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Venezuela: Another black eye for Chinese economic diplomacy

February 14, 2019 spacedaily.com reported: "China and Venezuela seemed like natural bedfellows: one is the planet's top crude-oil importer and the other possesses the world's largest reserves.

But Venezuela's descent into crisis -- with President Nicolas Maduro and self-proclaimed leader Juan Guaido vying for control as the economy unravels -- has highlighted the gamble inherent in China's \$60 billion investment in the South American nation.

Over the past decade Beijing has extended vast amounts of credit to Caracas for oil shipments and infrastructure deals, in what China has touted as a "mutually beneficial" relationship.

Yet Venezuela is wracked by recession and hyperinflation while millions of people are suffering from shortages of basic necessities such as food and medicine -- and vital oil production has dropped to a three-decade low.

"Venezuela's story is an important one," said Margaret Myers, director of the Asia & Latin America Program at the Inter-American Dialogue, a US-based think tank.

"Other countries in the region commonly reference Venezuela as a cautionary tale when determining how best to engage with China."

The situation also shines more unflattering light on Beijing's \$1 trillion "Belt and Road" project, a Chinese initiative to offer loans or investment in infrastructure and other projects across a range of countries.

Critics say the project saddles countries with debt that they cannot repay, increasing China's influence over them.

"By playing such a central role in Venezuela, China has provided evidence for the US government's argument that Beijing's financing worsens corruption and ensnares emerging-market borrowers in a debt trap," said Benjamin Gedan, senior advisor at the Wilson Center's Latin American Program. "..."

'There will be no peace without 1967 lands'

February 13, 2019 Arutz Sheva 7 reported: "Representatives of Palestinian Arab organizations, who participated in a Russian-sponsored conference in Moscow, issued a joint statement stressing the common desire to work toward unity in the Palestinian camp and an end to the split.

The statement said that the Palestinians have the right to fight the 'occupation' using all legitimate means and methods, as well as to resist attempts to label the resistance of the 'Palestinian people' as 'terrorism.'

The Palestinian organizations expressed strong opposition to the 'Deal of the Century', as the US peace initiative to resolve the conflict with Israel has come to be known, and all attempts to 'eliminate the Palestinian problem,' such as economic peace and the establishment of a state with temporary borders..."



Top Commander: China 'Eroding' U.S. Military Advantage in Asia

February 13, 2019 breitbart.com reported: "China's 'massive effort to grow and modernize' the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is 'eroding' the United States' 'relative competitive military advantage' in the Indo-Pacific region, the top American commander in the area warned on Tuesday, stressing that Beijing's communist leaders are sensing 'weaknesses.'

Adm. Philip Davidson's warnings came as part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's (INDOPACOM) annual posture statement — a comprehensive report on the combatant command's role, missions, accomplishments, plans, and programs — presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday in the form of written testimony..."

Pompeo seeks to woo Hungary's Orban away from Russia, China

February 12, 2019 spacedaily.com reported: "US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo voiced hope Monday that renewed American engagement with Hungary's Viktor Orban would help steer the increasingly authoritarian leader away from Russian and Chinese influence.

But Hungary's foreign minister retorted that Budapest was tired of the West's "enormous hypocrisy".

Hungary, Russia's closest friend within the European Union, agreed with Pompeo to seek closer defence ties and cast itself as a natural ally for President Donald Trump's brand of nationalist politics.

Pompeo had dinner with Orban on the first visit in seven years by a US secretary of state to Budapest, the first leg of his Central European tour.

The US top diplomat opened his trip by meeting representatives of Hungarian civil society groups, who praised Pompeo for the show of support as their ability to promote human rights and transparency is steadily curtailed.

Pompeo later told Orban's government that he would be upfront about concerns with Hungary and voiced worries about inroads of influence by both Russian President Vladimir Putin and China.

"We must not let Putin drive wedges between friends in NATO," Pompeo said. "An authoritarian Russia will never be a friend to the freedom and sovereignty of smaller nations."

Alluding to former president Barack Obama's cold shoulder to Orban, Pompeo said the United States had pushed Hungary into the arms of "folks who didn't share our values" and vowed to "compete for positive influence in the region".

Pompeo, standing next to Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto at a joint news conference, said the US was "increasing support to help Hungary in its fight against corruption" and highlighted US help to train an independent media -- under fire from Orban." ..."

Yellowstone volcano: How scientists 'intensely monitor' rising column of HOT MAGMA

February 12, 2019 express.co.uk reported: "Volcanoes typically erupt when molten rock, known as magma, rises to the surface following the Earth's mantle melting due to tectonic plates shifting.

This act creates a series of small earthquakes, fracturing the rock above it days or even weeks before the main eruption.

Robert Smith, from the University of Utah, is in charge of the seismometers around Yellowstone National Park. This technology is designed to detect any change in activity, and give anyone in the immediate area some valuable time to evacuate."

Mr. Smith revealed during History Channel documentary "Deadliest Volcanoes" how important it is to constantly watch Yellowstone.

He said in 2014: "We have seismic vaults with seismographs inside...

"We can reconstruct a 3D picture like an MRI scan by recording thousands of earthquakes."

The documentary then reveals how the mapping system of more than 150 seismometers has identified a 400-mile-long magma plume rising from the Earth's core. Should this reach the surface, there could be catastrophic effects. The last eruption of Yellowstone produced around 2,500 times more volcanic material than the 1980 eruption of Mount St Helens."..."

China says US aims to 'stir up trouble' with naval sail-by

February 11, 2019 spacedaily.com reported: China accused the United States of trying to "stir up trouble" on Monday by sending two US guided-missile destroyers near disputed South China Sea islands.

The two warships sailed near the Beijing-claimed Spratly Islands earlier Monday as part of what Washington calls "freedom of navigation operations", Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a daily press briefing.

The US is "determined to stir up trouble in the South China Sea, create tension and undermine peace", Hua said.

She urged the US to cease the "provocative actions".

The sail-bys -- conducted by USS Spruance and USS Preble -- occurred as both sides started crucial trade talks in Beijing this week, seeking to avoid an all-out trade war between the world's two biggest economies." ..."

Europe not to be trusted: Iran leader

February 11, 2019 spacedaily.com reported: "Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Friday that Europe 'cannot be trusted', a week after the EU launched a trade mechanism to bypass US sanctions on Tehran.

'These days there's talk of the Europeans and their proposals. My advice is that they shouldn't be trusted, just like the Americans,' he said at a meeting with air force officials, his website reported.

'I'm not saying we shouldn't have relations with them. This is about trust,' he added.

Britain, France and Germany last week launched a special payment mechanism called INSTEX to help save the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers. It would allow Tehran to keep trading with EU companies in spite of US sanctions renewed after Washington quit the accord last year..."

Iran ready to boost uranium enrichment, says official

February 11, 2019 Arutz Sheva 7 reported: "Iran is ready to boost the capacity of its uranium enrichment, a spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) said Sunday, according to the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS).

'Based on a decree by Iran's Supreme Leader and the emphasis put on this issue by AEOI head, the country is ready to increase its uranium enrichment capacity to 190,000 separative work units (SWUs),' the spokesman, Behrouz Kamalvandi, was quoted as having said.

Kamalvandi said that Iran is also ready to increase the level of its uranium enrichment to 20 percent of purity.

Iran has drawn up plans to start re-designing the Arak heavy water reactor given the fact that the signatories to the nuclear deal have failed to fulfill their commitments, Kamalvandi added, according to IANS..."

Iran warns it would 'raze Tel Aviv to the ground' if attacked by U.S.: IRNA

February 11, 2019 Reuters reported: "A senior Revolutionary Guards commander said on Monday that Iran would demolish cities in Israel to the ground if the United States attacked the Islamic Republic.

"...If they (United States) attack us, we will raze Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground," Yadollah Javani, the Guards' deputy head for political affairs was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA.

