

China, Russia Agree on THAAD 'Countermeasures'



This file, handout image shows the launch of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile during a test.

BEIJING (Dispatches) — China has a range of economic, diplomatic and military options to retaliate if the U.S. and South Korea proceed with deployment of an advanced missile defense system, experts said Friday, as Beijing remained vague in its threats against the plan.

Such steps could raise the stakes for Washington and Seoul in a controversial deployment that China regards as a major security threat, while complicating matters for South Korea as it faces domestic political divisions and significant public opposition.

China's official Xinhua News Agency said Beijing and Moscow agreed to take "further countermeasures" in response to the plan during security

talks between the two countries in Moscow on Thursday.

"The countermeasures will be aimed at safeguarding interests of China and Russia and the strategic balance in the region," Xinhua quoted the agreement as saying.

The report gave no details and a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman on Friday said only that China has a legitimate right to defend its security interests.

"China believes it is a serious threat to China's security interests and for the region," Lu Kang said at a daily briefing. "I believe that as long as our country has legitimate security concerns, it is understandable that necessary measures be taken to safeguard such interests."

The proposed Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, radar system aims to guard against North Korean missiles, a threat that drew renewed attention after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un announced in his annual New Year's address that the country had reached the "final stages" of developing an intercontinental ballistic missile.

China has campaigned relentlessly against the deployment, warning of unspecified retaliation and leading to a sharp downturn in relations with Seoul. China says the system's powerful radar can peer deep into its territory, allowing the U.S. to monitor flights and missile launches and potentially making it capable of launching a pre-emptive strike.

Trump Risks 'War' Over South China Sea: Chinese media

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Any attempts by the United States to block access to artificial islands in the South China Sea would have to be backed up by waging war, Chinese state media have warned.

U.S. president-elect Donald Trump's nominee as secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, suggested the strategy during his confirmation hearing, saying that China would "not be allowed" to access the territories in the South China Sea.

The initial response was relatively calm, but the tone of the editorials in the state-owned media was much tougher.

"China has enough determination and strength to make sure that his rabble rousing will not succeed," the Global Times newspaper, which generally takes a stridently nationalist tone, said in an editorial.

"Unless Washington plans to wage a large-scale war in the South

China Sea, any other approaches to prevent Chinese access to the islands will be foolish," it said.

The Global Times is state-owned and published by the same house that publishes the Communist Party's official organ, People's Daily.

While it does not reflect official government policy, it often gives a good indication of the way the central government is thinking.

China has built a number of artificial islands on reefs, equipped with airstrips for military aircraft and anti-aircraft missile batteries to back up its claims to most of the South China Sea.

China's claims are contested by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and self-ruled Taiwan.

The maritime region has major strategic importance, with €4.75 trillion in trade passing through every year, and it is also believed to be resource rich.

Tunisian Police Fire Tear Gas at Protesters Demanding Jobs



Protesters clash with riot police officers during a protest over jobs and a lack of development, in Ben Guerdane, Tunisia January 12, 2017.

TUNIS (Reuters) - Tunisian police have clashed with hundreds of youths who tossed rocks and petrol bombs in protests over jobs and a lack of development in a town in the country's south, residents said.

Six years after their revolt ousted autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia's central and southern regions are still flashpoints for rioting in marginalized towns where many young Tunisians see little economic progress since the uprising.

Local residents said police clashed with several hundred young men in the centre of Ben

Guerdane, and that protesters lobbed rocks and petrol bombs and set tires ablaze.

"Police are firing tear gas to try to disperse hundreds of youths who are protesting in the centre of the town demanding work," Fethi Chandoul, a local resident, told media.

Residents and local media said shops and offices were closed for a general strike in Ben Guerdane.

Around 4,000 protesters also marched peacefully in the central town of Meknessi to demand work opportunities and development projects.

Cyprus Reunification Talks Stall Over Question of Security



António Guterres, centre, the UN secretary general with Mustafa Akıncı, left, the president of Turkish North Cyprus, and Nicos Anastasiades, the Greek Cypriots' leader.

GENEVA (The Guardian) - UN-led talks in Geneva hoping to create a reunified Cyprus after decades of bitter division has ended without a breakthrough, leaving officials

to reconvene later this month to readdress the issue of how any agreement could be militarily secured.

The two sides will meet again on 18 January to look again at the

security question, before a fresh attempt to forge a complete political deal.

The UN secretary general, António Guterres, said he was confident the participants were determined to make a "last effort" to find a solution. There was no precise date set for the guarantors of the process - the Greek, Turkish and British foreign ministers - to meet again. Negotiators said much progress had been made on the shape of the deal, but more time was needed to agree how external actors could persuade islanders that any plan will be enforced.

The outcome of the four days of talks is at one level of disappointment since there had been hopes that the Greek and Turkish Cypriots might sign a final outcome agreement. But diplomats think the talks have not collapsed, and the scope for an agreement genuinely remains.

Venezuela Arrests 3 Opponents Amid Threat of Crackdown

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela has jailed three anti-government politicians in what the opposition denounced as a new crackdown on dissent in the economically struggling country.

The wave of arrests began Wednesday night when police acting on orders of a new "anti-coup" unit inside the socialist government arrested substitute lawmaker Gilber Caro from a hard-line opposition party. Vice President Tareck El Aissami announced the arrest on state TV, saying police at

a highway toll station found a gun and explosives in his car.

Shortly afterward, government opponent Jorge Luiz Gonzalez, a councilman in the western city of Maracaibo, was also picked up on weapons charges.

Then on Thursday, officials threw back in jail former Gen. Raul Baduel, a former defense minister under the late president Hugo Chavez, alleging he was conspiring to overthrow the government. Baduel, now a staunch government critic, had been freed from prison

in 2015 after serving six years on corruption charges.

The arrests, along with an apparent threat to ban two-time presidential candidate Henrique Capriles from holding office, put the opposition on edge as it tries to jumpstart a campaign to force President Nicolas Maduro from office. It would also appear to go against the government's recent freeing of several jailed activists under a Vatican-sponsored mediation effort to ease tensions in the country.



Supporters of opposition leader Henrique Capriles argue with a National Guard officers outside of the Comptroller General building in Caracas, Venezuela, Thursday, Jan. 12, 2017.



VALLETTA (Reuters) - Libya's UN-backed government has not accepted proposals by Rome aimed at cutting refugees' flows to Italy and the two sides are "far apart" on the issue, Malta's foreign minister said on Friday.

George Vella, whose government holds the rotating chair of European Union ministerial councils, said he would brief his EU counterparts in Brussels on Monday on a long conversation he held on Thursday on behalf of the Union with the foreign minister of Libya's embattled, U.N.-backed premier, Fayez Seraj.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Barack Obama has surprised the vice-president, Joe Biden, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. A teary-eyed Biden accepted the medal, the highest civilian honor, at a ceremony at the White House.

Obama said he was bestowing the honor on Biden for "faith in your fellow Americans, for your love of country and a lifetime of service that will endure through the generations".

He called the vice-president an "extraordinary man with an extraordinary career in public service".

SHANGHAI (Reuters) - China has detained 720 people and Beijing imposed \$21.8 million of fines for violating environmental protection laws in 2016, according to domestic media.

China is in the third year of a "war on pollution" aimed at containing the damage done to its air, soil and water after decades of rapid economic growth. Just last week, Beijing faced severe pollution alerts, which forced people to stay indoors.

In 2016, 720 people were detained in China for damaging the environment, the official Xinhua news agency reported, citing information disclosed at a national environmental work conference.

BELGRADE (Reuters) - Serbia said on Friday it would refuse to extradite people sought by France if French authorities failed to hand over a former Kosovo prime minister and guerrilla commander who is charged with war crimes by Belgrade.

French police detained Ramush Haradinaj as he flew into the country on Jan. 4, acting on a warrant from Serbia which wants to try him for offences related to the 1998-1999 war in its former province of Kosovo.

LONDON (Daily Mail) - The Hungarian camerawoman who was seen tripping up Syrian refugees at a border crossing has been put on probation for three years after being convicted of disorderly conduct. In September 2015 Petra Laszlo was filmed tripping up a Syrian father carrying a crying child and kicking out at a refugee girl as they attempted to flee across a field on the Hungarian-Serbian border. She later apologized for her actions and denied accusations of racism.