carol Morello

Britain's decision to leave the European Union could make it more difficult to maintain transatlantic agreement on sanctions on Russia over Ukraine, and distract Britain and the E.U. from other pressing foreign policy issues as they disentangle their ties, analysts said Friday.

On the day after the historic vote known as Brexit, with financial markets plummeting worldwide, foreign policy and national security analysts were trying to predict the implications for the United States in its relations with the E.U and Britain, allies that separately and together have been key partners on a host of global issues, including the war in Syria and the nuclear deal with Iran.

Some adversaries immediately saw chinks in Europe's armor as a result of the vote. Politicians in Moscow predicted it would sap the E.U. of a strong member and ultimately hasten the lifting of sanctions with damaging effects for the United States.

"In my opinion, the most important long-term consequence of all this is that the exit will take Europe away from the anglo-saxons, meaning from the USA," said the Kremlin's small-business ombudsman, Boris Titov, in a Facebook post. "It's not the independence of Britain from Europe, but the independence of Europe from the USA."

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, tweeted as much, writing that Russian President Vladimir "Putin benefits from a weaker Europe. UK vote makes EU weaker. It's just that simple."

When President Obama visited London in April, he said Britain's membership in the E.U. "magnifies" its influence and warned they would have to go to "the back of the queue" for future trade deals if they left. He sounded more conciliatory on Friday, saying the "special relationship" between the two countries would endure.

But analysts said the British vote could signal a more inward-looking Europe as it copes with the decision.

"One of the strongest cards we have to play against Putin is transatlantic unity," said Julianne Smith, a national security analyst with the Center for a New American Security. "This creates two years of navel gazing and internal debate about where do we go from here and Britain's place in Europe. We lose our ability to stand together."

The loss of a British voice within the E.U. means Washington will have one fewer like-minded friend in diplomatic issues involving Europeans.

"It's still an important partner, one of the most militarily capable and diplomatically accomplished partners there is," said Karen Donfried, president of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "To not have the E.U. benefit from the role Britain plays is a net negative."

But some analysts say the concerns are being overblown. Britain's military will continue to operate within NATO, which is separate from the E.U.

Britain is providing troops and equipment to coalitions that are waging military operations in Iraq, Yemen and Syria. Michael O'Hanlon, a national security analyst with the Brookings Institution, said that while Britain's contribution is larger than its size would warrant, it is still no more than 10 to 15 percent of what the United States commits.

"The stakes are important, but they're not astronomically big to begin with," he said.

"It may have repercussions down the road," he said of Britain's break from the E.U. "Maybe its military will become a little smaller. But we need to take a chill pill on worries about the downsides of withdrawal."

Indeed, some argue that Britain's exit from the E.U. could free London to act more forcefully and, for instance, impose harsher sanctions against Russia.

"A sovereign Britain, one able to act completely independently of the supranational European Union, will be a more powerful force on the international stage than it is now," said Nile Gardiner, a onetime aide to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who now heads the Heritage Foundation's Center for Freedom that is named after her. "I think that far from welcoming Brexit, Putin fears it."

The biggest unknown is whether the British move will have a cascading effect.

"If three or four other countries do this as a copycat, then we have a more interesting problem," said Barry Pavel, director of the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. "They're opting out of an economic union, and I don't think it's good, but it's not as catastrophic as people are playing out - yet. We have to wait and see what happens."

Anti-E.U. parties in several European countries have said they plan to agitate for a referendum as Britain did. Marian L. Tupy, who analyzes the effects of globalization at the Cato Institute's Center on Global Liberty and Prosperity, called the British vote "the beginning of the end for the European Union."

"With every electoral cycle, pro-European parties are losing support and parties the E.U. calls dismissively 'populist' are increasing in popularity," he said. "It was only a matter of time before an E.U. country had either elected an anti-European government or held a referendum on it. The British were the first."

Tupy, who supports the breakaway as an expression of freedom, considers the security aspects negligible. The United States shares its intelligence more judiciously with other countries on the European continent than it does with Britain, he said.

But Smith of the Center for a New American Security said intelligence sharing and cooperation inevitably will be weakened in a divided Europe.

"Whether it's counterterrorism or a resurgent Russia or challenges in the Middle East, our ability to put forward common strategies is in question in a very distressed Europe," she said. "This is a crushing blow."

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7. US-UK security officials cement intelligence partnership after 'leave' vote

Brexit will not affect planned project as US will still consolidate its analysis complex within a Royal Air Force hub for intelligence on security threats

The Guardian Online (UK), June 24 | Spencer Ackerman

Brexit or not, a symbol of the durability of the US-UK security relationship is found on a Royal Air Force base set in the green rolling hills of the home counties around 70 miles north-west of London.

The US is moving forward with consolidating its transatlantic intelligence analysis operations within a planned Joint Intelligence Analysis Complex at RAF Croughton, a priority for the US military's European Command (Eucom), which is the US's anchor in Nato. An intended hub for intelligence on security threats through the US, UK and Nato, the project is critical for "seamless intelligence operations", according to former Nato commander and Eucom chief General Philip Breedlove.

The United States' European Command got its way despite legislative opposition in the US. Six chairmen of House of Representatives committees questioned the location of the center over ostensibly cheaper alternatives in places such as the Azores or elsewhere in Europe. In response, the Pentagon's inspector general opened an inquiry on 20 May.

But placing the intelligence-analysis complex in the UK reflected a desire among US military and intelligence officials to cement critical security operations within the Special Relationship. To them – even if a majority of UK voters do not seem to agree – Britain remains a vital bridge to Europe, where the US watches with increasing alarm with the spread of the Islamic State on the continent and a resurgent Russia on Nato's eastern frontier.

“The RAF Croughton site also ensures continuation of the strong Eucom [US European Command]-UK intelligence relationships [through] our sponsorship of the co-located Nato intelligence fusion center,” Breedlove told Congress in February ahead of stepping down in May, referring to an intelligence sharing facility.

And in an echo of what US intelligence and security officials are currently signaling after waking up to a transformed map of Europe, Breedlove continued: “The maintenance of our intelligence relationships and the intelligence sharing we maintain with the UK and Nato remains vital to Eucom's capability to conduct military operations from and within Europe.”

The prevailing feeling among the world's governments, international institutions and financial markets after Thursday's epochal vote for the UK to leave the European Union is uncertainty. But within the US's security apparatus, the desired sentiment is continuity in its ties to both Britain and Europe.

“The partnership between the United States and the United Kingdom on counterterrorism and other national security issues remains strong and will continue unabated,” said Timothy Barrett, a spokesman for the US office of the director of national intelligence.

US intelligence officials have recently expressed frustration over the relative immaturity of EU intelligence-sharing channels, a circumstance they say contributed to the Isis terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris. US intelligence officials' most significant foreign relationship deeply involves the UK, through the Five Eyes surveillance partnership of Anglophone countries, including Canada, Australia and New Zealand. On the continent, they work primarily through bilateral ties to close European allies like Germany. None of those ties are likely to be affected by Brexit.

“At least for the foreseeable future, there will be no change” in the US-UK security relationship, said Richard Morningstar, a former US ambassador to the EU.

Sir Peter Westmacott, the former UK ambassador to Washington, considered the strength of transatlantic security ties unaffected by Brexit on issues ranging from the UK's commitment to Nato to levels of British defense spending, which remains the highest of any of the US's Nato allies.

“The way our agencies and armed services work closely together, I see that as unaffected by this,” Westmacott said on a conference call with reporters.

Security establishments prioritize predictability and continuity. In the US as in the UK, they see themselves as bulwarks against fluctuations in public mood. It is a position that often engenders mistrust among left and right,

which can see intelligence and military elites as obstacles to their ideological projects – particularly those backed by democratic mandates.

Nato's Jens Stoltenberg, the transatlantic alliance's top civilian, attempted to signal such continuity after the Brexit vote. Though the alliance is formally untouched by Brexit, Stoltenberg positioned Nato as an enduring bridge between the US, Britain and Europe – usually something the alliance does in response to US politicians, like Donald Trump, who question its value.

“The UK will remain a strong and committed Nato ally, and will continue to play its leading role in our Alliance,” Stoltenberg said Thursday, calling Nato “more important than ever as a platform for cooperation among European Allies, and between Europe and North America” and an “essential pillar of stability in a turbulent world.”

But in the US, longer-term and second-order questions for a post-Brexit Britain remain.

Should Scotland, which voted to remain in Europe, seek a new referendum on independence – as nationalist first minister Nicola Sturgeon has signalled it might do – both Scotland and England will face massive questions about the future of the Royal Navy and the British nuclear arsenal, both of which have major implications for transatlantic and global security.

UK defense chief Michael Fallon held the British contribution to the Afghanistan war steady through 2016 at 450 troops, primarily for training the Afghan military. But it is difficult to predict what the 2017 troop footprint will look like after the political fallout resulting from David Cameron's resignation.

An economic downturn following Brexit also calls into question the UK's ability to purchase big-ticket US defense items like the F-35 warplane, as well as its ability to field and maintain the new aircraft carriers Queen Elizabeth and the Prince of Wales off of which the planes will fly.

Westmacott, who likened Brexit to an earthquake, said he hoped the process of transition to a post-EU Britain would “for the time being, keep issues of defense, security, counterterrorism” out of the political debate.

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8. Britain commits to European security, despite Brexit – NATO chief

Reuters, June 24 | Robin Emmott

BRUSSELS -- NATO will experience a more fragmented, uncertain Europe with Britain outside the EU, the alliance's chief warned on Friday, but London had given assurances that it remains committed to upholding Western stability.

With failing states on Europe's frontiers and a more aggressive Russia, NATO and the European Union are seeking to work more closely to shore up collective security. Britain, one of Europe's biggest military powers, was meant to act as bridge between the EU and the U.S.-led alliance.

"It is a more unpredictable situation than before the UK decided to leave. I think that's quite obvious," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said at alliance headquarters in Brussels. "I am concerned about a more fragmented Europe," he told a small group of reporters.

But Stoltenberg said British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon reassured him by telephone on Friday that Britain would not jeopardize joint EU-NATO efforts to counter potential Russian cyber attacks or naval operations in the Mediterranean, which are helping to stem an influx of migrants into Europe.

Britain will also stick to its promise to help lead the new multinational NATO force in Europe to deter Russia, Stoltenberg said. He added that even though Britons voted on Thursday to leave the EU, NATO and the European Union will still sign a cooperation pact at the alliance's Warsaw summit in July.

Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian premier whose country has twice voted against EU membership, said he would discuss the issue with EU leaders at a summit in Brussels on Tuesday that British Prime Minister David Cameron is to attend.

He said the experience of Norway showed that cooperation between the EU and NATO remains possible. That is despite Turkey, which is a member of NATO but not of the EU, and blocks the sharing of alliance intelligence with the European Union.

"Over the past 13 months, we have been able to reach more arrangements with the European Union than over the past 13 years," Stoltenberg said. "We have now a momentum in NATO-EU cooperation and I expect that to continue."

While plans are still being agreed before the Warsaw meeting, the EU-NATO tie-up could mean that taxpayers, currently footing the bill of separate military planning in both EU and NATO, finance less duplication towards common goals.

NATO and the EU say their operations in the Aegean Sea, launched in February, shows what they can do together. NATO ships have worked with EU border protection agency Frontex to stop migrants risking their lives to reach Greek islands in flimsy boats that set off from the Turkish coast.

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9. Despite Russia's Somber Facade, Glimpses of Joy Over E.U. Referendum

New York Times Online, June 24 | Ivan Nechepurenko and Neil MacFarquhar

MOSCOW -- President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia received the geopolitical equivalent of manna from heaven on Friday when British voters opted to leave the European Union, speeding his long-term goal of weakening the most powerful alliance confronting the Kremlin as it seeks to rebuild its superpower muscles.

Officially, Moscow presented a somber facade, repeating its prevote stance that the British referendum was of little direct concern and that any consequences could be taken in stride.

"This will certainly have consequences for Britain, for Europe and for us," Mr. Putin told reporters at an Asian security conference in Uzbekistan. "The consequences will be global, they are inevitable; they will be both positive and negative."

He added that only time could tell if the outcome was more positive or negative. "The markets will certainly decline, they have already declined," he said, "but everything will be certainly restored."

From other precincts, however, the reactions were far less restrained.

“We must express solidarity with the British people, with their right decision to exit the European Union,” Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy, the populist politician whose statements often reflect the national mood, said in a speech in Parliament. “They did a great deed!”

One commentator on Facebook suggested that Britain should be renamed the “Londonskaya Narodnaya Respublika,” or London People’s Republic. That echoed the names of the two breakaway regions of southeastern Ukraine that Russia has supported militarily in their fight against the central government in Kiev.

The Russian government, which has worked assiduously to undermine European solidarity in recent years, has any number of reasons to celebrate, analysts said.

“The Kremlin is interested in any kind of disagreement, any kind of trouble in the E.U. which makes it weaker,” said Nikolay V. Petrov, a professor of political science at the National Research University’s Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

For starters, he noted, the vote removes Britain as an influential voice in European efforts to isolate and punish Russia over its annexation of Crimea and role in destabilizing Ukraine. Second, it helps Mr. Putin in his preferred method of dealing with strong countries on a one-to-one basis rather than as blocs. Third, it can be exploited at home as an example of how a lack of unity can lead to weakness.

“It can be used domestically to demonstrate that we are strong and everybody around us is not that strong,” Mr. Petrov said. As for any negative economic consequences, he added, “Those are not the highest priority — geopolitically and strategically, the Kremlin thinks it will benefit.”

While France and Germany, not Britain, led the drive to impose sanctions on Russia for the annexation of Crimea and the Ukraine crisis, there was some hope that those issues would fade somewhat now that Europe confronts monumental internal problems.

“I don’t think the European Union will now have time to think about Ukraine or about sanctions,” said Andrei Klimov, the deputy chairman of the international affairs committee of the upper house of Parliament.

An unidentified Foreign Ministry spokesman told Interfax that Russia expected Britain’s vigorous support for sanctions to continue unchanged, although some analysts said they expected that Europe without the British voice might not be so adamant.

“Without Britain, there won’t be anybody in the E.U. to defend sanctions against us so zealously,” Sergei S. Sobyenin, the mayor of Moscow, wrote on Twitter.

Mr. Putin, however, said on Friday that he doubted the result would have an impact on European Union sanctions.

The Russian president has been trying to build close relations with those countries that have been less adamant about maintaining sanctions, including France, Greece, Hungary and Italy. Russia has given open financial support to the far-right National Front party in France, whose leader, Marie Le Pen, called for a similar exit referendum there.

The Kremlin is also believed to be following the Soviet tradition of underwriting other political groups who seek to weaken the European Union. Many Russian officials and commentators said they expected similar referendums to be held across the Continent.

“Don’t be surprised if, instead of terms for individual countries like ‘Grexit’ or ‘Brexit,’ there will soon be a universal one, ‘Whoexit,’ ” Maria Zakharova, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, wrote on her Facebook page.

Mr. Putin broke his silence about the British campaign last week to deny accusations that the Kremlin was trying to sway the outcome.

“It is unpleasant to link Russia to every problem, even those with which we have no link, nor to make Russia into a kind of boogeyman,” he said. “I should say that this is absolutely none of our business. This is the choice of the British people.”

The Russian leader is not a fan of unpredictable votes, and he expressed puzzlement about why the British prime minister, David Cameron, decided to hold the referendum in the first place.

“Why did he initiate this referendum, why did he do it?” Mr. Putin asked. “To intimidate Europe, or to threaten someone? What is the point of this if he himself opposes the idea?”

Ultimately, he said, the decision to call the referendum reflected “overconfidence” on the part of Britain’s leadership, and he denied that Russia had tried to influence the outcome.

Mr. Putin said the results reflected public dissatisfaction with issues like security, immigration and subsidizing weaker economies, as well as excessive control from Brussels, which he compared unfavorably to the old Soviet Union. “People want to be more independent,” he said.

Also on Friday, Mr. Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry S. Peskov, told Russian news outlets that he hoped a Britain outside the European Union would understand “the need to build good relations” with Russia.

Despite Russia officially not taking a position on the British vote, state-run news reports by the English-language service of RT television and the Sputnik news agency openly supported a British exit from the bloc.

State-run news outlets give significant attention to issues that are considered central to the euroskeptic movement, particularly the migrant crisis, and they paint Europe as a continent in crisis. An analysis of Sputnik’s English-language coverage by Ben Nimmo, a senior fellow at the Britain-based Institute for Statecraft, found a significant bias toward the exit campaign.

“Across the spectrum of analytical pieces, commentaries and blogs, Sputnik’s writers used consistently anti-E.U. and anti-‘Remain’ language,” the report said.

After the vote, Margarita S. Simonyan, the editor in chief of both RT and Rossiya Segodnya, Sputnik’s parent company, joined in rejoicing. “Fun times begin,” she posted on Twitter, “#Where is my popcorn.”

Perhaps the only thing tempering the general euphoria were a few sobering notes on the economic impact.

Aleksei Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies said that Russia would feel the economic effects of Britain's vote. "While this is a political victory, on the economic side of things, Russia will suffer," he said in an interview. "Oil will fall, the markets will be turbulent. Russia won emotionally, but lost economically."

Mr. Makarkin said many Russians saw in the vote the possibility that the European Union might crumble, much the way the Soviet Union fell apart 25 years ago.

"The overall mood in Russia can be described as malicious joy," he said. "A few liberals regret that Britain voted to leave, but in general there is some sort of relief that they have their problems, too, they are collapsing, too."

--Ivan Nechepurenko reported from Moscow, and Neil MacFarquhar from Stockholm. Alexandra Odynova and Lincoln Pigman contributed reporting from Moscow

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IRAQ/SYRIA

10. US-backed Syria alliance pushes into Islamic State border hub

Agence France-Presse, June 25 | Maya Gebeily

BEIRUT -- US-backed Syrian fighters pushed further into the Islamic State group stronghold of Manbij on Saturday, seizing a key road junction and grain silos overlooking the city, a monitoring group said.

The city lies close to the border with Turkey and is a key staging post on the jihadists' supply line to areas under its control in eastern Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

The US-backed Kurdish and Arab forces, which have thrust into Manbij after driving across the Euphrates River from the east, have encircled the city and are now closing in with the support of US-led coalition air strikes.

The Syrian Democratic Forces overran the Mills Roundabout in the south of the city on Saturday after capturing nearby grain silos overnight, taking them significantly closer to the city centre, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"The grain silos overlook more than half of Manbij. SDF fighters can climb to the top and monitor the city," said Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman.

The Raqa Revolutionaries Brigades -- one of the Arab components of the Kurdish-dominated alliance -- confirmed that SDF forces had seized the silos and pushed into the city.

Captured by IS in 2014, Manbij has served as a key transit point for foreign fighters and funds, as well as a trafficking hub for oil, antiquities and other plundered goods.

Its loss would deprive the jihadists of vital revenues and mark the greatest victory so far for the Kurdish-led alliance which has already sealed most of the Turkish border.

Some 200 US and other coalition advisers are supporting the offensive launched at the end of last month.

IS has thrown large numbers of fighters into the battle, losing 463 since May 31, according to the Observatory. The SDF has lost at least 89.

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11. Islamic State snipers, car bombs await US-backed fighters in Syria's Manbij

Agence France-Presse, June 24 | Delil Souleiman

MANBIJ -- As a knot of US-backed Syrian fighters advanced gingerly into the Islamic State group bastion of Manbij, the crack of a jihadist sniper round forced them to take cover behind a bullet-riddled wall.

One crouching fighter identified the source and shouted directions into a walkie-talkie. Immediately, his colleagues fired a barrage of bullets at the shooter from behind the wall.

Backed by US-led coalition warplanes, the Syrian Democratic Forces -- an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters -- broke into western districts of Manbij on Thursday.

A unit of SDF fighters piled into a camouflaged, armoured vehicle they nicknamed Scorpion and drove past a blue English-language sign at city limits announcing: "Welcome to Manbij".

Nearby, a large stone plaque erected by IS after its capture of the city in 2014 promised residents: "In the land of the Islamic State, you, your money, your religion and your honour are safe."

Accompanied by a team of AFP journalists who were given exclusive access, the SDF fighters rolled slowly through the city's western districts, clearing out the last IS snipers before attempting to push further towards the centre.

Blown-out apartment blocks stood empty, as thousands of civilians had already fled.

Wrecked cars blocked off sidestreets, probably booby-traps planted by the jihadists to slow down the SDF's advance.

Several bodies lay abandoned on the street, unidentifiable as they began to decompose in the summer heat.

As dusk began to fall, SDF commanders ordered AFP's journalists to pull back beyond city limits in anticipation of an IS counter-attack.

SDF forces began their drive on Manbij on May 31, crossing the Euphrates River from the east and encircling the city less than two weeks later.

At least 200 US special operations forces, as well as French special forces, are supporting the operation in an advisory capacity.

On the western edge of the city, SDF fighter Mervan Rojava stood outside an apartment block that had been partly destroyed by an IS car bomb.

"The first phase -- surrounding Manbij -- is over, and now we are gradually entering the city itself," he told AFP.

The lanky, bearded fighter wears a green bandana emblazoned with a reddish-pink floral pattern.

"There are fierce street battles in western neighbourhoods between our forces and Daesh," he said, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

In a small village less than a kilometre (mile) away, SDF field commanders met in a damaged building to plan their next steps.

Laying out a map of the city, they identified IS positions inside Manbij and prepared to send the coordinates to coalition warplanes circling above.

One SDF fighter in the meeting told AFP that IS had planted car bombs across the city.

"They also dug many tunnels to avoid the coalition air strikes," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Air support from coalition warplanes has been crucial to the SDF advance.

According to CENTCOM, the coalition has carried out at least 230 strikes since the offensive began last month.

SDF field commander Ali Kobane said the growing number of car bombs driven by suicide attackers showed the jihadists' desperation.

"Daesh is collapsing. This is why it's resorting to using car bombs, but our forces are patient," Kobane said, wrapping a checkered black-and-white scarf gently around his neck.

"Even if Daesh has prepared a huge number of car bombs, it will be to no avail," he said.

"Whenever we see a car bomb coming our way, we're happy -- it means Daesh is crumbling."

Founded in October, the Kurdish-dominated SDF have seized territory from IS across swathes of northern and northeastern Syria.

Capturing Manbij, a key staging post on IS's supply route from Turkey, would be their most significant victory yet.

In the nearby village of Um al-Safa, dozens of residents displaced from the city are living in tents, awaiting an SDF victory so they can return home.

A small child ran through the streets, waving a flyer that had been dropped by coalition warplanes hours earlier.

"The will of the Syrian people will break the shackles of terrorism," it said.

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12. Fight for Aleppo 'greatest battle' in Syria – Hezbollah chief

Agence France-Presse, June 24 | Rouba El Husseini

BEIRUT -- The head of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement said Friday that the offensive on the city of Aleppo was the "greatest battle" in Syria, pledging to dispatch more fighters to support Syrian regime forces.

In remarks broadcast on the Shiite group's Al-Manar television, Hassan Nasrallah said his party would "increase our presence in Aleppo... because the real, strategic, greatest battle is in Aleppo and the surrounding area."

He spoke at a commemoration event for Mustafa Badreddine, a Hezbollah commander killed in an explosion on May 12 near Damascus international airport.

Hezbollah has intervened in Syria's complex war on behalf of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and has dispatched thousands of fighters to Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs provinces, among others.

Aleppo city -- once Syria's economic hub -- in particular has seen an uptick in violence over the past two months between government forces in the west and rebel groups in the east.

Regime fighters, backed by Hezbollah and government and Russian warplanes, are seeking to close off the last rebel route out of the city.

"We are facing a new wave, or a new phase, of military operations in Syria that will be fought in the north, specifically in the area of Aleppo," Nasrallah said.

He announced that 26 Hezbollah fighters had been killed in the offensive this month, a rare admission of casualties for the group.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the war-torn country and tallies casualties, at least 25 Hezbollah fighters have been killed in fighting south of Aleppo city.

"Fighting in defence of Aleppo is in defence of the rest of Syria, of Damascus. It's in defence of Lebanon and Iraq and Jordan," Nasrallah said via video-link.

"This is why it is our duty to be in Aleppo -- and we were, and we will stay in Aleppo."

More than 280,000 people have been killed since Syria's war erupted in 2011, and millions have been forced to flee their homes.

International efforts to reach a political solution to the war have faltered and a ceasefire brokered by the US and Russia has all but collapsed.

In Aleppo, several temporary freezes on fighting have been announced in an attempt to bolster the broader truce but violence has steadily risen.

Nasrallah accused the United States of securing the truce in Aleppo to give rebels a change to re-arm.

"Who benefitted from this truce? Those who brought thousands of fighters, artillery, ammunition, to revive their offensive (on Aleppo)," he said.

13. Fallujah's Forever War

The battle for the Islamic State stronghold still rages, and civilians are bearing the brunt of the horrors of war

ForeignPolicy.com (Dispatch), June 24 | Jane Arraf

FALLUJAH, Iraq – Khalil Mahmoud left Fallujah in the back of an ambulance after burying his daughters in the garden of the deserted city hospital.

“We tried to leave, but when we reached the market a rocket landed on us,” he tells me, his voice still edged with panic as he crouched next to his wounded 10-year-old son. “My wife and three daughters were blown apart.”

Mahmoud took their bodies to the Fallujah hospital after the attack on Thursday. But Islamic State staff had fled, and the hospital and the morgue were deserted. So he buried two of his daughters in the garden and took his wounded son home.

He starts to sob as he tells the story, covering his face with the sleeve of a grimy white robe. His son, burns visible on his face, is wrapped in a faded floral-print sheet and lies on a stretcher nearby. Traumatized women from Mahmoud's extended family are crowded into the back of the ambulance.

“After that we couldn't leave,” Mahmoud says, explaining they stayed in the city to care for the wounded boy as Iraqi forces moved in against the Islamic State.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, desperate for a victory, declared last week that Fallujah had been liberated. Iraqi commanders said they were just clearing remaining pockets of Islamic State fighters. But U.S. military officials said the battle for the iconic Islamic State stronghold is far from over, and that only roughly one-third of the city had been recaptured from the jihadist group.

Inside Fallujah, it's clear the clashes are continuing. Black smoke rose from airstrikes in the north of the city over the weekend, and the rattle of heavy machine gun fire and the thud of mortars echoed from adjoining neighborhoods.

For civilians like Mahmoud, urged by Iraqi forces to leave, there were no good choices. Tens of thousands of civilians have managed to flee unharmed, but now face another struggle for survival in makeshift desert camps without enough water or even toilets and where health care workers say they are treating over 1,000 undernourished people per day.

In the countryside near Fallujah, in the steel and concrete skeleton of an abandoned construction site littered with debris from Islamic State suicide truck bombs, Iraqi Special Forces commander Abdul Wahab al-Saadi sits at a plastic table directing the fight with an iPad and a radio.

He approves a U.S. Hellfire missile strike on four Islamic State fighters his men have sighted behind the Fallujah hospital. A young U.S.-trained Iraqi colonel reads back grid coordinates to his Australian counterpart on another radio.

“The plane hit three, and a fourth is wounded,” Saadi radios to his unit commander minutes later. “If you can deal with the fourth yourself, even better.”

Saadi, a three-star general dressed in a black T-shirt, black trousers, and sneakers, has the air of nonchalant confidence that comes with 25 years of Special Forces experience dating back to Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

In the U.S.-led battle for Fallujah in November 2004, he served as operations officer in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense while the U.S. Marines and Army battled al Qaeda in the fiercest urban fighting by the U.S. military since the Vietnam War. The city was almost destroyed in the process. Fifty-four American troops were killed and more than 400 wounded in some of the worst U.S. losses of the conflict.

Twelve years later, the U.S. military has played a supporting role in the war against a new incarnation of al Qaeda in Iraq, launching airstrikes and trying to coordinate with their Iraqi partners on the ground while steering clear of Iraqi Shiite militias backed by Iran.

Saadi says they have learned a lot from cooperation with U.S. forces about urban fighting and wouldn’t have made it as far as they did without the airstrikes.

After the Iraqi government unexpectedly launched the Fallujah battle in May, it took five weeks to fight into the center of the city. Retaking the provincial capital of Ramadi this year took 18 months and left the city heavily damaged. Saadi is proud his forces have managed to accomplish their missions in Fallujah and Tikrit, where he says Special Forces fought much tougher fights last year, without destroying the cities.

“I have four priorities,” he says. “The first is to keep civilians safe, the second is to keep my men safe, the third is to destroy ISIS, and the fourth is to safeguard the infrastructure.”

That is not to suggest the city, and its residents, hasn’t suffered. Dozens of civilians were killed trying to flee the Islamic State – either drowning in the Euphrates River as they tried to evade Islamic State checkpoints or in artillery attacks after the Islamic State allowed them to leave. There has been no government-provided electricity or running water in the city since the Islamic State took control. And as Iraqi security forces began to surround Fallujah this year, the jihadist group began stockpiling food for its own fighters, leaving thousands of people living on dates meant as animal feed.

Security officials believe it will be months before civilians are allowed to return.

“Most of the people left Fallujah in 2014 or 2015, but there were some stupid families who stayed here and came under ISIS control,” says Abdul Aziz Faisal Hameed, a colonel in the emergency police force now in charge of the Tamim-Nazal neighborhood.

In fact at least 80,000 people stayed in Fallujah, and almost all of them are now under suspicion by security forces of supporting the Islamic State. As the families have escaped the city, Iraqi security forces have separated the men and older boys from their families, taking them away for screening. They spend days in an overcrowded warehouse with little food or water, where security forces lack the computers necessary to verify their identities.

Planning had been underway for an assault on Mosul later this year, but Iraqi and Western officials say Abadi switched gears abruptly after a series of car bombs in Baghdad believed to have originated in Fallujah, a 40-minute drive away.

Iraqi commanders say once they broke through the outer belt of Islamic State sand berms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombers, there was relatively little resistance. They're holding out hope that the areas of the city that were still populated under the Islamic State will be free from the explosive booby traps for which the jihadist group is known.

"If you're trying to run a city with 50,000 citizens inside, you can't litter the whole thing with IEDs or all your citizens get blown up and then nobody wants to live in the caliphate anymore," says Col. Christopher Garver, a U.S. military spokesman, who described the announcement of liberation as "slightly premature."

"We are still conducting strikes in support of the fight," he says. "It will take days to weeks to make sure it's fully cleared and a while before people can come back in again."

Months before the Islamic State rolled into the northern city of Mosul two years ago, the group took root in Fallujah – a deeply tribal city that had seethed under U.S. occupation and chafed under Iraqi government neglect.

The Islamic State, like al Qaeda before it, fed on the anger of a Sunni population that believes it has been persecuted by a Shiite-dominated government and security forces. The fight against the Islamic State has been complicated by the participation of Iranian-backed Shiite militias fighting under the nominal control of the Iraqi government. The Iraqi government has told Shiite paramilitary groups to stay out of Fallujah, a purely Sunni city.

But it hasn't prevented them from operating on the outskirts. At the beginning of the current assault on Fallujah, as its remaining residents began to flee, Shiite militia fighters set up their own checkpoints outside the city. The men they intercepted were then taken away and beaten or tortured, according to human rights groups.

While several thousand Sunni tribal fighters were recruited for the assault on Fallujah, the Iraqi government has delayed providing them with arms. As a result, they have not been involved in the main fight, but are intended to help secure the city once the neighborhoods are cleared.

Whether Sunni fighters and police can establish themselves as a force trusted by both Fallujah residents and the Iraqi government will do much to determine the Iraqi government's success in holding the city. But wresting back Fallujah from Islamic State control is only the beginning of a new era of inclusion promised by an Iraqi government — one that it has so far failed to deliver.

"We have a strategy to win people's hearts and minds, so the government has to provide security and services for the families who live here," says Special Forces Maj. Rajji al-Husseiny, in a house in Fallujah taken back from the Islamic State. "If we don't win over the people, IS will come back and brainwash them again."

Amid the plush sofas in the large salon, documents with the Islamic State seal detail the make and model of guns and other weapons that were apparently kept in the house.

Husseiny says they are grateful to the Americans and Australians, who he says taught them how to raid buildings and called in airstrikes at one point, when he and his men were trapped by fighting in Ramadi.

“Without them, we wouldn’t have been able to get to Fallujah,” he says.

Many of the Special Forces fighters are Shiite and deeply religious. But there seems less these days of the obvious sectarianism that has characterized other elements of the Iraqi Army and federal police.

Cpl. Wissam Karim, the driver for a colonel from Mosul, has tied a green cloth from the Shiite shrines where the rearview mirror of his battered Humvee should be. The mirror was blown out last week in a mortar attack. Two of the windows have been shattered by anti-aircraft bullets.

“The blessing of the imams is everything to me,” says Karim, referring to the successors of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly revered by Shiites. Karim, 29, will still be at the front when his second child is born over the next few days.

Hameed, who is a Sunni from Fallujah, holds a special contempt for the Sunni politicians and protest leaders who siphoned off money and have not been seen in Anbar for almost two years.

“They are in Amman, wearing suits and living in hotels,” he says. “Anbar was the richest region in Iraq. Now it’s gone to less than nothing because of its own people. From now on we will not respect politicians, or tribal leaders, or imams.”

Many here share Hameed’s anger. For most of them, the battle has become deeply personal: In 2005, while Hameed was with the police, he says al Qaeda came to his house and attacked and injured his wife and son. They blew up his home and his brother’s homes. He knew the men.

“I killed some of them,” he says, when asked what happened to them. “It was in battle in 2007.”

“You see all these people?” he asks, pointing to almost a dozen Fallujah policemen standing behind him. “All of them lost someone – if they didn’t kill their father, they killed their brother. If they didn’t lose relatives or friends they blew up their houses.... We have all suffered from them. Either they die here,” he says, referring to the Islamic State, “or we die.”

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MIDEAST

14. Turkey Boosts Military Powers in Fight Against Kurdish Militants

Human rights groups say new law gives armed forces right to act with impunity in offensive

Wall Street Journal Online, June 24 | Emre Peker

ISTANBUL -- Turkey’s parliament has made it harder to prosecute soldiers for alleged human rights abuses committed during counterterrorism operations, a move that strengthens the government’s hand in its fight against Kurdish insurgents.

A law passed late Thursday gave expanded powers to the armed forces in a campaign launched in southeastern Turkey last July after the collapse of a two-year cease fire. Hundreds of civilians, police officers, soldiers and Kurdish militants have been killed in some of the deadliest fighting of a 32-year-old conflict.

The measure is a sign of the military's re-emergence as a central player in national security decisions under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had moved during the previous decade to curb its influence following allegations of coup plotting against him.

"This law is an Eid gift for our brave security forces who are courageously fighting terrorists in the region," Defense Minister Fikri Isik told parliament, referring to the religious holiday early next month marking the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting. "It is a very important law that will boost their morale and motivation."

Critics of the measure said it allows the military to act with impunity in an offensive that has destroyed parts of cities with artillery and tank fire.

Prosecutors investigating complaints of abuse in counterterrorism operations will now be required to seek the prime minister's approval before filing charges against any top general. The defense or interior ministries would have to authorize any charges against lower-ranking military personnel.

Officers and soldiers who end up being charged would go to trial in military courts, under a provision of the law that reduces the jurisdiction of civilian courts.

The law applies retroactively to military operations conducted over the past year. It also allows military commanders, under some conditions, to issue search warrants on their own rather than seek a judge's prior approval.

Emma Sinclair-Webb, Turkey researcher for Human Rights Watch, said prosecutors were already reluctant to pursue allegations of abuse by the military in its campaign against the insurgents. She said numerous allegations had been brought to the attention of authorities since September but that there had been no information about how they were resolved.

Parliament's action "puts into law what was already in practice," she said. "The fact that there is no willingness to investigate the soldiers is very alarming and shows a very cavalier disregard for international law and Turkey's own laws."

The law also drew criticism from European officials, who already were demanding that Turkey change sweeping antiterrorism laws used against academics, journalists, Kurdish members of parliament, and other critics of the government.

"People's feeling of injustice will grow stronger" because of the law, Kati Piri of the Netherlands, the European Parliament lawmaker who monitors Turkey, wrote on her Twitter account. "Impunity prevails."

A Turkish official said the legislation is being unfairly criticized "and it most certainly doesn't curb civilian oversight of military actions."

Officials say the military is confronting an insurgency that moved from mountainous rural areas into cities during the cease-fire. The Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has led the armed campaign for Kurdish autonomy in

the southeastern provinces since 1984, is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S. and its other North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies.

The conflict has cost more than 40,000 lives. Since the fighting resumed last summer, at least 281 civilians, 525 members of Turkish security forces, and 553 Kurdish militants have been killed, according to the International Crisis Group, which tracks conflicts worldwide. Turkey's state-run news agency said six soldiers were killed in two attacks Friday. Turkish officials have put the death toll for Kurdish fighters in thousands.

Some Kurdish lawmakers and human rights organizations have accused the state of war crimes, charging that the military carried out indiscriminate attacks that engulfed civilians.

Turkish officials have denied the allegations, and accused Kurdish lawmakers of providing support for terrorists.

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AFRICA

15. Libyan forces clash with militants in Sirte, 14 dead – official

Reuters, June 24 | Ahmed Elumami

TRIPOLI -- Libyan forces fighting Islamic State in its stronghold of Sirte said on Friday that four of their troops and 10 militants were killed in heavy clashes around the port area as militants tried to flee the city under siege.

Brigades from the nearby city of Misrata, allied with the country's U.N.-backed government of national unity, launched a campaign to retake Sirte last month. They rapidly recaptured ground west of the coastal city, but their advance slowed as they closed in on its centre.

Islamic State militants, who exploited Libya's security chaos to seize Sirte last year, have been fighting hard to defend territory they still control in the residential centre.

"Brigades of Bonyan Marsous intercepted a group of Islamic State militants on Friday attempting to escape from the coastal side of the city," said Rida Issa, a spokesman with the government's operations room.

"The clashes were massive and have resulted in four troops killed and 24 wounded. After the clashes ended, our forces found about 10 bodies of militants."

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has had no official national army, but brigades of former rebels who once fought together against him have steadily turned against one another and allied with rival political forces on the ground.

Misrata city forces, among the most powerful military brigades, are aligned with the U.N.-backed unity government that arrived in Tripoli in March. It is seeking to replace two other rival governments that were set up in Tripoli and the east in 2014, and to unite Libya's many political and armed factions.

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AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

16. After Obama decision, first U.S. airstrikes hit Afghan Taliban

Associated Press, June 24 | Amir Shah and Lolita C. Baldor

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. military has launched its first airstrikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan since President Barack Obama's decision earlier this month to expand America's involvement against the insurgents, U.S. officials said Friday.

Officials said the strikes began in the last week and were against Taliban targets in the southern part of the country. But Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook declined to provide any details, citing "operational security."

One senior U.S. official said there have been "a couple" of airstrikes, but the U.S. does not want to provide more information because there may be more strikes in that area, including missions with Afghan forces who could be accompanied by U.S. advisers.

The official was not authorized to discuss the operations publicly, so spoke on condition of anonymity.

The U.S. military spokesman in Kabul, Brig. Gen. Charles Cleveland, said U.S. forces "have conducted a limited number of strikes under these new authorities" but it is "too early to quantify the effects achieved."

The strikes "are only being used where they may help the Afghans achieve a strategic effect," Cleveland said.

U.S. officials made it clear when they announced the new authority to hit Taliban targets once again that they would only be used in selective operations that were deemed to have a strategic and important effect on the fight. Cook said the strikes "hit their intended targets."

He added the strikes were "part of an ongoing operation that, again, the goal of which would be a strategic effect on behalf of the Afghan forces that we are enabling, and that's exactly what they were intended to be used for."

Pressed for more details, Cook refused, saying "these are ongoing operations" and he does not want to be "telegraphing what's to come to the enemy."

The war in Afghanistan began in 2001, and the U.S. has been conducting a broad range of operations there ever since.

Obama decided in early June to expand America's involvement with more airstrikes against insurgents, giving the U.S. military wider latitude to support Afghan forces, both in the air and on the ground.

Since all foreign combat troops pulled out of Afghanistan at the end of 2014, leaving only an advisory and training contingent of international forces behind, the Afghan military has struggled in leading the fight against the Taliban and other militants.

The 9,800 remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan are scheduled to drop to 5,500 by the end of this year, but the pace of that decline has yet to be decided. One factor in determining future troop levels is the extent to which NATO allies are willing to remain involved in training and advising the Afghans.

--Associated Press writer Robert Burns in Washington contributed to this report

ASIA/PACIFIC

17. Washington hopes to wrap up anti-missile deal with South Korea

Agence France-Presse, June 24 | Thomas Watkins

WASHINGTON -- The United States wants to wrap up discussions with South Korea on the deployment of a sophisticated defense system, the Pentagon said Friday, two days after North Korea's latest missile tests.

Seoul and Washington have for weeks been in talks about deploying the advanced US THAAD missile system in South Korea to protect against the potential threat from Pyongyang -- a move vehemently opposed by China.

"We would like to see these conversations, as I think the South Koreans would, wrapped up in an as efficient and timely fashion as possible," Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said.

He said discussions had "progressed well," but there were still "some details to work out."

North Korea tested two Musudan medium-range missiles just hours apart on Wednesday.

The first was seen as a failure, but leader Kim Jong-Un hailed the second as a complete success.

South Korea has had reservations about THAAD -- the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System -- primarily because of opposition from China, which sees it as a threat to its own nuclear deterrent.

Beijing also fears the presence of more US military hardware on its doorstep will further tip the balance of power in the Pacific towards Washington.

Pentagon officials spoke with South Korean and Japanese counterparts earlier on Friday to discuss the recent North Korean missile launches, Cook said.

"All three countries reiterated their strong condemnation of these launches and urged North Korea to refrain from provocative actions that undermine peace and security and instead focus on fulfilling its international obligations and commitments," he told reporters.

"The three noted that North Korea's provocations would only strengthen the resolve of the international community."

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18. North Korea: We won't abandon nukes with U.S. gun to our head

Associated Press (Interview), June 24 | Eric Talmadge

PYONGYANG, North Korea — The top North Korean official for U.S. relations told The Associated Press on Friday that his country is now a nuclear threat to be reckoned with, and Washington can expect more nuclear tests and missile launches like the ones earlier this week as long as it attempts to force his government's collapse through a policy of pressure and punishment.

"It's the United States that caused this issue," Han Song Ryol, director-general of the department of U.S. affairs at North Korea's Foreign Ministry, said in his first interview with an American news organization since assuming the post three years ago. "They have to stop their military threats, sanctions and economic pressure. Without doing so, it's like they are telling us to reconcile while they are putting a gun to our forehead."

Han defended the North's test-launching on Wednesday of two medium-range ballistic missiles. Foreign military experts believe that, once perfected, such missiles could deliver nuclear warheads to U.S. bases in Japan and possibly to major U.S. military installations as far away as the Pacific island of Guam, where long-range U.S. Air Force bombers are deployed.

The tests indicated technological advances in the North's missile capabilities. They were quickly condemned by Washington, Tokyo and Seoul as a "provocation" and a violation of United Nations resolutions.

State Department spokesman John Kirby said U.S. policy calling for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula hasn't changed.

"The capabilities that the DPRK continues to pursue are doing nothing obviously to get us to that goal," he said. "We urge the North to take the necessary steps to prove that they're willing to return to the six-party talk process, so that we can get to that goal."

Han dismissed the criticism, saying North Korea has no choice but to build up its military deterrent as long as the world's largest superpower — and the country that first developed nuclear weapons — remains an enemy. He noted that the U.S. recently deployed nuclear-powered submarines and strategic bombers capable of dropping nuclear weapons on North Korea to the region, and earlier this year conducted training for precision airstrikes on North Korea's leadership, along with simulations of an advance into the capital, Pyongyang, with the South Korean military during joint annual exercises.

"This launch was a significant and novel step that my country must take to produce a powerful nuclear deterrent," Han said. "The real provocation is coming from the United States. ... How can my country stand by and do nothing?"

Han said North Korea has never recognized a longstanding United Nations Security Council ban on its testing of nuclear weapons or long-range missiles, though the world body has ratified the resolutions and imposed heavy sanctions on North Korea for continuing them — including a round of new sanctions imposed after its latest nuclear test in January. North Korea says that test was its first of an H-bomb.

"The United States must see correctly the trend of the times and the strategic position of (North Korea) and must withdraw its hostile policy," he said in the hour-long interview at the Foreign Ministry, located next to Kim Il Sung Square in central Pyongyang. "My country is a nuclear state. In the past, my country has been threatened by the United States with its nuclear weapons, but I can now say proudly that the United States is being threatened by my country's nuclear weapons."

He held out the possibility of dialogue with the United States, but only if Washington agrees to "drop its hostile policies," replace the armistice that ended the 1950-53 Korean War with a lasting peace treaty, and withdraw its troops based in South Korea.

None of those proposals is new. North Korea has repeated them for years, but they have gotten virtually no traction in the U.S., which has instead stood by its own demand that North Korea show a willingness to give up its nuclear program before any meaningful talks can begin.

Han, who formerly served at North Korea's United Nations mission and lived in New York, said it would require "political resolve" in Washington to change its policies toward North Korea. "There are many measures that the United States can take," he said. In response, he said, North Korea is willing to follow suit, regardless of what has happened in the past.

But until that happens, he said, there are "clouds of nuclear war" on the Korean Peninsula.

Han said North Korea has only grown stronger under the "strategic patience" policy of the Obama administration, which focuses on sanctions and military pressure to weaken and isolate North Korea and has brought talks between the two countries to a virtual standstill. The policy was initiated after North Korea conducted its second nuclear test in 2009. It has conducted two more nuclear tests since then and launched rockets that carried satellites into orbit, but which share technologies that could be used to produce rockets with warheads to strike the U.S. mainland.

"Day by day our country is becoming stronger, especially the military capacity," he said. "It is natural that many Americans, including the critics, say that strategic patience is a failure. It gave a lot of time to my country to strengthen. So if the United States does not change its policy, which is based on the collapse and overturn of my country, without accepting it as a nuclear state, any policies in the future are fated to fail as well."

He said he is not optimistic the election of a new U.S. president in November will bring much change.

"Since the founding of our country the United States has refused to accept our country as a sovereign state," he said. "My country will be focusing on the new administration. But we don't think it will change its policy, so we are preparing ourselves to deal with its policy to overturn our country ... I can see dark clouds hanging over the sky of the Korean Peninsula."

He said that as long as those dark clouds remain, Washington can expect more nuclear tests and missile launches.

--Associated Press writer Bradley Klapper in Washington contributed to this report

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AIR FORCE

19. Welsh Retires as Air Force Chief of Staff at Andrews Ceremony

Military.com, June 24 | Bryant Jordan

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh marked his retirement -- officially scheduled for July 1 -- with a ceremony Friday morning at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

Welsh, the Air Force's 20th chief of staff, bid his official farewell in a hangar filled with family, colleagues past and present, and two aircraft he had flown during the course of his 40-year career: the F-16 Fighting Falcon and the A-10 Thunderbolt, aka the Warthog.

"To airmen and families everywhere, you are magnificent," he said. "It has been the honor of my life to represent you. This may be the understatement of my life, but I will miss you."

Welsh's nominated successor, Vice Chief of Staff David Goldfein, has yet to be confirmed by the Senate.

Welsh entered the Air Force from the Air Force Academy in 1976, with the Vietnam War over. But beginning in 1990 -- from the Persian Gulf War and its subsequent No-Fly-Zone missions, through the Kosovo War and finally the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions that followed 9/11 -- Welsh has known only an Air Force at war.

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said one of Welsh's greatest legacies will be as "an integrator," both within the Air Force and across the joint force, especially in the areas of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Welsh was perfectly suited for that role not only because of his Air Force background, but his work in intelligence, including as an associate director of the CIA.

"Since Mark became chief of staff, the Air Force's ISR, electronic warfare, and cyber components have been completely transformed in how they work together," Carter said. "Look at the Army pods now affixed to the wings of Air Force Reapers, or the Air Force and Navy's partnership on jamming improvised explosive devices. These are just two of the joint-force collaborations he's championed. And for years to come, American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines will be safer because of them."

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James observed that Welsh "leads effortlessly and tirelessly -- and I'm talking about 24/7 -- always, always advocating for the needs of our United States Air Force."

James said Welsh keeps a cutout of John Wayne in his office.

"John Wayne once said 'courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway,' " she said. "Well, General Welsh, you saddled up each and every day without fail."

James said Welsh "knows his business and most importantly he knows our airmen."

Most poignant were some of the remarks by Welsh's son, Marine Corps 1st Lt. Matt Welsh, whose memories included "hearing Dad speak about the death of a subordinate in combat. I remember listening to the flight tapes from Operation Desert Storm -- the chaos and the calm come out simultaneously. I remember 9/11 and Dad away from home for days, staying at his post in support of his country. I remember the night his sister died -- I remember how he looked at me, not too dissimilar to the way he looked at me following that conversation the night his cadet died.

"Even though I was just a small kid. It's funny the stuff you remember," the younger Welsh said.

In his own remarks, Gen. Welsh also grew most emotional when he talked about his family, including his wife, Betty; his other sons, Mark and John; and daughter, Elizabeth. Also, he said:

"I do need to thank my mom and dad, my sisters and brothers, for showing me the path to a good and decent life," he said, pausing before going on. "And for inspiring me to try and walk it."

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20. USAF Weighing Replacement F-35 Ejection Seat

DefenseNews.com (Exclusive), June 24 | Aaron Mehta

WASHINGTON — The US Air Force is looking into the possibility of replacing the Martin-Baker ejection seat on the F-35 joint strike fighter with the United Technologies ACES 5 model, Defense News has learned.

While still in the earliest stages, such a move could have massive repercussions for the F-35 supply chain, impacting the workshare strategy that forms the backbone for the international fleet of the Lockheed Martin-designed fighter.

Air Force Lt. Gen. Arnold Bunch, the service's top uniformed acquisition official, confirmed the service's interest in the ACES 5 design in response to an inquiry from Defense News, but stressed that the Air Force had only just sent a letter to the F-35 Joint Program Office (JPO) in order to gather information on potential costs and challenges for switching the seat.

"We believe it is prudent to look at what it would take to qualify the ACES 5 seat as a potential risk mitigation step if additional things happen as we go through the testing of the Martin-Baker seat," Bunch said Friday. "We believe it's prudent to determine what it would cost, how much [impact on] the schedule, what the timeline would be, if something else happened and we wanted to go a different way."

At the core of the Air Force's move is concern over pilot safety following the discovery that F-35 pilots under 136 pounds were at increased, potentially fatal, risk of neck damage when ejecting from the plane aboard the Martin-Baker US16E design. The service has also acknowledged an "elevated level of risk" for pilots between 136 and 165 pounds.

Defense News first broke the news of that issue in October. As a result of the issue, pilots under 136 pounds are prohibited from operating the fifth-generation fighter, which went operational for the Marines in 2015 and is expected to be operational for the Air Force by the end of this year.

That pilot risk, Bunch said, is unacceptable.

"Our reason for going forward is safety and having a risk mitigation. That's our big driver. We have to have a seat that covers the whole envelope, all the demographics, from lightweight pilots to people who are [heavier], to be able to cover and allow them to be able to get out of the aircraft that we're going to ask them to operate."

Bunch signed off on a letter Thursday that was sent to the JPO to begin the process of gathering information. However, four sources say the process of looking into the ACES 5 design and gathering information has been underway internally for over a week.

"We've not given [the JPO] direction to qualify. We've not asked them to go qualify, we've not asked for any change in the configuration in the airplane," Bunch stressed. "What I have tried to do is get the information in so we would know what it would cost, how much it would take, all it would entail, so we have that available were something else to occur."

The issue with the Martin-Baker design is that the US16E rotates slightly with a lighter pilot, opening up the risk of damage to the neck. As a result the JPO began looking at ways to better manage that weight, zeroing in on reducing the weight of the high-tech helmet designed by Elbit and Rockwell Collins.

The ACES 5 seat deals features a stabilization system the company calls “STAPAC,” which helps correct for pitch during an ejection. The ACES 5 design also features a headrest which pushes the pilots head down during ejection, stabilizing it during the process, which could help alleviate the risks there. Martin-Baker is working on adding a similar feature to its next seat version, which would add a fabric panel that will protect the pilot’s head from moving backward during the parachute opening.

According to Bunch, the Air Force found no other seat that would potentially replace the Martin-Baker design than the ACES 5, and his information request is only about that specific design. UTC is certainly no stranger to the Air Force, with the legacy ACES II design featured in the service’s fleets of A-10s, F-15s, F-16s, F-22s, B-1s and B-2s.

Two sources told Defense News on background that the decision is being driven, in part, by frustrations that Martin-Baker is making small fixes and not addressing core design issues with its seat. Bunch demurred when asked about those concerns, saying that so far the Martin-Baker redesign tests are “performing the way they need to.”

But, he noted, “I also know they have quite a few test shots still to go. I don’t know exactly the number but they have more shots to go. What we want to have is some information so that if something else were to occur, we have something to consider as we move forward.”

Based on Bunch's comments, it appears Air Force officials are concerned that another problem could occur with the Martin-Baker seat in the future, which raised the question of why the Air Force is only now starting to look at a backup option, eight months after the pilot safety concerns became public knowledge.

Bunch acknowledged that “We could have done it earlier. I won't disagree with that,” but did not offer a specific reason for why the move is happening just now.

“It's just after looking at everything and watching everything and having our dialogues,” Bunch said. “I just signed the memo out yesterday. It’s something we could have done earlier, but we still believe it’s a prudent step to take at this time to have a potential risk mitigation [option] if something else were to occur.”

He added that there should be no impact on the Air Force decision to declare the plane operational, expected before the end of the year.

Industrial Impact

Whatever the service’s reasoning, swapping out the ejection seat could lead to serious implications with the industrial base for the jet.

Martin-Baker’s ejection seat work is part of the industrial participation strategy that makes the backbone of the F-35 program. United Kingdom companies produce about 15 percent of each F-35 jet, which a Lockheed Martin factsheet claims will “create and support more than 24,000 jobs” in the UK.

If the US Air Force — the single largest customer in the program, with a targeted buy of 1,763 F-35A conventional take-off and landing models — were to abandon the US16E design, it would open questions about the industrial partnership, with Britain perhaps demanding more workshare in the future to make up for lost revenue. It also, as one source warned, would drive up costs for the Air Force.

“Instead of one seat you have two separate seats with suppliers/supply chain duplication,” the source said. “That would drive costs skyrocketing for everybody because it impacts quantity of scale because the Air Force has the largest majority. Then costs go up for both the Air force and the rest of the enterprise.”

Bunch acknowledged that the industrial participation aspect of the program adds complexity, which is one of the aspects he asked the JPO to look into.

"I'm sure whatever answer I get, there will be words in there that will give me the idea of what that will do," Bunch said. "But until I get that information it would be presumptive of me to make much of a statement."

He also said he had not personally reached out to either UTC nor Martin-Baker, and has not begun the process of discussing the ACES 5 seat with the Marines, Navy or international partners.

"Once we get the information back we may have those dialogues. We understand at this point that if we're the only ones that would want it, the JPO would tell us we had to pay for it," Bunch said.

Obviously, if the Air Force does make this change, it would be a boon for UTC, and could lead to inclusion on future programs.

The company has been peddling the ACES 5 as an option for the service's upcoming T-X trainer modernization program, which is expressly tied into training pilots on the F-35; if the seat was inserted into the F-35 it would logically pave the way for it to go on the 350 new training planes the service expects to buy in the future.

A request for comment to Martin-Baker was not returned by press time. A UTC spokesman declined to comment.

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ARMY

21. General: Army's training of men, women held up as example

Associated Press, June 24 | Susanne M. Schafer

FORT JACKSON, S.C. — Fort Jackson has become a guide for other military organizations trying to expand training for women now able to enter additional combat-related jobs, the post's departing commander said.

"We've been a model to other services and other organizations that are trying to do gender-integrated training," Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier said in an interview prior to his departure Friday as the commander of the Army's largest training installation.

"I mean, we are kind of the model for the rest of DOD (Department of Defense)," Cloutier said.

Fort Jackson spokesman Christopher Fletcher said representatives from all of the military service branches, including the Coast Guard, have sent representatives to the installation to study its approach to training men and women together.

Fort Jackson trains around 62,000 soldiers annually. Women began being integrated into basic training units with men in the 1980s.

Now, the installation trains 54 percent of all male soldiers and 65 percent of all female soldiers during the first 10 weeks of training that prepares them for military life and combat.

Late last year, the Pentagon decided to allow females to compete for all front-line combat jobs, opening areas such as infantry and armor that had been closed to them.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter ordered all service branches to allow women to compete for the most demanding and difficult jobs, such as the Army Delta units and Navy SEALs.

The Marines have never integrated basic training. Male and female Marines train in separate units.

The Army's basic training weeks include physical fitness, marksmanship, land navigation, obstacle courses and lengthy marches, among other types of training. Men and women are separated in their sleeping quarters and while they conduct personal hygiene.

Cloutier said he thinks the installation has made "a lot of progress" during his single year on the job. He pointed to some improvements in renovating some of the post's buildings and training areas, and that he has been able to work closely with residents in the local community.

The Army has just begun a year of celebrations leading up to the 100th anniversary of the founding of the training post outside Columbia. Camp Jackson became a training facility in 1917 as part of the nation's preparation for World War I.

Cloutier said he's sorry he has to leave early — commanders usually remain at the post for two years — but he has been ordered to the organization that oversees Army operations in Africa. The headquarters of the Africa Command are in Stuttgart, Germany.

Cloutier hands responsibility to Brig. Gen. John P. Johnson, who has been the director of training for the Army's deputy chief of staff.

"We have some good plans down the road for moving the installation forward," Cloutier said, adding, "Gen. P. Johnson is a great American and he's going to pick it up and just continue to move the ball forward."

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NAVY

22. U.S. Fleet Forces Will Focus Training, Fleet Experimentation on Distributed Operations

U.S. Naval Institute News, June 24 | Megan Eckstein

U.S. Fleet Forces Command will push its fleet experimentation and training towards a new distributed operations concept, in which deployed forces – surface ships, submarines, aircraft and more – are sufficiently linked together so that they can support theater-wide needs regardless of their physical location, the commander said Friday.

USFF Commander Adm. Phil Davidson said the Navy can no longer conduct disaggregated operations, in which distinct groups of ships train for and conduct missions in a silo. Instead, those forces within a geographical combatant command must be synchronized and netted together to support whatever the numbered fleet commander may need, he said at an event cohosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the U.S. Naval Institute.

Davidson cited three concepts that support his idea of distributed operations. First, he said, the surface force's recent push towards distributed lethality has yielded positive results that could be applied throughout the rest of the fleet.

“When we have a more lethal force, more widely distributed ... our commanders are much more confident,” he said.

“And when we game it with potential ... adversaries, our adversaries are much more conservative. That's a wonderful place to be.”

Second, the Naval Integrated Fire Control-Counter Air architecture of netting together sensors and shooters has proven successful, and “as we think about other assets coming to this structure ... it is very, very important to understand that people need to be contributing to this network. And if it can't come to this network, its value is going to be a little less.” He highlighted an upcoming test to integrate the F-35 into the NIFC-CA construct as an example of how the fleet should be thinking.

And third, he said, the Navy's ability to maneuver in physical space and the electromagnetic spectrum will remain important in countering near-peer and peer adversaries that seek to deny the U.S. sea control.

“When you lay out the geography of the Eastern Mediterranean, lay out the geography of the Strait of Hormuz, lay out the geography of Western Pacific, the challenges in the physical spectrum are all remarkably different. What we would put in the battle space has to be effective in all of those environments, not to mention the electromagnetic environment. So a fleet with the speed of decision, the speed of action, and the human-machine symbiosis that can make things move is going to be incredibly important,” he said.

“It used to be that we prepared a group, got that group all up to speed in its warfare areas and then we put it to sea, and all that function would exist inside that group. Now the power of all these platforms – be they submarines, surface forces, aircraft, [maritime patrol aircraft], the joint force – coming together and informing the whole of the fleet so the fleet commander can operate that fleet integrated, distributed and maneuver in a way that delivers on his objectives is incredibly important.”

To that end, Davidson said a white paper would be coming out, and potentially a Naval Doctrine Publication eventually, on distributed operations. In the mean time, he said acquisition program offices are already hard at work building and integrating technologies to support this concept, and Fleet Forces would focus its training, its wargaming and its doctrine development on the concept as well – which Davidson made clear was a serious focus of his.

Whereas the West Coast fleet under U.S. Pacific Fleet commander Adm. Scott Swift has experimented with different ship groupings such as the April deployment of a three-destroyer Surface Action Group, Davidson said he had no plans to do the same.

“I’m happy to put any tactical-level formation out there that meets a fleet commander’s need, particularly in the rotational force at the Phase 0 level – but more interesting to me in the very current is making sure that force benefits from this distributed architecture I’m starting to describe going forward.”

When the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group deployed in March 2015, it was the first NIFC-CA capable strike group to go overseas.

“When we sent Theodore Roosevelt out the door, our first NIFC-CA strike group, we actually had a wargaming series that trained them to think through the problem, how they would employ the thing, and then we actually put it to sea and trained that strike group to actually employ it while it was forward,” Davidson told USNI News after the event.

That kind of NIFC-CA-focused training will continue, and a funded fleet experimentation program will allow the warfighters to learn even more about what capabilities they currently have that support distributed operations and what technologies they will need going forward. Davidson said a fleet synchronization conference convenes a couple times a year to bring together warfighters and technology developers, and distributed operations will be a focus in these conversations as well.

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23. Benedict: Life Extension for Trident II Missile ‘Is Essential’

SEAPOWERS Magazine Online, June 24 | Otto Kreisher

WASHINGTON — While the Navy’s top acquisition program is a replacement for the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, the admiral responsible for the Navy’s strategic systems said Friday that his top priority is extending the service life of the Trident II missiles that arm the Ohios and will go into the first of their replacements.

The Trident II D5 missiles also are deployed in Great Britain’s Vanguard strategic submarines and will continue to arm their replacement, Vice Adm. Terry Benedict said during an Air Force Association breakfast June 24.

“The Trident was planned originally for a service life of only 25 years. However, it will serve throughout the remaining service life of the Ohio and Vanguard classes, and it will be the initial on-load of the Ohio replacement and [Vanguard] successor submarines,” taking it “long beyond its original service life,” Benedict, director of Strategic Systems Programs, said.

Life extension therefore “is essential to ensuring that the Trident remains the successful sea-based deterrent that it has been since the early ‘90s,” he told a forum on strategic deterrence.

Prolonging the operational life of the D5 requires upgrading or replacing all the strategic weapon systems and subsystems, including launchers, the navigation, fire control and guidance electronics and the W88 nuclear warheads in the Trident’s re-entry vehicles, he explained.

The continued reliability and accuracy of the updated missiles is being tested in an extensive schedule of flight tests that will total 14 shots over 18 months, in preparation for a planned initial operational capability in fiscal 2017, he said.

Benedict is part of the Navy team working to plan and then produce the replacements for the Ohio strategic deterrence submarines, which will begin to retire in 2029. The other team members are the program executive office submarines, which heads the overall design effort, and Naval Nuclear Reactors, which is developing the nuclear power plant that is expected to last the entire service life of the new boat.

The admiral said his primary responsibility for the Ohio replacement was the middle section, which includes the common missile compartment (CMC) and the other strategic systems.

The CMC, which will have 16 missile tubes and the monitoring and control systems, also will go into the Vanguard replacements. The two navies worked closely to design the compartment and in a “truly unique” arrangement, each country will produce the CMCs it needs in its own shipyard, Benedict said.

Construction of the first 15 US missile tubes began in 2015, and the Navy is about to let a contract for the next 30, he said.

To reduce the technical risk for both the U.S. and U.K. programs, SSP is leading the development of the Strategic Weapons System Ashore integration and test site at Cape Canaveral, Fla., Benedict said.

The admiral praised the Navy’s historic cooperation on the strategic submarine programs with the British, and said that relationship would not be affected by Great Britain’s vote Thursday to “exit” the European Union.

Benedict said that based on a telephone exchange he had that morning with his Royal Navy counterpart, “I have no concern.” The Brexit vote “was a decision based on its relationship with Europe, not with us. I see yesterday’s vote having no effect.”

While concentrating on the service life extension of the Tridents, Benedict said his office also is beginning work on a new strategic missile to replace them sometime in the future. In that effort, he has been cooperating with the Air Force, which is actively seeking a replacement for its Minuteman III ground-based strategic missiles. That effort appears to be focused mainly on finding as many common subsystems as possible to help both services save money.

While expressing his support for all three legs of the nuclear deterrent Triad, which also includes the Air Force strategic bombers, Benedict noted that the Navy not only provides the “most survivable” leg, but is responsible for 70 percent of the deployed nuclear warheads under the 2010 New Start Treaty with Russia that limits each nation to 1,550 deployable warheads.

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24. Navy riverine boss fired for errors that led to sailors' arrest by Iran

NavyTimes.com, June 24 | David Larter

The head of 5th Fleet on Friday fired the commander of the task force in charge of the riverine squadron involved in a high-profile debacle that led to 10 sailors' arrest by Iran in January.

Vice Adm. Kevin Donegan ousted Capt. Kyle Moses for his role in the January incident, the details of which will be briefed to Congress and the public in the coming days. The disciplinary action against Moses, who headed Task Force 56 in the Persian Gulf, follows up on a previous administrative reprimand, Donegan said in the release.

"Several weeks ago, I had initially taken what I felt was appropriate administrative and corrective action involving Capt. Moses based on the preliminary results of the investigation, which I began immediately after we recovered our Sailors," Donegan said. "However, after thoroughly examining the findings of the final, comprehensive investigation, I determined that this additional action was necessary."

Task Force 56 leads the riverine squadrons in theater, as well as Seabees and explosive ordnance disposal units.

The firing is the second in what sources say will be a series of disciplinary measures for what has been a high-profile embarrassment for the U.S. Navy, which came on the eve of a nuclear deal with Iran.

The Navy release did not elaborate on specific problems or shortcomings by Moses that had led up to the sailors' arrest, which Navy leaders have said was the result of training and supervision lapses. Moses could not be immediately reached for comment Friday.

The Navy's investigation into the incident has been closed after months of review, said Navy spokesman Cmdr. Mike Kafka.

"The investigation is complete, and is being referred to appropriate commands for adjudication," Kafka said in a statement.

Ten riverine sailors were captured Jan. 12 and their high-speed special mission boats were seized when they drifted into Iranian waters around Farsi Island, a remote Iranian military outpost in the middle of the Persian Gulf. During their 16 hour detention, one of the U.S. sailors appeared to apologize while being videotaped, which became part of the flurry of Iranian propaganda publicized in the wake of the arrests.

Navy officials believe that a navigational error, along with some baffling errors in judgment on the part of the crew, led to their capture. Officials have suggested that the crew may have been taking an unauthorized shortcut through Iranian waters to meet up with a U.S. Coast Guard vessel for refueling.

Iran has awarded medals to the Revolutionary Guard Corps commandos involved in the sailors' arrest, which U.S. leaders have called illegal. Iran plans to commission a statue to commemorate the arrests.

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25. US Navy keeps electromagnetic cannon in its sights

Agence France-Presse, June 25 | Thomas Watkins

WASHINGTON -- The US Navy is quietly pushing ahead with a radical new cannon that one day could transform how wars are fought, even though some Pentagon officials have voiced concerns over its cost and viability.

Named the railgun, the weapon in question represents a paradigm shift in ballistic technology. Instead of using gunpowder and explosive charges to shoot a shell from its barrel, it employs vast amounts of electromagnetic energy to zoom a projectile along a set of copper-alloy rails.

Thanks to four small fins on its rear, the hefty round can then be guided toward a moving object -- such as an enemy ship, drone or incoming ballistic missile -- relying purely on the kinetic energy from its vast momentum to destroy the target.

Ultimately, scientists expect the railgun rounds to travel at speeds up to Mach 7.5, which at 5,700 mph (9,100 kph) is more than seven times the speed of sound, and cover a distance of about 100 miles (160 kilometers.)

"The railgun is revolutionary in terms of how much it can accelerate the bullet," Tom Boucher, the railgun program manager for Office of Naval Research, told AFP at the Pentagon as he displayed six interconnected steel plates that all had been shredded by a single test round.

"Powder guns have been matured to the point where you are going to get the most out of them. Railguns are just beginning."

The futuristic weapon has long been a darling of the Navy's research wing, along with other game-changing technologies such as laser beams that can track a boat in choppy water and blast holes in its hull.

Yet the railgun, which so far has cost more than \$500 million, may find itself becoming something of a victim of its own success -- even before it is made operational.

That's because of its special shells designed to hurtle through the skies at jaw-dropping speeds.

These rounds, called High Velocity Projectiles, can be guided in flight. They can also be fired from a conventional five-inch cannon.

Though the HVPs would travel slower than they would out of a railgun, they still outperform regular shells, making them a tempting proposition for the Navy to deploy across its fleet.

"It turns out that powder guns firing the same hyper-velocity projectiles gets you almost as much as you would get out of the electromag rail gun, and it's something we could do much faster," Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work told US lawmakers last month.

Each HVP eventually will cost about \$50,000 -- still considerably more expensive than a conventional shell but an order of magnitude cheaper than guided missiles such as the Tomahawk, that cost more than \$1 million apiece.

Currently, it requires about 25 megawatts of energy to power a railgun. That kind of juice, and the space needed to generate or store it, rules out many vessels from hosting it, but researchers are optimistic the technology will grow more compact.

The Navy hopes to install a railgun on the USS Zumwalt, a brand new guided-missile destroyer that produces the large amounts of power needed to charge the weapon.

The railgun has also suffered from technical setbacks during its development.

The enormous forces generated by the HVP leaving the gun caused early versions to fail after only a few shots, but scientists say they are now working toward a solution that could see the barrel last for thousands of rounds.

Boucher said he is optimistic the gun will ultimately end up being operationally deployed, probably within a decade.

"We are going to be OK," he said. "We are showing our progress, and the proof will be in what we do."

It's not just the Navy with its sights on the railgun. The Army would one day like to put the electric blasters on its tanks, but is currently constrained the gun's power requirements.

Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley this week said he envisions a time in the not-so-distant future where railguns and lasers are deployed on land.

"We are looking at all those technologies," he said.

"My professional opinion is that I think we are on the cusp of a fundamental change in the character of ground warfare."

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VETERANS

26. Few vets expelled under 'don't ask' seek remedy

Associated Press, June 24 | Jennifer McDermott

Less than 8 percent of veterans expelled from the military under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy have applied to upgrade their discharges to honorable or strip references to their sexual orientation from their record.

In the nearly five years since the repeal of the policy that banned gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military, fewer than 1,000 people — out of the more than 13,000 people who were expelled — have sought corrections, according to data the military provided to The Associated Press.

Many veterans simply don't know it's an option, said Scott Thompson, executive director of the Board for Correction of Naval Records. The boards have always existed without a lot of internal or external advertisement, he said.

Veterans and the veterans' advocates agreed there's a lack of awareness but cited reasons why veterans wouldn't correct their record. They may be in jobs where they aren't affected by what the record says. Going to the board could open up old wounds. Or they may feel it's not worth the effort, or don't know where to start.

For Danny Ingram, the reference to his sexual orientation on the form is a badge of honor. Ingram was given an honorable discharge from the Army in 1994 as one of the first to be expelled under "don't ask, don't tell."

"I was victimized by that policy," said Ingram, of Atlanta, who is now 56. "I want that to remain so people in the future can see what was done to people, and that it was unjust."

"Don't ask, don't tell" didn't require that people be dishonorably discharged. It varied case by case, but if their commanders weren't pushing for a lower category and there were no mitigating factors, such as misconduct, the service member could be given an other-than-honorable or honorable discharge.

Honorably discharged veterans are entitled to benefits, such as medical care and a military burial, and can re-enlist if they meet eligibility requirements.

Jeremy Brooks was given an honorable discharge from the Navy in 2007 under the policy. He re-enlisted in 2011 after the full repeal. Currently serving in the Navy Reserve, Brooks said he considered trying to change the narrative that states "homosexual admission" because of the risk of bias anytime anyone sees it.

"You're handing it to them and telling them something about yourself without being able to choose when you're telling them," said Brooks, who is 39 and works in Washington, D.C.

Brooks said the idea of tackling it was overwhelming. Like Ingram, he didn't want that part of history erased from his record, as if his service under "don't ask, don't tell" didn't happen, so he didn't pursue a correction.

He thinks many veterans know about the process but were deeply wounded by their discharge and may be trying to forget that part of their lives.

Since the 2011 repeal, the Navy has reviewed about 430 cases, including from the Marines, and upgraded slightly more than 300 of the discharges. The Army has received nearly 300 applications from soldiers discharged under "don't ask, don't tell" or its predecessor policies and granted about 200 requests.

The Air Force reviewed about 150 similar cases and approved about 130 of the applications. The Coast Guard, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security, reviews far fewer cases, only eight since the repeal.

Some applications were denied because there were "aggravating factors," such as misconduct. Some were incomplete. About 65 cases are pending among the boards.

The Defense Department barred gays and lesbians from serving before "don't ask, don't tell." President Bill Clinton promised to lift the ban but compromised and authorized the policy in 1993. After that, they could serve but not be open about their sexual orientation, and personnel couldn't ask about it. The policy was widely criticized because thousands of people were discharged under it, and many others were forced into secrecy.

A bill in Congress would streamline the paperwork for applying for a correction and codify the Defense Department policy in statute. It would require the historians of each military service to review the circumstances of the estimated 100,000 service members discharged for their sexual orientation prior to "don't ask, don't tell" to improve the historical record.

Melvin Dwork was expelled from the Navy during World War II for being gay. He spent decades fighting what he called a "terrible insult" that had to be righted — a discharge characterized as "undesirable."

In 2011, the Navy agreed to change it to honorable. It was believed to be the first time the Pentagon had taken such a step on behalf of a WWII since the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell."

Dwork died last week at age 94.

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TARGETED KILLINGS

27. Officials: U.S. Report Will Say Drones Have Only Killed 100 Civilians

NBCNews.com, June 24 | Ken Dilanian and Courtney Kube

The Obama administration is preparing to announce as early as next week that it believes around 100 civilians have died in nearly 500 U.S. drone strikes since 2009, U.S. officials tell NBC News.

That is a far lower estimate than those of the three major independent groups that seek to track the secret operations in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. The highest estimate among those groups puts civilian casualties from drones at over 1,000.

The disclosure, which is expected to cite an estimated range of civilian deaths lower and higher than 100, represents the latest attempt by the president to fulfill his promises to be more transparent about the controversial secret killing program he ramped up when he took office. Despite those vows, officials continue to release very little information about the targets and circumstances of each lethal strike.

Obama is expected to issue an executive order requiring annual disclosures of civilians killed in counter-terrorism strikes, officials say, a development first reported by the Daily Beast.

Human rights groups praised the move, but remain skeptical about the numbers.

"This is a big victory," said Naureen Shah, who directs Amnesty International's human rights program in Washington. However, she added, "It's impossible to assess their claims without the administration acknowledging or denying the specific cases that we've put forward."

U.S. officials have credited drone strikes carried out by the CIA and the military's Joint Special Operations Command with putting al Qaeda on its heels. Officials have long said that Hellfire missiles fired from unmanned drones are far more precise than conventional bombing when it comes to targeting terrorists living among civilians.

The disparity in the civilian casualty numbers, however, is likely to fuel the debate about whether U.S. officials can be trusted to grade their own work based on evidence no one else can see.

It is not seriously disputed that U.S. targeted killing operations outside of active war zones have become less frequent and more discriminating in recent years. The main reason for that, officials say, was Obama's decision in 2013 to impose rules that such attacks may only be carried out if there is a "near certainty" that civilians won't be harmed.

The Britain-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which U.S. officials often privately criticize as biased against the U.S. government, counted one civilian casualty in three Pakistan strikes and none in 13 Yemen strikes so far in 2016.

But when it comes to the overall count since Obama took office, which includes a period from 2009 to 2011 when Obama authorized a flurry of CIA drone strikes in Pakistan, there is a stark disagreement.

The Long War Journal, a project of the right-leaning Foundation for Defense of Democracies think tank whose numbers tend to be the most favorable for U.S. policy-makers, tallied 207 civilian casualties since 2009 in 492 strikes in Pakistan and Yemen. That does not include strikes in Somalia and Libya, which the Obama administration includes in its count of around 100.

New America, a left-leaning Washington think tank, counted between 244 and 294 civilians killed in 547 attacks in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that as many as 1068 civilians were killed in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, the vast majority since 2009.

Obama administration officials point out that those groups rely mainly on local media reports, which they argue are often distorted.

For example, current and former officials tell NBC News, Pakistan has on several occasions conducted its own airstrikes against militants and then attributed those attacks to CIA drones. Pakistani media reports based on those leaks then fuel the independent counts.

Still, questions have long been raised about how the administration counts military-aged males killed in each strike, and what standard of evidence is used to label someone a militant.

For example, JSOC in 2013 carried out a strike in Yemen that killed 12 people who were deemed militants. But local officials said the strike hit a wedding party, and CIA analysts could not say with confidence that all the dead were combatants.

And after a CIA strike in 2011 killed 44 in Pakistan, CIA officials insisted the dead were all linked to the Taliban. But Pakistani officials said the agency had hit a meeting to settle a mining dispute, and that most of those killed were civilians.

In 2013, according to Amnesty, a strike in Pakistan killed a 68-year-old Pakistani grandmother named Mamana Bibi and 18 civilian laborers.

Whether the Obama administration's civilian casualty report will address those and other disputed strikes is unclear.

Many of the alleged mistakes came during the early years of the Obama administration, when the CIA and JSOC expanded their use of so-called signature strikes -- attacks against groups of militants who fit the pattern of terrorists, but whose identities weren't known. NBC News reported in 2013 on classified documents showing the CIA did not always know who it was killing.

There is also a drone campaign ongoing against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but that effort is part of a larger conventional bombing campaign operating under the less stringent rules for military targeting that does not apply the "near certainty" standard. The U.S. military, which releases aggregate numbers of strikes, refuses to say which attacks came from unmanned platforms.

The military drone program is technically separate from the one operated by the CIA, but it relies on intelligence gathered from unarmed CIA drones, as well as on human sources, NSA intercepts, and other intelligence. Obama has been shifting the bulk of lethal drone attacks from the CIA to the military, but the CIA retains the capability for cases when the host country will not allow a U.S. military presence.

The level of civilian casualties from that effort is also in dispute. The military counts 41 total, while the website Airwars says a minimum of 1,323 civilians have been killed by coalition action in Iraq and Syria.

The White House declined to comment.

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NOTABLE COMMENTARY

28. A daunting new reality poses threats to US

Boston Globe, June 25, Pg. A14 | Editorial

For American policy makers, the impending exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union has introduced a long list of new headaches -- and a much shorter list of new opportunities. The best that the Obama administration can hope for may be to soften the economic and political blow from the British vote on Thursday while seizing this opportunity to shore up NATO and other international organizations.

It's no secret that President Obama -- and a succession of US presidents before him -- supported British membership in the EU. The union has helped ensure peace on the continent by drawing the once-warring countries closer together economically and culturally. But now British voters, worried that their nation was losing too much sovereignty to the bloc, have chosen a different direction.

That's their right, as Obama had no choice but to acknowledge in his remarks on Friday. But the British vote does imperil several American interests.

Most immediately, the likely economic slowdown could spread if policy makers aren't careful. Stock markets plunged on Friday. British voters voluntarily accepted the risk of recession when they voted to leave the union, but now that risk has been inflicted on everyone else too. The Federal Reserve should take interest rate hikes off the table until it's clear how much the Brexit vote affects the US economy. Another way to ease the economic pain would be for the United States immediately to commence bilateral trade talks with the UK. Before the vote, Obama said that wouldn't happen -- that the UK would go to the "back of the queue" -- but he should show enough pragmatism to jump at an economic opportunity in both nations' interests.

Meanwhile, American diplomats will also need to bolster friendships on the continent. The exit of America's closest international ally is likely to diminish US influence over future EU decision-making. American businesses are dreading the stricter regulation they might face in continental Europe now that the British and their similar values won't be at the negotiating table.

Thursday's "leave" victory could also inspire copycats. In France, for instance, the leader of the right-wing National Front says France should get a vote next. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, leader of the anti-EU Dutch Party for Freedom, wants a "Nexit" vote. The United States benefits from a strong and stable EU that is not enmeshed in a constant existential war with itself.

The departure of Britain from the EU could also introduce an element of instability to Northern Ireland, where the United States played a central role in crafting the peace accord. It now seems that the United Kingdom will be convulsed with status questions of its constituent parts -- Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales. It will take watchful diplomacy by the United States and others to ensure that nothing upsets the last 20 years of peace in Belfast.

As the dust settled from the geopolitical earthquake on Friday, a few faint silver linings appeared. If nothing else, the EU's troubles could make other international institutions more relevant. NATO, the other major pillar of the postwar European order, has shrunk in importance since the Cold War; many European countries don't even meet their mandated military spending levels. Perhaps the trouble gripping the EU will make it easier to convince European allies to recommit to NATO.

Finally, if things go badly in Britain after the exit, the experience could also provide a sobering warning to the rest of the world about the dangers that can come from indulging atavistic nationalism. The EU debate in Britain -- which included silly discussion about bananas, among other frivolities -- did not always match the gravity of the decision that faced voters. For relatively prosperous countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, it's sometimes possible to forget that politics is serious business. Sadly, the UK and the rest of the world is in for a rough spell that may dispel that notion for voters everywhere.

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29. Darkening skies over Bahrain

A Sunni monarchy represses a Shiite cleric and opposition

Washington Post, June 25, Pg. A18 | Editorial

When Bahrain announced a decision Monday to strip the citizenship of a leading Shiite cleric, Sheik Isa Qassim, it accused him of "creating an extremist sectarian environment" and claimed he had "encouraged sectarianism and violence." In fact, Bahrain's ruling monarchy and government are the ones fomenting division. In recent weeks, they also dissolved the main Shiite opposition group, al-Wefaq, of which Sheik Qassim was the spiritual leader.

These and other repressive measures taken lately are likely to backfire. Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy in the Persian Gulf that hosts the U.S. 5th Fleet, has been cracking heads of the opposition ever since the Arab Spring broke out five years ago and has harshly repressed those who sought a greater political voice for the country's Shiite majority. The latest actions take the ruling al-Khalifa family still farther down the road of despotism and could trigger new waves of protest. The leader of Iran's elite Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard Corps immediately vowed to stir up an armed revolt.

Bahrain's decision means that Sheik Qassim could be deported. Human Rights Watch said the authorities have produced no evidence to support the charges against him. Since July 2014, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Bahrain has stripped more than 250 people of their citizenship, a pernicious form of punishment.

At the same time, on May 30, a court in Bahrain more than doubled the prison sentence imposed by a lower court on opposition leader Sheik Ali Salman, from four to nine years. As secretary general of the now-defunct al-Wefaq, which was the country's largest legally recognized opposition political group, he had given speeches explicitly repudiating the use of force and calling for nonviolence, but he was nonetheless found guilty of having "justified acts of violence and sabotage, provoking regime change and calling for Jihad as a form of religious duty." Human Rights Watch said the court ignored videos of his speeches and may have relied instead on a government report that misrepresented what he said.

Also alarming, the authorities on June 13 detained the prominent human rights activist Nabeel Rajab and on June 21 extended his imprisonment for eight days, on charges of "spreading false news . . . in a bid to discredit Bahrain."

The kingdom had promised reforms after the crackdown of 2011 but largely failed to deliver. A report by the State Department just sent to Congress says that Bahrain did establish some institutions of accountability and oversight but has fallen down on the vital issues of allowing free speech and assembly, and establishing due process. Last year, the Obama administration lifted some holds on military sales to Bahrain. Perhaps this sent a signal to the king and his regime that there would be no further consequences from Washington if they pummeled the opposition again. At the very least, it is time to send a different signal - if necessary by holding up U.S. military sales - that Bahrain's contempt for dissent and basic human rights is intolerable.

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30. The Obama administration is failing to stop China's Pacific aggression

Washington Post Online, June 24 | Josh Rogin

This month, on their way from Taiwan to Japan, a group of U.S. senators inadvertently flew over a set of islands that both the Chinese and Japanese claim as their own. The Chinese government was incensed.

I obtained a formal protest letter from the Chinese Embassy in Washington sent to the Senate Armed Services Committee this week demanding that no U.S. official ever again fly in a straight line from Taipei to Tokyo, which takes you over what the Japanese call the Senkaku Islands and the Chinese call the Diaoyu Islands.

"Diaoyu Dao has been an inherent territory of China since ancient times," the Chinese Embassy wrote. "The American aircraft entered China's territorial airspace in violation of international law and the norm of international relations, which was a serious provocation against China's sovereignty and security. . . . China will staunchly defend its territorial sovereignty over Diaoyu Dao."

The incident was just the latest signal that the Obama administration's strategy to deter Chinese aggression and encourage China's good behavior in the South and East China seas is falling short. President Obama has tried to build a policy on diplomacy, quiet warnings and restrained military gestures. It's not working. China has rebuffed them all, and if it loses and then ignores an arbitration case shortly as expected, then it's not clear his administration has any new tools in its toolbox.

Over the past few weeks, the administration has tried to maintain the image that its South China Sea strategy is viable. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore this month, top defense and military officials insisted that the policy still might bear fruit and restrained themselves from saying anything that might upset their Chinese counterparts.

Unlike last year, Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter's keynote speech at the conference contained no messages crafted to send tough signals to the Chinese officials in the room. He briefly criticized Chinese aggression toward the end of his remarks.

"China's actions in the South China Sea are isolating it, at a time when the entire region is coming together and networking. Unfortunately, if these actions continue, China could end up erecting a Great Wall of self-isolation," he said.

Asked directly how the United States plans to change China's strategic calculation that maritime expansion is in its best interest, Carter had no real answer. He pointed to the upcoming decision by an international tribunal on a case between China and the Philippines as a "big opportunity" for the region to return to a rules-based international order and quickly added, "I wouldn't single out China."

The White House had made it clear to Carter's staff that it wanted no disruptions ahead of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, which was to begin only days later, several U.S. officials told me. Only one week earlier, the White House scolded Carter after he gave a speech more critical of China at the U.S. Naval Academy. The White House was not upset at the content of the speech, officials said, but resented that Carter made headlines and upstaged Obama's visit to Hiroshima.

Even Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., head of the U.S. Pacific Command, who last year coined the phrase "great wall of sand" to protest Chinese island reclamation, avoided any criticism of China at the Singapore conference. "We've seen positive behavior the last several months with China," he told reporters, praising what he said were Chinese efforts to avoid incidents in contested waters.

Carter and Harris's charm offensive was not returned in kind by the Chinese military officials at Shangri-La. Adm. Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the joint staff development for China's Central Military Commission, gave a fiery speech in which he declared that China had done nothing wrong in the South China Sea and has no intention of abiding by the ruling of the international tribunal Carter touted.

Sun then accused the United States of "openly flaunting its military force, and on the other hand pulling in help from cliques, supporting their allies in antagonizing China."

As of yet, U.S. moves to respond to China's expansion and militarization in the South China Sea have not persuaded China to change course. The United States has sailed ships through contested waters, deployed U.S. troops and equipment in the Philippines, held huge military exercises with India and Japan, moved two aircraft carrier groups into the region and invested millions of dollars in new security partnerships.

China continues to harden its military facilities on artificial islands it built in the South China Sea, has begun sailing navy ships in the Senkakus and has ramped up its harassment of fishing boats from other countries in disputed waters. China reportedly is planning new construction on disputed islands in the Scarborough Shoal, and U.S. officials worry that China will soon announce a new Air Defense Identification Zone in the South China Sea.

The diplomatic effort to get all Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries together to stand up to China had recent setbacks as well. Last week, the United States worked behind the scenes to get all of the ASEAN foreign ministers to issue a statement criticizing China's actions in the South China Sea. They issued a very strong

statement but then retracted it only hours later under heavy Chinese government pressure. Now the Chinese are working hard to cut a side deal with the Philippines by offering the new president in Manila a new railway system.

The Obama administration has never been willing to use the big tools at its disposal — for example, economic sanctions — to confront Chinese maritime aggression, and there's no sign that reluctance will change.

"If there were economic consequences of some kind involved, we would be more likely to get their attention," said Bonnie Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "But most people in this administration are reluctant to say we are going to put the whole relationship at stake over this. And when you get to the final months of an administration, you begin to lose leverage."

To the unresolved problems the Obama administration will bequeath its successor — Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, North Korea — you can add China's assertiveness in the South and East China seas.

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