

## International Briefs

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### British Intelligence Moving in To Run Ukrainian Cybersecurity

The British daily *The Telegraph* reported Feb. 16: “Britain is poised to double its troops in Estonia to more than 1,700, and cyber specialists from GCHQ have also been drafted in to help ‘toughen’ Kiev’s defenses. Senior military sources said both the UK and the U.S. were ‘helping harden’ Ukraine against cyberattacks with options to ‘disrupt any Russian offensive and counter their disinformation’.”

How willing will GCHQ be to obligingly “discover” evidence of alleged Russian cyber attacks? GCHQ is the General Communications Headquarters, Britain’s surveillance intelligence agency, often compared to the U.S. National Security Agency.

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### Nuclear Threat Initiative Urges To Negotiate and End War Threat

Three former U.S. officials, all currently leaders of the Nuclear Threat Initiative—Ambassador to Moscow and Beijing Jon Huntsman, former Senate Armed Services Committee chair Sam Nunn, and former Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz—pled for serious diplomacy in which “Leaders Must Untie the ‘Knot of War’ in Europe,” as they wrote in their Feb. 10 [op-ed](#) in *The Hill*. The three put the onus of the crisis upon Russia, but recognize that the onus of responsibility for heading off war falls equally on the West.

“The Euro-Atlantic region is on the precipice of the most significant conflict in generations, with a menacing

Russian military buildup on Ukraine’s borders and Ukraine and NATO shoring up defenses in response. With Russian demands viewed as unrealistic by NATO, and NATO replies termed inadequate by Moscow, leaders are now—as Chairman Nikita Khrushchev warned President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis—in danger of pulling the knot of war so tight that they will not have the strength to untie it,” they write.

While the authors are well-meaning, they do not propose decisive action to open a new paradigm, clinging to the belief that promises that Ukraine will not enter NATO for an extended time would suffice to gain time for long negotiations centered on other security arrangements.

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### A Ukrainian Initiative for Vatican Mediation?

Ukraine’s new Ambassador to the Holy See Andriy Yurash told Reuters on Feb. 14 that Ukraine would welcome Vatican mediation between Ukraine and Russia, as well as a Papal visit to Ukraine, “even now.” “As I understand it, the Vatican would be ready and happy to create this possibility for meeting leaders from both sides,” Yurash told Reuters. “Ukraine is completely in favor of [using] this very influential, very spiritual place for a meeting. If Russia confirms its willingness to sit at the table, immediately Ukraine will respond in a positive way.”

Yurash was reported to have referenced President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s statement to an Italian newspaper last April, that “the Vatican would be an ideal place for negotiating an end to the war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine,” as Reuters paraphrased him.

Yurash, the former head of the Department of Religious Affairs and Nationalities at Ukraine’s Ministry of Culture, will take up his post in Italy this month, according to Reuters.

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### Russia Expels Deputy U.S. Ambassador from Embassy in Moscow

Russia’s Foreign Ministry announced that Bart Gorman, the U.S. Deputy Ambassador to Russia, has been expelled from Russia. Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova explained: “The U.S. diplomat was indeed ordered to leave Russia, but strictly in response to the unjustified expulsion of the minister-counselor of our embassy in Washington, despite his status as a senior official.”

Gorman joined the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in 2019, coming from his position as the State Department’s Assistant Director for Threat Investigations and Analysis (TIA). There, he oversaw all Diplomatic Security programs that analyze, assess, investigate, and disseminate information on threats directed against U.S. diplomatic personnel overseas and domestically. The State Department response on Feb. 17 claimed that the expulsion was “unprovoked” and “an escalatory step.” A spokesperson said that Washington is “considering our response.”

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### Moscow’s Minister Siluanov on Defenses Against Financial Warfare

On Feb. 16, Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov responded to concerns of the effects of Western financial warfare sanctions against it. Sanctions

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against Russian banks, he said, would be "unpleasant," but he assured the government will make sure that all deposits with banks and all transactions, including in foreign currencies, are secured. He observed that Russia's abundant reserves can deal with any financial sanctions. "Thank God we have enough forex liquidity and enough forex reserves." As of early February, Russia had nearly \$635 billion in gold and foreign exchange reserves. He seemed to want to rub it in: "They say we have a financial shield in the form of gold and forex reserves, budget surplus and ... low debt."

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## **Brazil's Bolsonaro Meets Putin with Economic Cooperation on the Agenda**

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro began his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Feb. 16 by announcing that Brazil feels "a sense of solidarity with Russia. We have good prospects for cooperation in various areas, specifically defense, oil and gas, and agriculture. Our government ministers are also holding meetings. I am confident that my visit to Moscow is a signal to the whole world that our bilateral relations have good prospects for growth... We are ready for cooperation, and I would like to express confidence that this visit and our meeting will be quite productive." Putin said the two countries, both of which are members of the BRICS economic bloc (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), are "working pro-actively at international venues," and he remarked that Brazil is "the leading trade and economic partner of Russia in Latin America."

As could be expected, the U.S. State Department had tried to get Bolsonaro to cancel the planned trip to Russia. When that failed, they gave him instructions that he should focus on reading Russia the Riot Act over Ukraine, according

to a *Miami Herald* article that cited an unnamed State Department official.

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## **Russian International Affairs Council Posts Joint Seminar with Schiller Institute on Afghanistan**

The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) posted on its website the video of the Feb. 10 [seminar](#) on the "Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan: Towards a Durable Solution," jointly organized by the RIAC and the Schiller Institute. The seminar is also posted on the Schiller Institute's conference page. The entry cites the topics on the agenda for discussion and the speakers, the link to the video on the Schiller site, and RIAC's summary of its conclusions, as follows:

"The participants of the meeting came to the conclusion that an improvement in the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan in the short and medium term seems unlikely. The world community has not yet developed a unified position on the issue of recognizing the existing Afghan government. There is also no consensus on how to organize the supply of humanitarian aid, and how to distribute it among the Afghans. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has a regional significance and affects the situation in neighboring countries. This is an important reason why the solution of humanitarian issues should take precedence over political contradictions."

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## **Afghanistan Bank Official Denounces Biden's Executive Order**

Shah Mehrabi, a member of the Board of the Da Afghanistan Bank (Afghanistan's central bank), responded angrily to President Biden's announcement that the U.S. was stealing half the \$7 billion belonging to the Afghan

people, while diverting the other half from the central bank, supposedly to meet humanitarian needs through some other channels. "All of the foreign exchange reserves that are in the U.S. and Europe belong to the Afghan people," said Dr. Mehrabi. "The decision to release only part of the funds will continue to hurt millions of Afghan children, women, and families who are suffering one of the worst humanitarian and economic crises around the world."

The Afghan central bank itself issued a statement, saying it "considers the latest decision of the U.S. on blocking FX (foreign exchange) reserves and allocating them to irrelevant purposes, [an] injustice to the people of Afghanistan. [The bank] will never accept if the FX reserves of Afghanistan [are] paid under the name of compensation or humanitarian assistance to others, and wants the reversal of the decision and release of all FX reserves of Afghanistan."

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## **WHO Director Says COVID 'Acute Phase' Could End with 70% Vaccinated**

World Health Organization Director, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters in South Africa on Feb. 11: "Our expectation is that the acute phase of this pandemic will end this year, of course with one condition, the 70% vaccination [target is achieved] by mid-year, around June, July." He emphasized, "If that is done, the acute phase can really end, and that is what we are expecting. It's in our hands. It's not a matter of chance. It's a matter of choice."

Speaking at a press briefing after a visit to the Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines Center in South Africa, which has produced the first mRNA COVID vaccine made in Africa, Dr. Tedros said: "We expect this vaccine to be more suited to the contexts in which it will be used, with fewer storage constraints and at a lower price."