

March 2018

INTERNATIONAL

Trade

March 8—US President Donald Trump signs an order increasing tariffs by 25% on steel imports and 10% on aluminum imports, invoking a little-used trade law that allows such moves when certain imports allegedly endanger national security. But he agrees to exempt Canada and Mexico pending a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The same day, a group of 11 nations sign a regional trade pact, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, at a meeting in Santiago, Chile. It is a revised version of the Trans-Pacific Partnership originally promoted by the US to counter Chinese influence in the region but abruptly abandoned in early 2017 by Trump. Even without US participation, the trade pact encompasses 500 million people and 13% of the global economy, including major US allies and trading partners around the Pacific Rim such as Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Australia.

March 22—Trump orders up to \$50 billion in trade penalties on China for alleged violations of US companies' intellectual property. China's Commerce Ministry the next day says it will impose \$3 billion in tariffs on a wide range of US goods in retaliation for the steel and aluminum tariffs, warning, "China does not want a trade war, but China is not afraid of a trade war."

March 28—US and South Korean officials announce a bilateral trade deal under which South Korea will cut steel exports to the US by nearly a third while lifting limits on imports of US-made autos. The concessions were linked to a March 22 decision by the US to exempt South Korea from the steel and aluminum tariffs along with the European Union, Argentina, Australia, and Brazil.

FRANCE

March 22—1,000s of railway workers, teachers, and other public-sector workers launch a nationwide strike to protest President Emmanuel Macron's plans for labor reforms, which include freezing salaries, introducing merit-based pay, cutting 120,000 jobs, and outsourcing work to private contractors. The rail workers say rolling strikes will continue at least until June with 2-day stoppages every 5 days.

IRAQ

March 21—The Iraqi national government approves an agreement with the Kurdish regional government under which Baghdad will contribute \$268 million to help pay the salaries of Kurdish security forces and civil servants, a sum that the Kurdish government is to match with funds from its own oil revenues. Tensions between the Kurdish region and the national government had escalated into military confrontation after Kurdish leaders in September 2017 defied Baghdad by holding a nonbinding referendum on independence.

ITALY

March 4—Anti-establishment parties win over half the vote in parliamentary elections. The populist Five Star Movement (M5S) finishes 1st with over 32% of the vote. The ruling center-left Democratic Party, led by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, is 2nd with 19%, its worst-ever result. Just behind, the far-right, anti-immigration League takes 18% after campaigning in an alliance with the center-right Forza Italia party of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, which takes 14%. M5S and the League

gained ground by giving voice to discontent over migration across the Mediterranean Sea from Africa. But analysts expect talks on forming a governing coalition to be difficult.

NORTH KOREA

March 28—Chinese and North Korean state media confirm that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has visited Beijing to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping over the past 2 days. It is the 34-year-old Kim's 1st trip abroad, and 1st meeting with a foreign head of state, since he took power in 2011. The meeting comes weeks before a planned summit between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in and a possible meeting between Kim and Trump. North Korea has turned to a diplomatic offensive after its nuclear weapons tests ratcheted up tensions during 2017, straining relations even with its ally China, which has supported international sanctions on North Korea.

PERU

March 23—Congress accepts the resignation of President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, less than 2 years after he was narrowly elected in a runoff against the daughter of autocratic former President Alberto Fujimori. Martin Vizcarra, a vice president and ambassador to Canada, is sworn in as Kuczynski's replacement. Kuczynski, while denying any wrongdoing, offered his resignation after videotapes were released showing supporters trying to buy the votes of opposition lawmakers to block impeachment proceedings against him. Kuczynski faced impeachment in connection with payments he received from the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht, which has been linked to bribery scandals across Latin America. Kuczynski's position had become more precarious after he issued a December pardon to release Fujimori from prison.

PHILIPPINES

March 14—President Rodrigo Duterte announces that he is pulling the Philippines out of the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the International Criminal Court. The Hague-based court had announced Feb. 8 that it was opening a preliminary inquiry into allegations that Duterte and other Philippine officials have committed crimes against humanity in an ongoing campaign in which an estimated 12,000 alleged drug dealers and users have been killed in raids by police and other assailants.

UNITED KINGDOM

March 12—Prime Minister Theresa May in an address to the House of Commons asserts it is "highly likely" that Russia was to blame for the March 4 poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the town of Salisbury. The Skripals were exposed to "a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by Russia," May says.

March 14—In response to what she calls "an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom," May orders the immediate expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats she says have been identified as "undeclared intelligence officers." Russia March 17 retaliates by ordering the same number of British diplomats to leave the country within a week and the closure of the British Council, a cultural and educational organization.

March 26—Acting in response to the British allegations, the US, EU member states, Canada, and Ukraine together expel more than 100 Russian diplomats. By the end of the week, Russia responds in kind. ■