

## US finally gets a new Pentagon chief as Senate confirms Esper



Mark Esper

Washington, United States

The US Senate yesterday confirmed former soldier Mark Esper as secretary of defense, filling America's longest-ever Pentagon leadership vacuum as Washington faces mounting tensions with Iran and struggles to end its long war in Afghanistan.

President Donald Trump's second Defense Department chief will take over nearly seven months after the shock departure of Jim Mattis, the deeply respected career US Marine who broke with Trump over policy towards the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Two others were made acting defense secretary this year to fill the void -- including Patrick Shanahan, who served a six-month temporary stint but resigned for family reasons in June and withdrew from consideration for the full-time top post.

Esper sailed through the confirmation process in lightning speed. He earned broad bipartisan support and was confirmed by a vote of 90 to 8.

He is expected to take his oath of office later Tuesday, according to the Pentagon.

Esper's confirmation brings ballast to a Pentagon destabilized by the leadership revolving door since late December, and as the world's primary military power is engaged in two wars -- in Syria and Afghanistan -- and being tested by Tehran.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, the top Republican in Congress, hailed Esper, who served a two-year stint as secretary of the US Army beginning in 2017, as "a thoroughly well prepared nominee" who has the respect of the national security community and can hit the ground running.

# Russia denies S.Korean airspace violation

● Moscow said two South Korean jets on Tuesday approached the Russian aircraft

Moscow, Russia

Moscow denied yesterday that its aircraft had violated South Korean airspace, saying its jets had carried out planned drills over international waters.

"Two Tu-95 strategic bombers of Russia's aerospace forces carried out a planned flight in the airspace above the neutral waters of the Sea of Japan," the defence ministry said in a statement.

It also denied that the South Korean planes fired warning shots.

Moscow said two South Korean jets on Tuesday approached the Russian aircraft near the easternmost islets of Dokdo, disputed islands controlled by the South but claimed by Japan where they are known as Takeshima.

The South Korean aircraft carried out "unprofessional manoeuvres" by crossing the



South Korea's Air Force scrambled fighter jets and fired warning shots at Russia bombers

Russian jets' flight path and "threatening their safety," the ministry said, adding that the South Korean crews did not contact their Russian counterparts.

Russia said its bombers did not veer off course and were more than 25 kilometers (15 miles) away from the islands.

"It was not the first time that South Korean pilots tried to unsuccessfully interfere with the flights of the Russian aviation forces above the neutral waters of the Sea of Japan," the ministry said in a statement.

Officials in South Korea said it was the first time a Russian plane had violated South Korean airspace.

South Korea's Air Force scrambled fighter jets and fired warning shots, an official at the Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

But Moscow said that there was no "warning fire" from South Korea otherwise the Russian jets would have retaliated.

"Had the Russian pilots felt under threat the response would not have been long in coming," the statement said.

## Van with \$140m of meth smashes into police car

Sydney, Australia

Australian authorities have uncovered a US\$140 million stash of amphetamines after an alleged criminal's run-in with the law saw his drug-filled van crash into an officer's car outside a police station.

Security camera footage released on Tuesday showed a white van ploughing into the front of a vehicle parked outside a suburban Sydney police station before speeding off down the street.

Police said the alleged 26-year-old driver was pulled over about an hour later, less than a 10-minute drive away from the accident scene.

The van was said to be packed with moving boxes containing 237 kilograms (523 pounds) of methamphetamine, an illegal drug commonly known as "ice",



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with a total estimated street value of AUS\$200 million.

Australia has a growing problem with meth, with a government report released last year showing the country has proportionally more users than most nations. The van driver

has been charged with large commercial drug supply, negligent driving, and not giving particulars to police.

He was due to appear in a Sydney court later on Tuesday. No one was injured in the incident.

## Trump praises Pakistan's role in 'progress' on Afghan peace



US President Donald Trump shakes hands with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan (L) during a meeting in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, DC

● Trump warned he could end the conflict in a matter of days through force and "Afghanistan would be wiped off the face of the Earth"

Washington, United States

President Donald Trump on Monday hailed Pakistan's help in advancing peace talks in Afghanistan, a marked shift in tone as the United States seeks an accord with the Taliban to end almost 18 years of war.

Speaking from the Oval Office alongside Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, Trump also warned he could end the conflict in a matter of days through force and "Af-

ghanistan would be wiped off the face of the Earth," but preferred dialogue.

Pakistan was the Taliban's chief sponsor when it took power in neighbouring Afghanistan during the 1990s.

Its influence over the group, which has waged an insurgency since it was ousted from power by US-led forces in 2001, is seen as key in facilitating a political settlement with the government of President Ashraf Ghani.

"We've made a lot of progress over the last couple of weeks, and Pakistan has helped us with that progress," said Trump.

"A lot of things are happening for the United States, and I think a lot of great things are going to be happening for Pakistan under your leadership," he added as he turned to face his counterpart.

## Kuwait receives \$270 million in war reparations

Geneva, Switzerland

Kuwait has received another \$270 million in compensation for Iraq's 1990 invasion, the UN said yesterday, as it aims to wrap up reparations more than a decade after Saddam Hussein's death.

The United Nations Compensation Commission was set up in 1991, the same year that a US-led coalition drove former Iraqi dictator Hussein's forces out of Kuwait.

The commission has been authorised to pay out \$52.4 billion (46.8 billion euros) to individuals, corporations, government bod-

ies and other organisations that incurred losses directly caused by the Iraqi leader's incursion and occupation of Kuwait.

The funds come from a levy on the sale of Iraqi oil and petroleum products.

With the latest payment, the commission said it had paid out a total of \$48.7 billion, leaving \$3.7 billion left to be distributed.

Those funds are tied to a single claim submitted by the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation losses in oil production and damage to oil field assets, the commission said in a statement.

# Facebook to fix kids app flaw allowing chats with strangers

San Francisco, United States

Facebook acknowledged yesterday that a flaw in its Messenger Kids service allowed children get into group chats with people who were not approved by their parents.

The leading social network said it has been shutting down the group chats involved and notifying thousands of parents that their children many have unintentionally connected with strangers.

"We recently notified some parents of Messenger Kids account users about a technical error that we detected affecting a small number of group chats," Facebook said in response to an AFP inquiry.

"We turned off the affected chats and provided parents with



Representative picture

additional resources on Messenger Kids and online safety."

Technology news website The Verge first reported on the development, publishing a copy of an alert informing parents that the flaw allowed a child's friend to create a group chat involving people who were not on their child's list of approved connections.

Group chat involvement was still limited by restrictions set by the parents of whoever got it going.

Facebook in December 2017 introduced a version of its Messenger application designed to let children between six and 12 years old connect with others under parental supervision. No in-app purchases are allowed. The social media giant said at

the time that it created the app as a safe environment because many children had been going online without safeguards.

Facebook's rules require that children be at least 13 to create an account.

The slip comes as Facebook works to rebuild the trust of users and regulators, and could prompt scrutiny as to whether the leading social network violated law regarding the privacy of children.

It also comes as the California-based internet giant continues to deal with the aftermath of revelations that personal data on tens of millions of users was hijacked by the political consultancy Cambridge Analytica, which was working on the Donald Trump campaign in 2016.