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Putin shake-up could keep him in power past 2024 as cabinet steps aside



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U.S. and China tiptoe around holes in new trade agreement



Chinese Vice Premier Liu He and U.S. President Donald Trump shake hands after signing “phase one” of the U.S.-China trade agreement during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington, U.S., January 15, 2020. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States and China signed an initial trade deal on Wednesday that will roll back some tariffs and boost Chinese purchases of U.S. products, defusing an 18-month row between the world’s two largest economies but leaving a number of sore spots unresolved.

Beijing and Washington touted the “Phase 1” agreement as a step forward after months of start-and-stop talks, and investors greeted the news with relief. Even so, there was skepticism the U.S.-China trade relationship was now firmly on the mend.

The deal fails to address structural economic issues that led to the trade conflict, does not fully eliminate the tariffs that have slowed the global economy, and sets hard-to-achieve purchase targets, analysts and industry leaders said.

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While acknowledging the need for further negotiations with China to solve a host of other problems, President Donald Trump hailed the agreement as a win for the U.S. economy and his administration’s trade policies.

“Together, we are righting the wrongs of the past and de-

livering a future of economic justice and security for American workers, farmers and families,” Trump said in rambling remarks at the White House alongside U.S. and Chinese officials.

Chinese Vice Premier Liu He read a letter from President Xi Jinping in which the Chinese leader praised the deal as a sign the two countries could resolve their differences with dialogue. The centerpiece of the deal is a pledge by China to purchase at least an additional \$200 billion worth of U.S. farm products and other goods and services over two years, above a baseline of \$186 billion in purchases in 2017, the White House said.

Commitments include \$54 billion in additional energy purchases, \$78 billion in additional manufacturing purchases, \$32 billion more in farm products, and \$38 billion in services, according to a deal document released by the White House.

Liu said Chinese companies would buy \$40 billion in U.S. agricultural products annually over the next two years “based on market conditions.” Beijing had balked at committing to buy set amounts of U.S. farm goods earlier, and has inked new soybean contracts with Brazil since the trade war started.

Key world stock market indexes climbed to record highs on hopes the deal would reduce tensions, before closing below those highs, while oil prices slid on doubts the pact will spur world economic growth and boost crude demand. Soybean futures, which traded 0.4% lower throughout much of the deal signing ceremony, sank even further after Liu’s remarks, a sign that farmers and traders were dubious about the purchase goals. The deal does not end retaliatory tariffs on American farm

exports, makes farmers “increasingly reliant” on Chinese state-controlled purchases, and does not address “big structural changes,” Michelle Erickson-Jones, a wheat farmer and spokeswoman for Farmers for Free Trade, said in a statement. Trump and his economic advisers had pledged to attack Beijing’s long-standing practice of proping up state-owned companies and flooding international markets with low-priced goods as the trade war heated up. Although the deal could be a boost to U.S. farmers, automakers and heavy equipment manufacturers, some analysts question China’s ability to divert imports from other trading partners to the United States. “I find a radical shift in Chinese spending unlikely. I have low expectations for meeting stated goals,” said Jim Paulsen, chief investment strategist at Leuthold Group in Minneapolis. “But I do think the whole negotiation has moved the football forward for both the U.S. and China.” Trump, who has embraced an “America First” policy aimed at rebalancing global trade in favor of U.S. companies and workers, said China had pledged action to confront the problem of pirated or counterfeited goods and said the deal included strong protection of intellectual property rights. U.S. Speaker of the House of Representative Nancy Pelosi said Trump’s China strategy had “inflicted deep, long-term damage to American agriculture and rattled our economy in exchange for more of the promises that Beijing has been breaking for years,” in a statement.



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Putin shake-up could keep him in power past 2024 as cabinet steps aside

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed constitutional changes on Wednesday that would give him scope to extend his grip on power after leaving the presidency, and picked a new prime minister after Dmitry Medvedev and his cabinet stepped down.

Most importantly, Putin suggested diminishing the powers of the presidency and beefing up those of the prime minister.

The dramatic moves were widely seen as preparing the ground for 2024, when Putin, now 67, is obliged to leave the presidency after occupying the Kremlin or the prime minister's job continuously since 1999.

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Putin nominated Mikhail Mishustin, 53-year-old head of the tax service, as the next prime minister. Mishustin, who will be quizzed by parliament on Thursday, has played ice hockey with Putin but has little public profile and had not been spoken of as a possible candidate.

He will inevitably be viewed as a possible successor to a shrunken presidency, as will members of his cabinet, many of whom are expected to be new to government.

Critics have long accused Putin, a former KGB officer, of plotting to stay on in some capacity after his term ends to wield power over the world's largest nation - and one of its two biggest nuclear power
His proposals, which he suggested should be put to a referendum, would give him the option of taking an enhanced role as prime minister after 2024 or a new role as head of the State Council, an official body he said he was keen to build up. He could even become speaker of a new, supercharged parliament.



Russian President Vladimir Putin is seen on screen as he delivers his annual state of the nation address to the Federal Assembly in Moscow, Russia January 15, 2020. REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

Opposition politician Leonid Volkov said it looked as though Putin was digging in.

‘LEGAL COUP’
“It’s clear to everyone that everything is going exclusively towards setting Putin up to rule for life,” he wrote on social media.
Russian President Vladimir Putin is seen on screen as he delivers his annual state of the nation address to the Federal Assembly in Moscow, Russia

January 15, 2020. REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov
Dmitry Gudkov, another opposition politician, said Putin, re-elected last year for his fourth term, had decided to re-arrange everything around him now rather than wait until closer to 2024.
“Constitutional coups like this occur and are completely legal,” wrote Gudkov.

Under the current constitution, which sets a maximum of two suc-

cessive terms, Putin is barred from immediately running again, but his supporters find it hard to imagine Russian political life without him. It was unclear when a referendum on the changes might be held or when the changes could take effect, but Putin told the political elite in his annual state-of-the-nation speech that he wanted the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, to have the power to choose the prime minister and other key positions.

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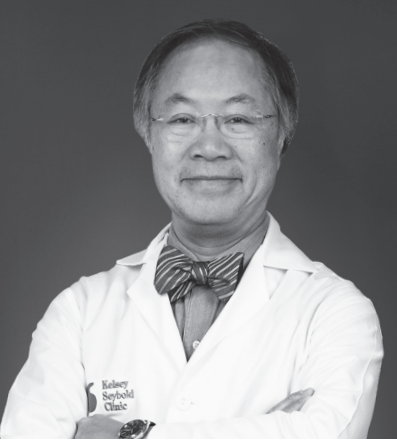
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Editor's Choice



A team of volunteers takes care of dogs rescued from the homes of residents who have evacuated due to the erupting Taal Volcano in Batangas



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during a campaign rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S., January 14, 2020. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY



Mourners attend a memorial for the victims of a Ukrainian passenger jet which was shot down in Iran



U.S. President Donald Trump holds a campaign rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin



A Secret Service agent directs news photographers in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington



Actors Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen attend the premiere of “Star Trek: Picard” in London, Britain January 15, 2020. REUTERS/Simon Dawson TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY



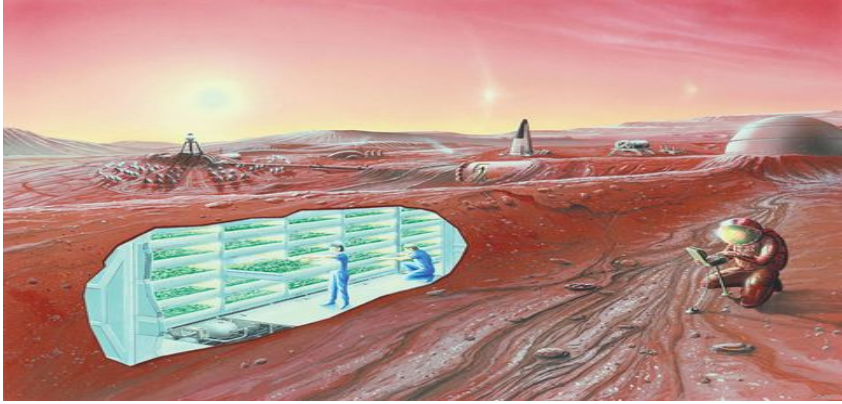
Democratic 2020 U.S. presidential candidates former Vice President Joe Biden greets Senator Bernie Sanders as they take the stage for the seventh Democratic 2020 presidential debate at Drake University in Des Moines



Protest over economic hardship and lack of new government in Beirut

The More Resources We Can Harness On The Red Planet, The Fewer We Need To Bring With Us

Almost Everything We Need To Live On Mars Is Already There



Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

We continue to learn that Mars is rich with resources that could be vital to supporting astronauts on the Red Planet for any extended period of time. Instead of launching resources such as water and materials to build a habitat to Mars, it could potentially be much more cost effective to send automated robots to harvest resources from the Martian surface and atmosphere in preparation for the arrival of humans. This colonization strategy is the subject of an April 2016 NASA scientific and technical information (STI) paper titled “Frontier In-Situ Resource Utilization for Enabling Sustained Human Presence on Mars,” which argues that the information we have gleaned from rovers and orbiters suggests that there is an abundance of useful resources already on Mars. What’s more, we are on the cusp of developing the technology that would be required to extract resources on Mars with robotic systems so they would be immediately available to arriving astronauts.

From the paper:

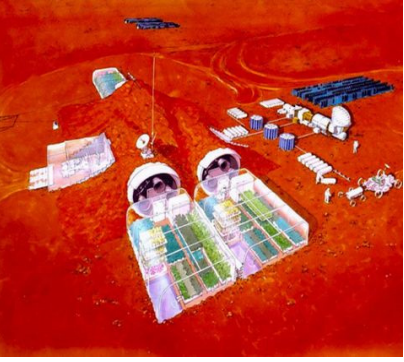
In recent years, measurements by rovers and satellites at Mars have indicated massive amounts of water in the form of ice beneath and within the regolith. At times, during the Martian year, liq-

uid water is observed on the surface of Mars. If the planet were flat and the ice melted, there would be an ocean many meters deep on the entire planet. These huge deposits of water can be extracted in several ways and combined with the large amounts of carbon residing in the 95% CO2 atmosphere to produce life support fluids, fuels, oxidizers, and plastics for equipment, including rovers and spare parts.



The tentative plan all starts with water. By sending in-situ resource utilization (ISRU) equipment to regions of Mars with subsurface water ice deposits, we could extract the water that is key to producing other materials. Carbon extracted from the atmosphere could then be used to make a wide range of things, from plastics to rocket propellant to habitat-heating fuel. Mineral resources are in abundance as well, including iron, titanium, nickel,

aluminum, sulfur, chlorine and calcium. “Clay-like minerals are also ubiquitous in the Martian surface soils, making the manufacturing of ceramics for pottery and similar purposes a straightforward enterprise,” reads the STI paper. “The most common material measured by the Viking landers on Mars was silicon dioxide (SiO2)... the basic constituent of glass, which thus can readily be produced on Mars using sand-melting techniques similar to those that have been used on Earth for thousands of years.” SiO2 could also be used to make “many important glass products, including fiberglass, an excellent material for constructing various types of structures.” To protect Martian settlers from cosmic radiation and intense cold, the most logical thing to do is build habitats underground, ultimately filling the caverns with inflatable habitat modules. Digging out habitats would also be an efficient way to expose subsurface water ice and other resources needed for ISRU.



Food could also be produced on Mars in a “protected atmospheric environment using sunlight,” or possibly using an artificial light source. “Earth independence requires that the astronauts grow their own food or that the food be grown for them robotically. Such robotic agriculture exists now. Possible food sources which could be produced on planet include mushrooms, insects, cyanobacteria (e.g. spirulina) and duckweed, along with many others.” The STI paper also mentions the possibility of developing a “rice paddy aquaculture” or “taking a plethora of insect species to Mars.” If this all sounds familiar that is because,

yes, this is pretty much exactly how it all goes down in Kim Stanley Robinson’s Red Mars. To actually realize a Martian outpost anything like what is outlined in the STI paper (and/or Red Mars), we would rely on advances in robotics technology and automated systems. Basically, we would need to send robots to start building our Martian settlement for us before we arrive, and continue to maintain the habitat, food-production systems, and other equipment. “The crew is there to explore, and to colonize, not maintain and repair. Any time spent on ‘living there’ and ‘housekeeping’ should be minimized to an oversight role of robotic automated tasks,” reads the STI paper.



We are starting to scratch the surface of developing robotic systems that could break ground on our new Martian home. A prototype instrument called Moxie will be included on the Mars 2020 rover for extracting oxygen from the Martian atmosphere. NASA is also considering a plan to launch an orbiter to Mars in 2022 that would search for ice deposits near the surface of the Red Planet, helping scientists pick the ideal location for a Martian outpost. The point is, the resources we need are already there waiting for us. We just need to figure out how to use them. (Courtesy/ NASA via Aviation Week)





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**Trump To Headline Farm Bureau Convention For
3rd Straight Year On Heels of China Deal Signing**

**Trump To Visit Austin For Farm
Bureau’s Annual Convention**



Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

President Donald Trump will speak at the American Farm Bureau Federation’s annual convention Sunday in downtown Austin. Trump and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He signed a “phase one” trade agreement in which China has pledged to buy at least \$40 billion annually in U.S. farm commodities in 2020 and 2021. Trump’s planned appearance this year also comes as the Senate is close to providing final congressional approval to the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, a renegotiated version of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Trump administration is close to finalizing a new rule redefining what streams, wetlands and other areas fall under the jurisdiction of the Clean Water Act. Repealing and replacing an Obama-era “waters of the U.S.” rule, as the juris-

diction regulations are known, has been a major priority of AFBF. The Austin meeting will be the 101st annual meeting of AFBF. The event, which Trump will headline for the third consecutive year, will be held at the Austin Convention Center, the organization announced in a news release Monday. “The American Farm Bureau is honored President Trump will return for a third consecutive year to speak with farmers and ranchers who work tirelessly to produce the quality food and fiber our country needs,” the group’s president, Zippy Duvall, said in a statement. “We are grateful that he has made agricultural issues a priority and look forward to welcoming him to Austin at a time when there is much to talk about, from trade progress to important regulatory

reforms.”



Donald Trump greets Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton as Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick follows at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport on Nov. 20, before his visit to the Apple campus. (Photo/American-Statesman)

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler, Senate Agriculture Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kan., and Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., also are scheduled to attend, according to a news release on the Farm Bureau’s website. Trump likely will tout trade deals with China, Mexico and Canada as the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement awaits a Senate vote. The trade pact is viewed largely as a 21st century update of the North American Free Trade Agreement, rather than a complete rewrite. The Texas Farm Bureau praised the USMCA after the U.S. House passed the measure in a bipartisan vote in December, calling it “a victory for Texas agriculture when farmers and ranchers need it most.” And Trump’s appearance at the gathering comes on the heels of a limited trade agreement with China after a nearly two-year-old trade war. The U.S. trade war with China rattled Texas businesses and farmers throughout 2019. “China went from the second-largest market for U.S. agricultural products to the fifth-largest since the trade war began. Reopening the door to trade with China and others is key to helping farmers and ranchers get back on their feet,”

Duvall said the day after the China deal was announced in December.



The Trump administration offered a \$16 billion aid package in May for farmers affected by the trade war. Texas Farm Bureau President Russell Boening said the group was encouraged by the initial agreement with China in December. “This is excellent news for Texas farmers and ranchers. We are hopeful the Phase One agreement creates positive momentum toward the completion of further trade agreements with China in the near future,” Boening said in a statement. A spokesman for the Texas Democratic Party on Monday called Trump’s visit a political move as he tries to appease farmers’ worries about the trade war with China. “After making seven visits to Texas in 2019 and making another early in 2020, team Trump is clearly terrified of losing Texas,” Texas Democratic Party spokesman Abhi Rahman said in an email. “Trump’s failed policies, trade wars, and broken promises to Texas workers, farmers, and families are why he will lose.” A number of Democratic presidential candidates have intensified their efforts in Texas, where Democrats are hopeful that the state could flip from red to blue. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg stopped in Austin on Saturday as part of a tour through Texas, his third trip to the state as a candidate. Former Vice President Joe Biden and U.S. Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Bernie Sanders of Vermont also have ramped up their efforts in the state. Warren’s campaign opened an Austin of-

fice in December and announced that it has hired more than two dozen full-time staffers and organizers across the state. Trump’s visit on Sunday will mark his second trip to Austin in less than two months.



Trump toured a Northwest Austin computer plant in November to celebrate Apple Inc.’s expansion in Central Texas. Apple CEO Tim Cook led the tour of the Fextronics plant where Mac Pro desktop computers are assembled after the company abandoned plans to shift that production to China after receiving federal tariff exemptions. Trump was joined by his daughter and adviser Ivanka Trump and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. (Courtesy statesman.com)

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