

British Advisor: EU Should Shake Off Ill Will



A man sorts through a delivery of washing in Larne, Northern Ireland, February 12, 2021.

LONDON (Reuters) -- The European Union should shake off its ill will and build a good relationship with Britain as sovereign equals, Britain's top EU adviser David Frost said on Sunday, promising to stand up for the country's interests.

Writing in the Sunday Telegraph, Frost again defended Britain's unilateral move to smooth post-Brexit trade between Britain and Northern Ireland, over which the EU has promised to launch legal action for breaching the terms of the Brexit

deal. Since Britain left the EU last year, relations between the two have soured, with both sides accusing the other of acting in bad faith in relation to part of their trade agreement that covers goods movements to Northern Ireland.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has tried to keep his distance from the row, said Britain and the EU would iron out what he described as "technical issues", saying such issues were bound to happen "in the early

stages of our new relationship".

Frost, who led Britain's negotiations to secure a trade deal with the bloc, was appointed as a minister and Johnson's main point man for future ties with the EU earlier this year and looks set to take a firmer approach.

"I hope they will shake off any remaining ill will towards us for leaving, and instead build a friendly relationship, based on sovereign equals," he wrote in an opinion piece.

"That is what I will be working towards, acting constructively when we can, standing up for our interests when we must -- as a sovereign country in full control of our own destiny."

Frost again defended the British government's extension of a grace period for checks on some food products imported by retailers to Northern Ireland as being "lawful and consistent with the progressive and good faith implementation" of part of the post-Brexit trade deal called the Northern Ireland protocol.

But he added: "Without this threat of disruption, we can continue our discussions with the EU to resolve difficulties arising from the protocol constructively -- and we aim to do so."

China Turning Navy Into 'Formidable' Deterrent



Chinese warships pictured at the end of a joint exercise with the Russian navy in South China Sea.

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- China is working to turn its navy -- the largest in the world -- into a "formidable" deterrent against U.S. aggression, says a political commentator.

"The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is defensive in nature, meant to protect the Chinese homeland, its coastal waters, and its vital marine trade routes. The United States Navy (USN) is offensive in nature and meant to project power across the globe to promote American hegemony," Dennis Etler, who holds a doctorate in anthropology from the University of California, told Press TV in an interview.

"The PLAN composed mostly of light tonnage ships that can patrol and protect China's coastal waters in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea in order to ward off any potential aggressors," he said. "On the other hand, the U.S. has a global reach."

The U.S. regularly dispatches its warships and warplanes to the South China Sea as part of what it describes as "freedom of navigation" patrols. China claims sovereignty over nearly the entire sea and has repeatedly warned Washington against military activities in the region.

"Currently, there are three car-

rier strike groups in the Western Pacific," Etler said. "The build-up of the PLAN is mostly to counter these carrier strike groups. They have become a formidable deterrent with an array of anti-ship missiles and overall firepower."

"The U.S. will think twice before even contemplating an attack against China," he noted.

China has managed to assemble the world's largest naval force, and is now working to make it formidable far from its shores.

In April 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping oversaw the largest naval parade in his country's history, saying at the time that "the task of building a powerful navy has never been as urgent as it is today".

Some six years ago, China had 255 battle force ships in its fleet, according to the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). As of the end of 2020, it had 360, over 60 more than the U.S. Navy, according to an ONI forecast.

Four years from now, the PLAN will have 400 battle force ships, it predicts, while the goal of the current U.S. navy shipbuilding plan, a goal with no fixed date, is for a fleet of 355.

Analysts say those are troubling signs for the United States as it grapples with budget and pandemic problems.

FM: Venezuela to Move Forward Despite U.S. Threat

CARACAS (Dispatches) -- Venezuela says it will press ahead with its political and economic development despite the "extraordinary threat" of sanctions by the United States.

Caracas "will move forward regardless of what Washington does or does not do in relation to Venezuela," Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza told Russia's Sputnik.

Washington and the European Union have an attitude of "ideological lies" toward Caracas, even though it does not pose a threat to other countries, Venezuela's foreign minister said.

Earlier this week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Venezuela's Western-backed politician Juan Guaido, in an indication that President Joe Biden is pursuing the same policy as his predecessor Donald Trump.

The White House also said early this month that the Biden administration was in "no rush" to remove U.S. sanctions against Venezuela.

Relations between Washington and Caracas were tense under Trump, who imposed crippling sanctions on Venezuela and its state oil company PDVSA.

Venezuela has been in turmoil since January 2019, when Guaido, former president of the National Assembly, unilaterally declared himself "interim president," arguing that Maduro's reelection the previous year had been fraudulent.

The Trump administration recognized Guaido as the "le-

gitimate" leader of the oil-rich country and publicly pursued a regime change policy against Maduro.

Now the Biden administration has reaffirmed Washington's recognition of Guaido as Venezuela's interim president, ruling out negotiations with Maduro.

The European Union, however, has announced that it no longer considers Guaido interim president, describing him as a "privileged interlocutor."

The status of interim president gives Guaido access to funds confiscated from Maduro by Western governments. In a related development, Venezuela's armed forces launched military exercises on Friday in an effort to unite civilian, military and police forces "to combat all present threats."

The military exercises, named after the late former President Hugo Chavez -- Supreme Commander Hugo Chavez Frias 2021 -- kicked off "to guarantee the comprehensive defense of the nation," said, Admiral Remigio Ceballos, chief of staff of the Strategic Operational Command of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces.

Over 545,000 troops will take part in more than 76 exercises, he said.

The war games aim to ensure "the security of our oil installations, national electric system installations and strategic public services," Ceballos added.

The military was scheduled to wrap up the maneuvers later on Sunday.

Sahel Leaders Sideline France in Talks With Militants



A soldier poses for a portrait during Operation Barkhane in Burkina Faso, on November 13, 2019.

BAMKO (Dispatches) -- Leaders of countries in West Africa's Sahel region have abandoned their hopes in purported counter-terrorism efforts by France and started negotiating with armed militants to bring peace to the restive region.

The Sahel, a semi-arid stretch of land south of the Sahara desert, has been in turmoil since 2012, when a number of armed separatists started targeting the local population in Mali.

As a former colonial power seeking significant military presence in Africa, France decided to send thousands of soldiers in 2013 to try to prevent separatist forces from reaching Mali's capital, Bamako.

Last year, France boosted its troop numbers for its so-called Operation Barkhane in the Sahel by 600 to 5,100 soldiers, but with the military presence failing to bring the situation under control, the UN also deployed its peacekeeping forces in the region.

Terrorist groups, linked to Al-Qaeda and Daesh, have strengthened their foothold across the arid Sahel region, making large swathes of territory ungovernable and stoking local ethnic violence, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso.

During a two-day summit on February 16, French President Emmanuel Macron appeared via video link from inside the Elysee palace to give France's view on

the Sahel region's rampant militancy.

After addressing heads of state from Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania, Macron told journalists that the African leaders had agreed that they could not negotiate with the commanders of two of the region's most notorious armed groups.

Three days later, however, Moctar Ouane, Mali's interim prime minister, revealed that his government had created a body to lead talks with the militant groups, which have devastated areas in north and central Mali and elsewhere across the Sahel.

"More and more voices in Mali are calling for dialogue with our brothers who have joined radical groups," he said.

Echoing the position taken by authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso also announced for the first time in February that it too was open to the idea of negotiating with militants.

"If we want to end the security crisis, we will need to find paths and ways to talk with those responsible for terrorist attacks so that we are in peace," Burkina Faso's Prime Minister Christophe Dabire told parliament.

Ironically, the most violent extremists have emerged in the Middle East and Africa after the deployment of Western troops and violence has intensified in proportion to their military buildup over time.

Sisi Warns Ethiopia Against Filling Nile Dam



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (L) is received by Sudan's head of state, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, upon the former's arrival in Sudan's capital Khartoum on March 6, 2021.

KHARTOUM (Middle East Eye) -- Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi warned against Ethiopia continuing to fill its Nile dam, on his first visit to Sudan since the removal of Omar al-Bashir nearly two years ago.

Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia have been locked for almost a decade in inconclusive talks over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile, which broke ground in 2011.

Egypt sees the structure as a threat to its water supply, while Sudan fears its own dams will be harmed if Ethiopia proceeds with filling the GERD before a deal is reached.

"We reject the policy of imposing a fait accompli and extending control over the Blue Nile through unilateral measures without taking Sudan's and Egypt's interests into account," Sisi said, in a statement carried by Sudan's state TV.

Addis Ababa, which said it reached its first-year filling target last year, has declared plans to go ahead with the second phase of filling regardless of whether an agreement is in place.

Egypt and Sudan "have agreed to re-launch negotiations with quadripartite mediation that includes the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union and the United States... to

reach a deal before the flood season", Sisi added, standing alongside the Sudanese head of state, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

Ethiopia claims it has the right to draw from the Nile after the waters have been long exploited by Egypt.

Sisi has recently been on a diplomatic push, seeking support over the dam from South Sudan and South Africa, while his foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry, told UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday that negotiations needed to be relaunched.

Ethiopia this week indicated its opposition to adding mediators to an existing, African Union-led process.

The visit to Khartoum, Sisi's first since Bashir's ouster in April 2019, comes amid efforts to bolster Sudanese-Egyptian ties and amid tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia over a disputed border region.

Since Bashir was toppled following mass protests in 2019, a military-civilian council has held power in Sudan under a political transition expected to last until the end of 2023.

Sisi's talks with Burhan, and separately with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, also addressed maritime security in the Red Sea and the Sudan-Ethiopia border tensions, state TV reported.

News in Brief

BEIJING (TASS) -- The Chinese authorities are seeking jointly with Russia to protect the UN prestige and international law, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Sunday. "Our countries have become an example of how to pursue equitable and just policy. We are jointly safeguarding multilateral formats of cooperation," China's top diplomat said at a press conference held in Beijing during the sessions of the country's highest legislative and consultative bodies. "China and Russia will be jointly protecting the UN prestige and safeguarding international law norms," China's top diplomat stressed. Beijing seeks to strengthen all-embracing partnership relations with Moscow, he said. "We take into account the historical experience and, what's more, this is necessary in the conditions of the contemporary epoch," he said.

BEIJING (Reuters) -- China is at least 30 years away from becoming a manufacturing nation of "great power", a former industry minister said on Sunday, despite boasting the world's most complete industrial supply chains. In recent years, China has become the world's top manufacturing nation, accounting for over a third of global output, driven by domestic demand to produce everything from motor vehicles to industrial machinery. But its industries' heavy dependence on U.S. high-tech products such as semiconductors constituted a strategic weakness. "Basic capabilities are still weak, core technologies are in the hands of others, and the risk of 'being hit in the throat' and having 'a slipped bike chain' has significantly increased," said Miao Wei, who was Minister of Industry and Information Technology for a decade before stepping down last year. As the Chinese economy pivots towards a services-based model and polluting smoke-stack factories are mothballed, manufacturing output as a share of the economy has declined.

NAYPYITAW (Reuters) -- An official from the party of deposed Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi died overnight in police custody, associates said Sunday, while security forces cracked down on demonstrators staging some of the most widespread protests against last month's coup. The cause of Khin Maung Latt's death was not known, but Reuters saw a photograph of his body with a bloodstained cloth around the head. Sithu Maung, a member of the dissolved parliament, said in a Facebook post that Khin Maung Latt was his campaign manager and was arrested on Saturday night in the Pabedan district of Yangon. Police fired stun grenades and tear gas to break up a sit-in protest by tens of thousands of people in Mandalay, the Myanmar Now media group said. At least 70 people were arrested. Earlier, troops occupied a university in the city after firing rubber bullets at people there, it said. Two people were injured.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- South Korea and the United States will conduct its springtime military exercise this week, but the joint drill will be smaller than usual because of the coronavirus pandemic, Seoul said on Sunday. The allies will begin a nine day "computer-simulated command post exercise" on Monday, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement. South Korea and the United States decided to move forward with the drills after "comprehensively taking into consideration the COVID-19 situation, the maintenance of the combat readiness posture, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of peace," the JCS said, noting that the exercise is "defensive" in nature. The drills will not include outdoor maneuvers, which have been carried out throughout the year, and the number of troops and equipment will be minimized due to the pandemic, Yonhap news agency reported.

ASUNCION (AFP) -- Paraguay's President Mario Abdo Benitez announced a cabinet reshuffle after violent street protests over the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. He announced new people would be appointed to the ministries of health, education, women's issues, and civil affairs. "I am sure that the men and women named will do their utmost to confront this moment of crisis that the country is enduring," the president said. Thousands of protestors clashed with police late Friday, ransacking shops and setting cars on fire. A total of 21 people were injured, hospital officials said. Paraguayans are angry over a shortage of personal protective gear and other equipment to confront the health crisis and a collapse in the healthcare system. The health minister already resigned Friday.

SRINAGAR (Reuters) -- Indian police have detained more than 150 Rohingya refugees found living illegally in the northern region of Jammu and Kashmir and a process has begun to deport them back to Myanmar, two officials said on Sunday. Dozens of Rohingyas are in a makeshift "holding centre" at Jammu's Hira Nagar jail after local authorities conducted biometric and other tests on hundreds of people to verify their identities. "The drive is part of an exercise to trace foreigners living in Jammu without valid documents," said one of the two officials, who declined to be named as they are not authorized to speak to the media. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's federal government scrapped Jammu and Kashmir's special status in August 2019 and now administers the region from New Delhi.