

Headlines:

- **US Intelligence Blames Saudi Prince for Khashoggi Murder**
- **Is the Pakistan-Iran-Turkey Rail Link Economically Viable?**
- **China's Economy Could Double in size by 2035 and Surpass the US Along the Way**

Details:

US Intelligence Blames Saudi Prince for Khashoggi Murder

The intelligence report comes a day after US President Joe Biden spoke with Saudi Arabia's King Salman, reportedly without mentioning the document. A US intelligence report found Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman approved the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The release of the report Friday could prove a test for normally close relations between Washington and Riyadh. It comes the day after US President Joe Biden's first phone call with Saudi King Salman. The Saudi government rejected the allegations, adding that it had taken "all possible measures within our legal system to ensure that these individuals were properly investigated, and to ensure that justice was served," the Foreign Ministry said in after the release of the report. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday the State Department will impose a "Khashoggi Ban," a set of restrictions on 76 Saudi individuals who are believed to be involved in the killing. "Starting today, we will have a new global policy bearing his name to impose visa restrictions on those who engage in extraterritorial attacks on journalists or activists," Blinken said on Twitter. But media reports suggest that the US will not impose sanctions on the crown prince. The United States wants change but not a "rupture" in ties with Saudi Arabia, Blinken said. "What we've done by the actions that we've taken is really not to rupture the relationship, but to recalibrate to be more in line with our interests and our values," he told reporters. The document cites Mohammad bin Salman's "absolute power" over Saudi intelligence and security forces since 2017. "The crown prince viewed Khashoggi as a threat to the Kingdom and broadly supported using violent measures if necessary to silence him," the report said. Washington Post journalist Khashoggi — a critic of the prince's apparent authoritarian consolidation of power — was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October, 2018. Saudi Arabia sentenced five people to 20 years each in prison over the murder. The document concluded that a close adviser of the royal family, who publicly said that he did not make decisions without Mohammad bin Salman's approval, was affiliated with a Saudi delegation that arrived in Istanbul in October 2018. Rather than mention the report, the White House said Biden and King Salman had discussed the two countries' "longstanding partnership." It said the US president had welcomed the kingdom's recent releases of political detainees, including women's right advocate Loujain al-Hathloul. The pair also discussed Iran's "destabilizing activities and its support for terrorist groups" in the Middle East. The language contrasted with Biden's pledge as a presidential candidate to make Saudi Arabia "a pariah" over the killing. [Source: Deutsche Welle]

By releasing the report, Biden intends to recast America's relationship with the GCC by bringing consensus on regional issues, especially ties with Iran. This upends Trumps approach which divided the GCC, and mobilized Saudi Arabia and UAE against the Iran deal in exchange for brokering a deal on Palestine, which failed to materialize. Additionally, Biden will employ human rights as a political weapon against dictatorships and major powers like Russia and China.

Is the Pakistan-Iran-Turkey Rail Link Economically Viable?

Iran, Pakistan and Turkey have agreed to revive a transnational train service, which is likely to connect Islamabad, Tehran and Istanbul this year. But can the three countries bear its cost? Last month, Turkish, Iranian and Pakistani officials agreed to revive the Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad (ITI) rail network, which was launched in 2009. The aim of the project is to enhance communication and trade links among the three countries. So far, the train has conducted trial runs, but officials signaled that it would be made operational soon. The 6,500-kilometer (4,030 miles) railway line will run 1,950 kilometers in Turkey, 2,600 kilometers in Iran and 1,990 kilometers in Pakistan.

Although the ITI is not part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), experts say the rail link would eventually be incorporated into it. Fatemeh Aman, an Iranian analyst at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center, says that if a proposed \$400 billion (€329 billion) deal between China and Iran becomes reality, Beijing would need more projects like the ITI to increase connectivity within the region. "Also, if China manages to take over the US's role in Asia, it will need a greater partnership with regional countries," she told DW. Experts say the ITI would increase connectivity among the three countries and make traveling much easier. It will take a lot less time to travel from Istanbul to Islamabad via train (11 days) than the sea route, which takes up to 21 days. "The ITI will make travel easier and safer than long-distance bus services. In the long term, it will possibly make the journey cheaper for pilgrims, and more enjoyable than air travel," Lukasz Przybyszewski, a West Asia analyst at the Warsaw's War Studies Academy, told DW. Aman believes that if the project becomes operational, it will "dramatically increase connectivity among Turkey, Iran and Pakistan." "It will expedite cargo and container transportation, shorten travel time, and save cost," Aman added. But Tom Hussain, an Islamabad-based analyst, is cautious about the project. "Many transnational freight train and gas pipeline projects have been gathering dust for decades because of political instability in the region," Hussain told DW. "Even now, the future of the ITI depends on two major factors: the lifting of US sanctions on Iran, and the end of the Afghan war. It would also require huge investments in the rail-port infrastructure for the project to be financially viable," he added. There could also be security risks to the ITI as it passes through areas that are hit hard by an Islamist militancy. The "Islamic State" (IS) militant group is particularly active in parts of Pakistan's western Balochistan province and Iran. Also, separatist insurgents in Balochistan regularly attack security forces in the province, which is key to the Chi But how will Pakistan, which is facing an acute economic crisis, fund this expensive project? The South Asian country's local railway network is a shambles, and upgrading the tracks in Balochistan province will be a mammoth task. "For Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, it is not the most cost-effective project, but it is necessary, nonetheless. We'll see its economic benefits in the years to come," said Przybyszewski. Islamabad-based analyst Hussain says the project will require massive foreign and private investment. "This is where China's BRI comes into play. It can prove to be a key player in the ITI operations, just like it is doing with the Eurasian connectivity," he underlined. However, media reports say that China will only lend "political support" to the ITI, and that Beijing expects Iran, Pakistan and Turkey to bear the project costs. [Source: Deutsche Welle]

Unless, the US gives its consent, it is unlikely that this project will take off. Furthermore, such transnational projects are only really viable when there is unity between the countries. Only the Khilafah Rashidah (rightly guided Caliphate) can provide such unity amongst these countries, and give real life to these projects.

China's Economy Could Double in size by 2035 and Surpass the US Along the Way

China stands a good chance of doubling the size of its economy by 2035 — and surpassing the U.S. as the world's largest economy along the way, said an economist from the Bank of America. As China seeks to become an advanced nation, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in November that it was possible to double the country's gross domestic product and per capita income by 2035. Doubling of China's GDP requires an average annual growth of 4.7% for the next 15 years — which some observers said may be hard to achieve. But Helen Qiao, head of Asia economics at BofA Global Research, said some reform measures would help China get there. "We think China would be able to achieve it," she told CNBC's "Street Signs Asia" on Friday. In addition to doubling its GDP, the Asian economic giant would surpass the U.S. as the world's largest economy around 2027 to 2028, predicted Qiao. China was one of the few economies globally that grew in 2020 despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Official data showed the Chinese economy expanding by 2.3% last year, and the International Monetary Fund has forecast an 8.1% growth for China this year. Meanwhile, the U.S. economy contracted by 3.5% in 2020, latest government estimates showed. The IMF said the U.S. economy could grow by 5.1% this year.

It is important to note that the Soviet's GDP was only 50% that of the US and the USSR was able to compete with the West. Today, China's GDP is 67% of the US economy, but China needs to flex its political and military muscles if America's primacy is to be displaced in the Asian Pacific and elsewhere.