

China's Foreign Minister Warns U.S. Not to Cross Its 'Red Line'



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Chinese State Counselor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the 77th United Nations General Assembly

BEIJING (Reuters) -The United States must stop suppressing China's development and should not continue the "old routine of unilateral bullying", Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

In the latest phone correspondence between the two leaders, Wang said the United States must pay attention to China's legitimate concerns, stop curbing and suppressing its development, and not constantly challenge China's red line in a "salami-slicing" way. He was referring to the tactic of using a series of small actions to achieve a much larger result that would be difficult to achieve with a single large action.

The remarks by Wang underscored President Xi Jinping's meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden at the G20 summit in Bali last month where they discussed a number of hot-button issues, including Taiwan. It was their first in-person talks since 2017.

China considers Taiwan its own territory and believes the United States is slowly chipping away at its core interests and challenging its bottom line, while being careful to avoid a single drastic action that could give China a clear reason to react with full force.

In the phone call with Blinken, Wang stressed that the two sides should focus on translating the Bali consensus of the two heads of state into practical poli-

cies and concrete actions, according to a statement from the Chinese foreign ministry on Friday.

"It is necessary to step up consultations on the guiding principles of China-U.S. relations, promote dialogue at all levels, and resolve specific issues between the two countries through joint working groups," Wang said.

China has sovereignty over Chinese Taipei, and under the "one China" policy, almost all world countries recognize that sovereignty, meaning they would not establish direct diplomatic contact with the self-proclaimed government in Taipei.

This is while Chinese Taipei's secessionist president Tsai Ing-wen has independence aspirations and views the island as a sovereign state.

The United States, though professing adherence to the principle, has long courted Taipei and continues to sell weapons to the self-governed island in an attempt to affront Beijing.

Some U.S. allies in Europe have also been increasing their visits to Taipei, despite strong objections by Beijing.

A number of countries, including France, Germany, Japan, and others, have sent delegations of their own to Chinese Taipei since then, further increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

Back in August, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stirred controversy when she made a brief trip to Taipei and met with its president, which led to a major diplomatic row and inflamed military tensions.

North Korea Fires Ballistic Missiles, Denies Supplying Arms to Russia



The undated file photo, released by the Korean Central News Agency, shows a North Korean missile launch.

PARIS (AFP) - North Korea has fired two short-range ballistic missiles in the latest in a flurry of sanctions-busting weapons tests, South Korean officials said Friday, hours after Washington accused Pyongyang of delivering arms to the Russian private military group Wagner.

Friday's missile launches follow a year of unprecedented tests by the North, including the launch of its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile last month.

Pyongyang also tested what it described as a new rocket engine

last week, and claimed this week it had developed new capabilities to take images from space.

"Our military spotted two short-range ballistic missiles launched by North Korea into the East Sea from the Sunan area of Pyongyang at around 16:32 (0732 GMT) today," South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said Friday, referring to the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan.

Friday's missile test came hours after the White House said Pyongyang had delivered arms to the Russian private military group

Wagner.

Disclosing the delivery on Thursday US time, the White House called Wagner a "rival" for power to the defense and other ministries in the Kremlin.

The Wagner group is controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman once called "Putin's chef" for his work catering dinners for the powerful leader before and after he became the Russian president.

Prigozhin promptly dismissed the White House's report as "gossip and speculation".

Earlier, Japan's Tokyo Shimbun also reported that North Korea had shipped munitions, including artillery shells, to Russia via train through their border last month and that additional shipments were expected in the coming weeks.

In a statement carried by the Korean Central News Agency, the North Korean foreign ministry denied conducting any arms transaction with Russia, saying the story was "cooked up by some dishonest forces for different purposes".

The ministry described Tokyo Shimbun's report as "the most absurd red herring, which is not worth any comment or interpretation". It did not comment on Washington's allegations and did not refer to the Wagner group.

Japan Unveils Record Budget in Boost to Military Spending

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan unveiled on Friday a record 114.4 trillion yen (\$863 billion) budget for the next fiscal year from April, pushed up by increased military spending and higher social security costs of catering to a fast-ageing population, piling on more debt.

The budget - endorsed by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet on Friday - features record military and welfare spending as it confronts regional security challenges.

Kishida's controversial plan to double Japan's defense spending to 2% of gross domestic product by 2027 contributed to a record 6.8 trillion yen increase in spending, adding to the nation's public debt already exceeding 2.5 times the size of its economy.

To help spending for military facilities, warships and other vessels, the government decided to issue in fiscal 2023 just over 434 billion yen of construction bonds, which are usually used to finance infrastructure spending, but not military equipment.

"I believe those ships can be considered assets worth equipping for the people to share costs," Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki told reporters when asked about the decision, while adding the move should not be seen as abandoning fiscal restraints.

The need for more military spending comes at a time of intensifying economic challenges as the Ukraine war, soaring inflation and rising rates worldwide push the global economy to the brink of recession.

For fiscal 2023, the defense spending will rise to 6.8 trillion yen, up 1.4 trillion yen from this year. The government also set aside 3.4 trillion yen to help finance its five-year defense

build-up plan.

All of this means a longer road to reducing Japan's debt, as Tokyo aims to achieve a primary budget surplus, excluding new bond sales and debt servicing costs, by the fiscal year ending March 2026.

On the brighter side, tax revenue is estimated at a record 69.4 trillion yen thanks in part to recovery in corporate profits, allowing the government to reduce new bond sales by 1.3 trillion yen to 35.6 trillion yen.

Still, the budget's debt dependency ratio stood at 31.1%, underscoring the fiscal constraints faced by the government.

On a related note, Russia accused Japan of abandoning decades of pacifist policy and embracing "unbridled militarization".

In response to a \$320-billion military plan announced by Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida last week, Russia's Foreign Ministry said "It can be clearly seen that Tokyo has embarked on the path of an unprecedented build-up of its own military power, including the acquisition of strike potential."

Russia said such a move will "inevitably provoke new security challenges and will lead to increased tension in the Asia-Pacific region," criticizing Japan's military spending which has been increasing despite the growth of structural imbalances in the state budget.

Relations between Tokyo and Moscow have long been overshadowed by an unresolved dispute over a group of Pacific islands. The Kuril Islands, located in the Sea of Okhotsk, lie fewer than 10 kilometers from Japan's Hokkaido.

Capitol Riot Panel's Report Sets Out Case to Try Trump



A video of former president Donald Trump is shown on a screen, as the House select committee investigating the Jan 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol holds its final meeting in Washington, Dec 19, 2022.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The congressional panel probing the Jan 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol released its final report late on Thursday, outlining its case that former U.S. president Donald Trump should face criminal charges of inciting the deadly riot.

The House of Representatives Select Committee also made public the transcripts of a number of its interviews and witness testimonies earlier on Thursday and on Wednesday.

The report, which runs to more than 800 pages, is based on nearly 1,200 interviews over 18 months and hundreds of thousands of documents, as well as the rulings of more than 60 federal and state courts.

The report lists 17 specific findings, discusses the legal implications of actions by Trump and some of his associates and includes criminal referrals to the Justice Department of Trump and other individuals, according to an executive summary released earlier this week. It report also lists legislative recommendations to help avert another such attack.

On Monday, the committee asked federal prosecutors to charge the Republican former president with four crimes, including obstruction and insurrection, for what they said were efforts to overturn results of the November 2020 election and sparking the attack on the seat of government.

"Rather than honor his constitutional obligation to 'take care that the laws be faithfully executed,' president Trump instead plotted to overturn the election outcome," the House panel had said earlier in a 160-page summary of its report.

In comments posted on his Truth Social network after the final report's release, Trump called it "highly partisan" and a "witch hunt". He said it failed to "study the reason for the (Jan 6) protest, election fraud."

The request by the Democratic-led panel to the Justice Department does not compel federal prosecutors to act, but marked the first time in history that Congress had referred a former president for criminal prosecution. Trump announced in November that he would run for president again.

Among the transcripts released on Wednesday and Thursday was one that showed a former lawyer for ex-White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson told her to "downplay" her knowledge of events leading to the Capitol riot, telling her "the less you remember, the better."

Attorney Stefan Passantino advised Hutchinson in preparing for a February deposition before the panel to say that she could not recall certain events, she told the committee in September, according to the transcript of her testimony.

Trump gave a fiery speech to his supporters near the White House the morning of Jan 6, and publicly chastised his vice president, Mike Pence, for not going along with his plan to reject ballots cast for Democrat Joe Biden.

The former president then waited hours to make a public statement as thousands of his supporters raged through the Capitol, assaulting police and threatening to hang Pence.

The 2020 election results were being certified by Pence and lawmakers when the Capitol was attacked after weeks of false claims by Trump that he had won that election.

3 Dead, Several Wounded in Paris Shooting



A police officer stands next to the cordoned off area where a shooting took place in Paris, Friday, Dec. 23, 2022. A multiple people have been wounded and one person arrested after a shooting in central Paris on Friday.

PARIS (AP) — A shooting targeting a Kurdish cultural center in a bustling Paris neighborhood Friday left three people dead and three others wounded, authorities said. A 69-year-old suspect was wounded and arrested.

The Paris prosecutor's office opened an investigation for murder and attempted murder. The Paris prosecutor targeted the suspect had a prior police record, including an arrest for attacking migrants living in tents, and that investigators are considering a possible racist motive for the shooting.

The shooting occurred at midday at a Kurdish cultural center and a restaurant and hairdresser nearby, according to the mayor for the 10th arrondissement, Alexandra Cordebar. Speaking to reporters at the scene, she said the

"real motivation" for the shooting remains unclear.

Police cordoned off the area in the 10th arrondissement of the French capital, on a busy street with shops and restaurants near the Gare de l'Est train station. The shooting came at a time when Paris is buzzing with activity before the Christmas weekend. The Paris police department warned people to stay away from the area.

Paris Prosecutor Laure Beccuau said three people hit in the shooting have died, one is in critical condition and two others are hospitalized with less serious injuries. The attacker was also wounded in the face, she said.

She said anti-terrorism prosecutors are in contact with investigators, but haven't indicated any sign of a terrorist motive.



LONDON (Euro News) -England reported 94 deaths, including those of 21 children, from scarlet fever and invasive strep A infections so far this season the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said on Thursday. The British government last week said it was enacting protocols to ease shortages of penicillin medicines used to treat strep A infections, allowing pharmacists to prescribe alternatives where stocks are low. There have been 27,486 reported cases of scarlet fever from Sept. 12 to Dec. 18, according to the UKHSA. That compares with 3,287 reported cases at the same point in the year during the last comparably high season in 2017 to 2018, although cases in that season started to rise at a different time, the agency said.

TUNIS (Reuters) - A second round of elections would cause chaos and should be postponed following record-low turnout in parliamentary voting last week, the powerful UGTT union said on Thursday, saying the resulting parliament would have no legitimacy. Only 11.2% of the country's eligible voters participated in the election last week, sparking widespread criticism from the opposition, which said that President Kais Saied should step down and pledged mass protests. Although it backed Saied when he seized most powers last year by shutting the elected parliament, it has withdrawn its support after he moved to rule by decree and wrote a new constitution that was passed in a referendum in July.

ISLAMABAD (AP) — A powerful car bomb detonated in a residential area in Pakistan's capital on Friday, killing two suspected militants and an officer, police said, raising fears that militants have a presence in one of the country's safest cities. At least three police officers and seven passersby were wounded in the bombing in Islamabad. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the explosion. Friday's bombing happened 15 kilometers (about 9 miles) from the garrison city of Rawalpindi, home of the military and government spy agencies.

PARIS (AFP) - A Greek MEP, Eva Kaili, was ordered Thursday to stay in detention in Belgium over corruption allegations linked to Qatar that have rocked the European Parliament, prosecutors said. Kaili, 44, was one of four suspects arrested earlier this month. She protested her innocence and asked the custody hearing to grant her release under electronic surveillance. But the court ruled against her, ordering that she stay in detention for another month, the Belgium prosecutor's office said.

BEIJING (AP) — China has sanctioned two U.S. citizens in retaliation for action taken by Washington over human rights abuses in Tibet, the government said Friday, amid a continuing standoff between the two sides. The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Todd Stein and Miles Yu Maochun, along with their close family members, would be banned from entering China. Any assets they had in China would be frozen and they would be barred from contact with people or organizations within China.