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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

Sunday, December 6, 2020

Issue No. 880

www.heartofasia.af

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## Pakistan says fence along Durand Line is almost complete

Pakistan's military has said its 2,600km fence along the porous border with Afghanistan will be completed within the next two months.

Speaking to VOA, Pakistan's army media unit, Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), said on Friday the fence has already been installed along about 83 percent of the border and hundreds of new outposts and forts have been built along the line.

The program was launched in 2017 to block militant infiltration, smuggling and other illegal crossings.

ISPR said two three-meter-high mesh fences, a couple of meters apart, have been filled and topped with coils of razor wire, running through rugged terrain and snow-covered, treacherous mountains at elevations as high as 4,000 meters.

The ISPR also told VOA that it has attributed a "massive decrease" in the number of terrorism-related ... **P2**



## NATO vows medical supplies for ANDSF

NATO has promised providing more than 1,000 tonnes of medical supplies to support the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). The NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) would deliver the medical and pharmaceutical supplies to the Afghan forces.

In a statement, the alliance said 10 Boeing 747 chartered aircraft would airlift the supplies to Afghanistan from Canada, Portugal, Turkey and South Korea.

The first flight landed in Afghanistan on November 13, 2020. The last flight is scheduled for the end of the current year.

"As part of the Resolute Support Mission, CSTC-A is the center-of-gravity organisation for the security assistance process for ANDSF and ministries," the statement added.

# Afghan Gov't Conducted First Reconciliation Council Meeting



Addressing the first meeting of the High Council for National Reconciliation, chairman Abdullah Abdullah said on Saturday that in order for Afghanistan to achieve peace, international and regional support is needed.

He said peace needs unity, consensus, and inclusivity in words and in action.

"Peace needs sacrifices, and we are ready to fully engage with Taliban to discuss all issues."

Abdullah stated that from now on, regular meetings of the leadership committee of the HCNR will take place to discuss the peace process. He stated that the primary demand of the people of Afghanistan is the reduction of violence, and a

permanent ceasefire.

"The people of Afghanistan demand peace, and an end to war, violence and bloodshed. We have to end the war, and open a new peaceful chapter in our country. I do not have any personal agenda in seeking peace. My aim and only aim is a permanent peace in Afghanistan," he said.

Abdullah stated the HCNR is committed to a just, lasting, and inclusive peace in Afghanistan. "We have the political will, and the support of the people to do so. However, peace doesn't mean a return to the past. We are seeking a peace that offers a dignified future for everyone."

"We are calling for a permanent ceasefire. War destroys the country, and everyone, but peace will guarantee a future for everyone," he said.

According to him, the release of Taliban prisoners a few months ago had been a bold step and one that demonstrates that the people of Afghanistan are ready to make sacrifices if needed.

But he said both sides have to agree on how to preserve the achievements of the past, and at the same time move forward and have a political settlement.

"There might be a time that requires the decision of the people of Afghanistan, at that point we shall decide collectively on how to consult the people."

Abdullah also thanked the United States, the European Union, ... **P3**

## Chabahar University hosting 60 Afghan students

Head of Chabahar International University Naser Abravesh said 60 Afghan students are studying in international trade and law, Land management educational technology, civil engineering, architecture, computer and commercial science at Chabahar University.

Speaking to IRNA, Abravesh said based on the instructions for attracting non-Iranian students, Chabahar University has attracted 60 students in the first step.

He added that attracting 42 male ... **P3**



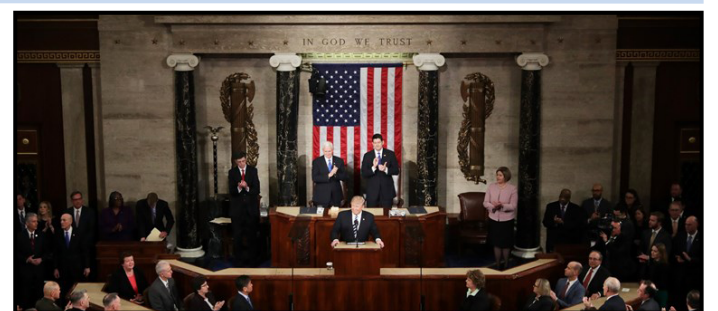
## U.S. Congress Moves to Block Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal

U.S. lawmakers are moving to prevent the Trump administration from reducing troop levels in Afghanistan and Germany before President-elect Joe Biden is sworn in on 20 January 2021.

U.S. news agencies report that the House and Senate conferees have hashed out the mutual terms for the proposed fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act and are set to vote on and approve the measure before sending it to President Donald Trump's desk.

The U.S. lawmakers have included two provisions designed to restrict the Pentagon from following through with troop reductions in Afghanistan and Germany, according to a report by janes.com.

Back in November, U.S. acting



Defense Secretary Christopher Miller announced plans to reduce U.S. troop levels from about 4,500 down to 2,500 by mid-January 2021.

The bill, however, prevents the department from reducing troop levels below 4,000 – or the total number left when the legislation is enacted – until the Pentagon, State Department, and the director of national intelligence detail how a drawdown affects

threats to the United States, the counterterrorism mission against the Islamic State, and more, according to report by janes.com.

"The conferees note the South Asia strategy emphasizes the importance of a conditions-based United States presence in Afghanistan in support of ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure a peaceful, negotiated solution to the conflict," lawmakers wrote as quoted by janes.com. ... **P3**

## Pakistan says...

incidents in Pakistan to the border security project but they say Pakistani troops involved in building the fence have also come under militant attacks from the Afghan side and in some cases clashes with Afghan security forces.

The border, or Durand Line as it is commonly referred to in Afghanistan, has historically been disputed as it was an 1893 British colonial era demarcation.

Pakistan rejects the objections and maintains it inherited the international frontier after gaining independence from Britain in 1947.

VOA reported that the Pakistani army is also working on enhancing the security of the country's more than 900-kilometer southwestern border with Iran and has already fenced off about 30 percent of the frontier.

This project is expected to be finished by the end of 2021, according to the ISPR.

## Some 321...

and the total tally of deaths reached 1,865.

The ministry has announced that the second wave of the pandemic has begun in the country and people should follow the virus preventive guidelines.

She added that 6,342,628 tests have so far been carried out in Iran.

The outbreak of dangerous coronavirus (COVID-19) has been affecting the world since December 2019 requiring a collective campaign of the international community to thwart the threat posed to humanity by the pandemic.

By New York times Editorials

# How to End a Forever War

For years, the stalemate in Afghanistan has left American officials torn between two bad options: Prop up a corrupt, hopelessly divided Afghan government indefinitely or admit defeat and go home, leaving the country to its fate. At 19 years and counting, the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan is already the longest war in American history. A consensus has been forming that it is time for U.S. troops to come home. But the speed of the withdrawal and whether any residual force will be left behind to carry out counterterrorism operations remain open questions.

The Trump administration has taken laudable steps toward a U.S. exit. In February, it struck a deal with the Taliban to withdraw American forces from the country within 14 months. In exchange, the Taliban agreed to cut ties with Al Qaeda, prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan as a base for international attacks, help reduce violence and participate in talks with Afghanistan's political leadership to try to end the conflict.

American diplomats have been pressing the Taliban to live up to their end of the bargain. Qaeda fighters are still believed to be embedded with the Taliban, although Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, may now be dead, according to Pakistani media. Intra-Afghan peace talks began in Doha, the capital of Qatar, in September but have stalled over a fresh wave of attacks and uncertainty over whether the Biden administration will honor the deal with the Taliban. Over the weekend, the Taliban announced on social media that both sides had agreed to a set of guiding principles for the talks, but President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan has reportedly pushed back on that claim, denying that an agreement has been reached.

The two sides have yet to begin confronting a host of seemingly irreconcilable differences, including whether to be a theocracy or a republic, and the status of women and followers of the Shiite sect of Islam. The Taliban claim that they now accept Shiites as fellow Muslims. But previously Taliban leaders have justified persecuting them as infidels. In 1998, Taliban commanders massacred



thousands of Hazaras, an ethnic minority that predominantly follows Shiite Islam, when they took power in their region. Today, two commanders of that bloody operation are among the Taliban negotiators in Doha. Some Hazaras fear the Taliban are simply going through the motions of peace talks until U.S. forces leave.

Efforts to hold the Taliban accountable for their commitments have been undercut by the Trump administration's abrupt announcement that it will pull all but 2,500 American troops out of the country by Jan. 15, regardless of whether the conditions the Taliban agreed to have been met. President Trump, who spent Thanksgiving 2019 with U.S. soldiers at Bagram Airfield, wants to keep a promise to bring American soldiers home before he leaves office. But NATO's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, expressed alarm at Mr. Trump's announcement and said the alliance would continue to train Afghan security forces even with the planned U.S. reductions. NATO has 12,000 personnel in the country, about half of whom are often American troops, and relies heavily on the U.S. military for transportation and logistics.

President-elect Joe Biden is unlikely to depart radically from the Trump administration's exit plan. Mr. Biden opposed the Obama-era surge in Afghanistan and wrote in the spring in Foreign Affairs magazine that "it is past time to end the forever wars."

But an American withdrawal does not have to mean ending financial support for the Afghan people or leaving the region in chaos. The United States has a moral obligation to work with regional partners to try to clean up the mess we are leaving behind. Americans have the geopolitical luxury of flying away from a war they plunged into in 2001 in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Afghanistan's neighbors do not. Six countries share a border with Afghanistan. Not one wants a failed state on its doorstep. Afghanistan has been at war almost continuously since 1978, partly because its powerful neighbors have all tried to manage the chaos inside it by funding proxies. A debilitating free-for-all might be prevented if Afghanistan's neighbors work together to support a peace process.

This is a rare instance where Iran, Russia, ... **P3**

By Rustam Shah Mohmand

## Australian soldiers in Afghanistan

The inquiry into the alleged crimes committed by members of Australia's Elite Special Forces during deployment in Afghanistan has now been made public. The report that took four years to complete has generated a strong reaction within and outside Australia. The exhaustive report was based on an examination of 423 witnesses, 20,000 documents and more than 25,000 images.

The damning report has shed light on the conduct of the Elite Special forces during the course of their duty in Afghanistan. Those targeted included, farmers, prisoners and other non-combatants. In some cases, dogs were unleashed on unarmed villagers, ripping them to pieces.

All acts were committed not during the heat of battle but in routine raids conducted by forces for arrests, house

searches of those suspected to be supporters of the resistance. In some cases, people were killed on orders of senior commanders to give a sense of 'real battle' to the soldiers.

The Australian Army Chief has apologised for these horrendous war crimes committed by the soldiers; 15 soldiers have been removed and other actions are to follow.

The Australian Prime Minister in a telephonic call to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has vowed to bring perpetrators to justice offering his country's apologies for the atrocities.

Stories of excesses committed by foreign forces on innocent civilians are not uncommon. What is most disgusting is that such crimes have not been thoroughly investigated? Those involved have not been punished. Accounts of war crimes being

committed by foreign forces mainly those of the US, UK and Germany have been in the air for a long time now.

What has really contributed to this ugly and dreadful spectacle where civilians bear the brunt of an unending conflict? And where has killing prisoners for 'blood' become a sport with foreign forces?

Firstly, it's the psyche that foreign forces bring to the country when they are deployed. They believe Afghans are mostly uncivilised, desperate to hunt and kill all foreigners and need to be treated as such. Then there is this feeling of lack of accountability for actions that would normally be bracketed in as war crimes. Lack of monitoring by senior officers is another reason for soldiers to indulge in acts that disgrace their countries or institutions.

The most unfortunate... **P3**

## Malicious actions not to disrupt Iran-Afghanistan relations

Following the release of videos attributed to Afghan citizens in social media, Iran Embassy in Kabul stressed that malicious actions will not disrupt Iran-Afghanistan relations.

The Iranian embassy in Kabul issued a statement following the release of videos in recent days in social media in which a number of people were beaten by several people and attributed to the Afghan citizens.

Extensive technical investigations were immediately launched by the Iranian police and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this regard, and it was determined that, with the utmost regret, some people in Afghanistan aimed at destroying relations and creating cross-cutting tensions in relations between the two countries have tried to broadcast these videos, one of which is related to a country other than Iran and the other is related to five years ago, the statement read.

There is no doubt that the relations between the two brotherly and neighbouring countries are based on strong principles and foundations, which have not been disrupted by malicious actions, and on the contrary, it will make the officials of the two countries more aware of dealing with psychological warfare and propaganda games in the future, it added.

Following the release of a video in social media, the police announced in a statement that technical investigations indicate that the



video released in cyberspace did not happen in Iran, and Iran's police strongly deny that such treatment of Afghan Muslim brothers took place in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Thursday that while the Khaf-Herat railway is to be inaugurated in the coming days as a symbol of great cooperation between the two countries, it is inevitable to take care of the suspicious actions of the ill-wishers of relations between Tehran and Kabul.

Regretting the occurrence of the incident anywhere in the world, Khatibzadeh called on the Afghan friendly and brotherly officials to be more careful in publishing the news and not to rush in issuing official statements.

# Pakistan to build railway line between Chaman and Spin Boldak

Pakistan's Minister for Railways Sheikh Rashid Ahmed has announced plans to link Pakistan with Afghanistan by railway with a line from Chaman to Spin Boldak. Ahmed said in the first phase Pakistan would lay around 11km of railway track from Chaman to Spin Boldak, and that a survey had already been completed in this regard, Dawn News reported.

He also said the Chaman-Spin Boldak railway line could later be extended to Kandahar if the Afghan government expressed its willingness.

He said that linking Chaman with Spin Boldak by railway would further promote trade between the



two neighbouring countries.

Referring to the government's decision to restart the Quetta-Chaman passenger train, the railways minister said that it was

running successfully and Pakistan Railways had decided to hand over the operation of the Quetta-Chaman train to the private sector, Dawn News reported.

He also said there was a plan to resume services of more passenger trains from Quetta, but due to Covid-19 a large number of people were avoiding travelling by train.

### Chabahar University...

and 8 female Afghan students indicates neighboring states' attention to the educational capacities of Chabahar International University. He noted that foreign students should introduce scientific, tourism, and economic capacities of Sistan and Baluchestan Province in their own countries. Abravesh went on to say that due to the outbreak of coronavirus, Chabahar International University has also limited its activities by observing health protocols.

### Afghan Gov't...

NATO, Islamic countries, the IOC, regional countries, and Qatar for supporting the peace process.

"I thank the Republic's negotiation team for their tireless efforts, and representing the republic. I also thank the Taliban negotiation team for their cooperation.

"I assure the Republic's negotiation team that they enjoy the full support of the people of Afghanistan and the High Council for National Reconciliation."

Former Jihadi leader Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf also addressed the meeting and said peace is a responsibility and that Afghans want peace with dignity - where the country's national sovereignty is preserved and stated that he was ready to support the efforts of the reconciliation council.

Afghanistan's former president Hamid Karzai also spoke and said "the people of Afghanistan have suffered a lot and now is the time for peace to come to the country. Peace is achieved when Afghans maintain unity and solidarity. It is the duty of Afghans to stop the bloodshed in Afghanistan."

President Ashraf Ghani also addressed the landmark meeting and said there is a need for more consultations as the negotiations move forward.

He said that following this week's breakthrough in the Doha talks deadlock, talks had now moved into the second phase.

"The first step showed that the task was not easy, but it came to fruition," he said.

### How to End a...

China, Pakistan and the United States all share a common interest: the orderly departure of American troops and preventing Afghanistan from imploding.

Mr. Trump, who has a well-known allergy to multilateral cooperation and a zero-sum mentality toward Iran and China, has been unable to fully engage Afghanistan's neighbors in the effort to stabilize the country. In March 2019, American diplomats threatened to veto the U.N. Security Council resolution renewing the mandate of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan because it referred to China's Belt and Road Initiative. And the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran scared off international

investors in Chabahar, an Iranian port considered essential for increasing trade in landlocked Afghanistan. Barnett Rubin, a former State Department official who is now the director of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Project at New York University, argues that the United States would benefit from having a strategic vision for the region that was bigger than "no Al Qaeda."

"Stop looking at Afghanistan as either 'war on terror' or nothing and broaden the aperture to see that it is a country in a region with China, Russia, Iran, India and Pakistan - four nuclear powers," he said. "They all have a very strong interest in trying to stabilize Afghanistan. Even though they want our troops out, they are worried

we are doing it too quickly."

The Biden administration is better positioned to test the limits of regional diplomacy. While it is far from clear that Afghan talks can negotiate a political settlement that will end the war between the Taliban and the Afghan government, a coordinated regional approach is more likely to produce success than a rapid unilateral American withdrawal. American soldiers should not be held hostage to a peace agreement that might never come. But with U.S. troops down to 2,500 soldiers, some portion of which is needed as a security umbrella for the embassy, the costs of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan have fallen sharply. The Biden administration has time to craft a more responsible withdrawal.

### U.S. Congress...

"The conferees further note that any decision to reduce the armed forces of the United States in Afghanistan should be done in an orderly manner and in coordination with United States allies and partners and the government of Afghanistan."

According to Defense News, Trump with late-night tweets reiterated to veto the annual defense policy bill.

"Very sadly for our Nation, it looks like Senator Jim Inhofe

will not be putting the Section 230 termination clause into the Defense Bill," he wrote. "So bad for our National Security and Election Integrity. Last chance to ever get it done. I will VETO!"

U.S. experts said that the bill basically opposes reducing the number of troops below 4,000, but it gives the U.S. president a national interest "waiver" and that it is still a strong signal. The experts said that Trump can veto, but there is enough support in Congress

to override a veto.

Afghan experts said the U.S. forces' withdrawal should be conducted responsibly.

"The United States is providing financial support to Afghan forces and also has advice and training mission to Afghan forces. We will lose this. But the withdrawal will not have more impacts if they commit to providing financial support to us as well as air support to Afghan forces," said Mirza Mohammad Yarmand, a military expert.

### Australian soldiers...

his resolve to punish those who are guilty. But he should also pursue those cases where the culprits have not been identified and tried yet. Other countries mainly the US should finally wake up to crimes committed by its military personnel and penalise those found guilty. The crimes, well-documented and proven by members of disciplined forces, shows the deep malaise that has pervaded the rank and file members of an elite force. The Australian government

will not be putting the Section 230 termination clause into the Defense Bill," he wrote. "So bad for our National Security and Election Integrity. Last chance to ever get it done. I will VETO!"

would certainly take a long view of this grim situation and take steps to rid the system of ingrained and deeply embedded lust for crime and killing amongst its trained and 'motivated' soldiers. In the meantime, the Afghan government should also comprehensively review the current environment in order to prevent foreign forces or indeed members of its own security forces from carrying out such brazen, cruel acts of killing in the garb of 'raids' or house searches.

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waygalprinting.co@gmail.com

## Heart of Asia

Chief Editor: M. Hamid Hamdard

Reporters: Safiullah Nasary, Shafiq Amirzay,

Jawad Temori & Hameedullah Hamidi

Graphic & Design: Arman

Phone: +93-202502100 - +93-777989696

Website: www.heartofasia.af

Email: heartofasiadaily@gmail.com

Address: Behind Rahman Baba High School

- Opposite to 3<sup>rd</sup> District,

Kabul - Afghanistan

Print: Waygal Printing .Co - +93 - 202512626

# U.S. 'terminates' five cultural exchange programs with China

The U.S. State Department said on Friday it had terminated five cultural exchange programs with China in the latest move targeting cultural exchange activities between the two countries. These programs are the Policymakers Educational China Trip Program, the U.S.-China Friendship Program, the U.S.-China Leadership Exchange Program, the U.S.-China Transpacific Exchange Program and the Hong Kong Educational and Cultural Program. "Such programs," claimed the department on its website, are "soft power propaganda tools." The decision was announced over one month after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo threatened to close all Confucius

Institutes in the U.S. in October. In a response to Pompeo's remarks on Confucius Institutes, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said that China has urged the U.S. to stop politicizing educational exchange programs and regular people-to-people exchanges, and to promote mutual trust and cooperation between the two countries. He rebuked Pompeo's groundless remarks, saying they were made out of ideological prejudice and political interests. The spokesperson also warned that Pompeo's comments had severely harmed mutual trust and cooperation between China and the U.S.



## A look at the world

### U.S. presence in Syria obstacle to restoration of country's unity, says Lavrov

Illegal military presence of the United States in Syria gets in the way of restoration of the country's unity, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said via a video link at the Rome 2020 Mediterranean Dialogues on Friday.

According to the Russian minister, it was possible to "break the back" of terrorism mostly thanks to Russia's decisive assistance to the Syrian government.

"The tasks of providing decent life conditions for millions of Syrians, who have survived that devastating war, are coming to the fore. It requires the participation of the



entire world community," Lavrov said. "We have to state with regret that in response to constructive shifts in political settlement, Damascus receives illegal presence of US forces on its territory, which is overtly used for encouraging separatism and for hindering the restoration of the country's unity."

The Russian foreign minister drew attention to the new US and European sanctions slapped against Syria and baseless, evidence-free allegations against Damascus about the use of chemical weapons and war crimes.

"The West demonstrates double standards denying help to Syria, even when humanitarian issues are raised," he stressed. "Amid the pandemic, the West sticks to its policy of economic strangling of Syria."

Lavrov confirmed that peace and stability could be brought to the Middle East and North Africa based on international law.

"It involves rejecting any external interference, respecting principles of the UN Charter, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and relying on inclusive national dialogue in each country, where any strife can be seen," the minister explained. "Russia sticks to this very line in all situations in the region, including in Syria."

### Some 321 more Iranians die from COVID-19



Some 321 people in Iran have died from COVID-19 disease over the past 24 hours, Iranian Health Ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on Saturday.

Sadat Lari added that 50,016 citizens have passed away from coronavirus (COVID-19) in the country so far.

She pointed out that 719,708 people out of a total of 1,028,986 people infected with the deadly virus have recovered and been discharged from hospitals.

The official noted that 12,151 new infected cases have been detected in Iran, some 1,562 of whom have been hospitalized, over the past 24 hours.

Some 5,817 other COVID-19 patients are in critical condition and being treated in intensive care units, the spokeswoman said.

Likewise, The Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan (MoPH) on Saturday said 253 new positive Covid-19 cases were detected during the last 24 hours that saw 18 people losing battle for life to the infection.

The ministry said 1,400 people underwent tests during the past 24 hours and the virus was detected in 253 people, pushing the total number of cases in the country to 47,641.

Of the fresh cases, 73 were registered in Kabul, 27 in Balkh, 22 in Nangarhar, 20 in Parwan, 17 each in Kandahar, Ghazni and Paktia, 16 in Khost, 12 in Paktika, 11 in Jawzjan, five in Helmand, four in Sar-i-Pul, four in Laghman, two in Bamyan, two in Nimroz and one each in Baghlan, Logar, Maidan Wardak and Uruzgan.

At least 138 individuals were recovered from the pandemic during the past 24 hours, taking the recoveries to 37,485.

The ministry said that 18 people lost their lives to the virus during the period ... **P2**

### NASA selects 4 companies to collect moon rocks

NASA has selected four companies to collect resources on the lunar surface on its behalf, one of which it will pay just \$1. Lunar Outpost, a Colorado-based startup, made the lowball bid before the space agency accepted it. The other three companies' bids amount to a total of \$25,000.

The highest accepted bid was from California-based Masten Space Systems while ispace Japan and ispace Europe each proposed \$5,000 contracts.

The companies will receive their payouts in stages with 10% granted upon selection,



10% at launch, and 80% delivered on completion, NASA said in a statement released Thursday.

"Leveraging commercial involvement enhances our ability to safely return to the Moon in a sustainable, innovative, and affordable fashion," Phil McAlister, NASA's Commercial Spaceflight Development chief, said. "A supportive policy for the recovery and use of space resources provides a stable and predictable investment environment for commercial space innovators and entrepreneurs."

In addition to collecting and returning the materials to Earth, the companies are being tasked with identifying where the samples are collected from in order to assist future lunar missions.

The collection of resources on the moon is a key step in NASA's plans for space exploration, including its proposal to return a manned crew to the Moon by 2024.

The agency is seeking to establish a permanent outpost on the moon as part of its efforts to send a crew to Mars on what is expected to be a years-long journey.



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