

Headlines:

- **Qatar Attendance at Saudi Summit Raises Prospect of Detente**
- **Taliban, Russia Demand Foreign Troops Leave Afghanistan**
- **Trade War Threatens U.S. Access to Rare Earths, Says China State Media**

Details:

Qatar Attendance at Saudi Summit Raises Prospect of Detente

A possible US-backed thaw in Qatari-Saudi relations has been signalled by Qatari diplomats travelling to Saudi Arabia to lay the ground for their country's attendance at a major summit in Mecca on alleged Iranian aggression in the region. Qatar's attendance will be seen as the biggest rapprochement between the two countries since the Saudis launched a sweeping economic and political blockade against the gas-rich country two years ago, accusing Doha of trying to undermine Saudi Arabia, fund terrorism and promote the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East. King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia invited Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, to attend the emergency Gulf Cooperation Council summit on Iran's alleged role in attacking Gulf shipping and oil installations. Qatar – unlike Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates – has so far retained support for the Iran nuclear deal. Although determined to follow an independent foreign policy, it will not be seeking to alienate Donald Trump by spurning Washington's pressure to curtail Iranian aggression in the region. Qatar has an economic interest in ensuring gas and oil installations are not the subject of attacks by Iranian proxy forces. It also acts as the host to the largest US military base in the Gulf. Riyadh has accused Tehran of ordering the recent drone attacks on two oil-pumping stations in the kingdom, claimed by Yemen's Houthis. Iran denied it was behind the attacks and a succession of Iranian politicians have said they are not seeking a military confrontation, although they said they wanted crippling US economic sanctions lifted. One Saudi-owned news outlet, Arab News, urged Washington to launch a surgical strike against Iran, but this view is not universally held in Saudi media. Washington has blown hot and cold in its demands on Iran, with Trump saying he was not seeking regime change in Tehran, merely a renegotiation of the nuclear deal. He said the deal was full of loopholes that allowed Tehran to achieve nuclear breakout too rapidly. Qatar is likely to urge caution by all sides, as well as privately appeal to Tehran not to sponsor proxies to attack Saudi oil assets. The Houthi rebel forces in Yemen, increasingly capable of mounting drone attacks, have the ability to operate independently from Iran. Iran's deputy foreign minister, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, has been trying to counter Saudi diplomacy by holding bilateral meetings in the region, including in Qatar, Kuwait and Oman. The US has been putting private pressure on Saudi Arabia and Qatar to bury their differences ahead of the imminent publication of the Middle East peace plan by Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. The "deal of the century", due to be discussed at the economic workshop for Gulf finance ministers in Manama, Bahrain, in June, centres on a plan to help the Palestinian territories economically. Kushner is touring the region to promote the plan and to try to secure political buy-in. He is also due to join Trump on the state visit to the UK at the start of June. [Source: The Guardian].

Is it not strange how the Gulf countries are able to mend their differences at the behest of America? The same countries that are supposedly against Iran are paving the way for the Trump administration to announce New Palestine—the deal of the century.

Taliban, Russia Demand Foreign Troops Leave Afghanistan

The Taliban and Russia have jointly called for the withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition troops from Afghanistan, with a top leader of the Islamist insurgent group denouncing the foreign presence in the country as a major obstacle to Afghan peace. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the political deputy of the Taliban, made the remarks in Moscow to a gathering of Russian and Afghan government personnel, as well as representatives from prominent political groups from the war-torn country. Russia

organized the meeting to mark the 100th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. "The Islamic Emirate [Taliban] is truly committed to peace but the first step is to remove obstacles in the way of peace, meaning the occupation of Afghanistan must come to an end," Baradar said in rare public appearance and speech. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in his welcome address to the group urged that foreign forces leave Afghanistan. He underscored the importance of bilateral relations, saying Russia is ready to offer more help to Afghanistan to fight terrorist groups led by Islamic State and drug-trafficking networks. "This conflict in Afghanistan has no military solution and the only way to settle this issue is to rely on diplomacy and politics. We believe all foreign military [forces] should be withdrawn from the country and the society of Afghanistan should unite in finding a solution," the Russian foreign minister stressed. "We believe that Afghanistan should stay united where all the ethnic groups can live peacefully. We hope that peace will settle in Afghanistan as soon as possible," Lavrov added, saying that accelerated Afghan peace-building efforts recently initiated by Moscow are furthering the peace process. The meetings in Moscow come as months of direct peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban appear to have slowed down, if not deadlocked, over the insurgents' refusal to cease hostilities until all U.S.-led international forces withdraw from Afghanistan. Washington has linked its troop withdrawal move to counterterrorism assurances by the Taliban, a comprehensive cease-fire and the insurgent group's participation in a peace dialogue with the Afghan government and other groups to end years of hostilities. The U.S.-led military invasion ousted the Taliban from power in late 2001 for sheltering al-Qaida leaders blamed for the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American cities. The Islamist group rejected the charges and has since retaken control or influences nearly half of the country, inflicting heavy casualties on American-backed and trained embattled Afghan security forces. [Source: Vox News]

No matter how hard America's domestic politics loath Russia, it is increasingly clear that the Trump administration is using Russia to give impetus to the floundering Afghan peace process.

Trade War Threatens U.S. Access to Rare Earths, says China State Media

Washington's trade war with Beijing puts it at risk of losing access to China-produced rare earths, which are critical to manufacturing, a commentary in state media said on Wednesday. The commentary follows President Xi Jinping's visit last week to a Chinese rare earths company — a move widely read as a threat, after President Donald Trump banned U.S. companies from providing technology to China's Huawei over concerns the telecom giant's equipment could be used by Beijing for espionage. Trump's move against Huawei, a rapidly expanding leader in super-fast 5G wireless technology, came as part of a trade war that he began last year over what the U.S. president calls China's unfair trade policies. Since then, the two sides have exchanged tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of two-way trade. After the Huawei ban, Xi called on cadres to brace for a "new Long March," and editorial commentaries have lambasted Washington. "While meeting domestic demands is a priority, China is willing to try its best to satisfy global demand for rare earths as long as they are used for legitimate purposes," Wednesday's commentary on state-run Xinhua news agency said. "However, if anyone wants to use imported rare earths against China, the Chinese people will not agree." During his visit to the rare earths company, Xi said that they are "not only an important strategic resource, but also a non-renewable resource," Xinhua reported earlier. However, analysts have said China appears apprehensive of targeting the minerals just yet, possibly fearful of hastening a global search for alternative supplies of the commodities. China produces more than 95 percent of the world's rare earths, and the United States relies on China for upwards of 80 percent of its imports. Rare earths are 17 elements critical to manufacturing everything from smartphones and televisions to cameras and light bulbs. That gives Beijing tremendous leverage in what is shaping up largely as a battle between the U.S. and China over who will own the future of high-tech. [Source: Japan Times]

The world is fast descending into a bipolar technology order, as the trade war between US and China goes high tech. The main centerpiece of the trade war between the two countries has always been about 5G, AI and other digital technologies that increasingly constitute the new economy. The winner of the 5G war will dominate trade for years to come.