

# Russia Seeks 'New Level' of Partnership With China



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet in Beijing, Feb. 4, 2022.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia said on Monday that it wanted to take ties with China to a "new level" and was looking forward to face-to-face talks with Beijing's leadership as a Russian newspaper reported that China's top diplomat would visit Moscow in February.

"We are convinced that the potential for Russian-Chinese bilateral cooperation is still far from exhausted," Russia's foreign ministry said.

Russia aims to reach its target of \$200 billion worth of trade between the two countries ahead of schedule and to "significantly deepen" its ties with Beijing, it said.

The deepening "no limits" partnership between the rising superpower of China and the natural resources titan of Russia is being watched by the West with some anxiety, though it is unclear just how deep the partnership is.

China has refrained from condemning Russia's operation against Ukraine or calling it an "invasion" in line with the Kremlin which casts the war as "a special military operation".

After the West imposed the most severe sanctions in modern history on Moscow due to the war in Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin says Russia is turning towards Asia - and China in particular - after centuries of looking to the West as the crucible of economic growth, technology and war.

The Russian foreign ministry's comments came shortly after Russia's Vedomosti newspaper reported that China's chief diplomat Wang Yi was set to visit Moscow in February.

According to the newspaper, Wang may visit Putin during his stay. The purpose of Wang's visit is unclear but may be related to preparations for an upcoming visit to Russia by Chinese President Xi Jinping, it added.

When asked about the potential visit by Wang Yi, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said during a regular briefing that she was not yet aware of such a meeting.

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But South Korean law bans the export of weapons to countries in active conflict, which Seoul has said makes it difficult to provide arms directly to Kyiv, although it has provided non-lethal and humanitarian assistance.

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He said that NATO did not regard China as "an adversary" and believed in engagement on issues from arms control to climate change.

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President Volodymyr Zelensky said Ukraine was facing a difficult situation in Donetsk and needed faster weapons supplies and new types of weaponry, just days after allies agreed to provide Kyiv with heavy battle tanks.

"The situation is very tough. Bakhmut, Vuhledar and other sectors in Donetsk region - there are constant Russian attacks," Zelensky said in a video address late on Sunday.

Denis Pushilin, the administrator of Russian-controlled parts of Donetsk, said on Monday that his forces had gained a foothold in Vuhledar, Russia's TASS news agency reported.

Ukrainian military analyst and colonel, Mykola Salamakha, told Ukrainian Radio NV that Russian troops were mounting waves of attacks on Vuhledar.

Stoltenberg is in Seoul on the first leg of his Asia trip, which will also take in Japan, as part of a drive to boost ties with the region's allies in the face of the Ukraine conflict and growing competition from China.

He met top South Korean officials Sunday, and on Monday urged Seoul to do more to help Kyiv, saying there was an "urgent need for more ammunition".

He pointed to countries like Germany and Norway that had "long-standing policies not to export weapons to countries in conflict" which they revised.

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## NATO Chief Presses South Korea to Up Military Aid to Ukraine



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg talks with South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin during their meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul, South Korea, Jan 29, 2023.

SEOUL (AFP) -- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg asked South Korea on Monday to "step up" military support for Ukraine, suggesting it reconsider its policy of not exporting weapons to countries in conflict.

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## Peruvians Have No Trust in Political Class to Solve Crisis



Peruvian demonstrators clash with riot police in Lima on January 28, 2023, as protests against President Dina Boluarte continue.

LIMA (AFP) -- With a political class that is widely mistrusted and seen as weak and out of touch, Peruvians have grown increasingly disillusioned that a solution to weeks of violent unrest is at hand, experts told AFP.

The national Congress was due to debate again on Monday a proposal to bring forward elections slated for April 2024 in a bid to break a political deadlock that has seen 48 deaths over seven weeks of near-daily protests.

Parliament rejected such a move on Saturday, however, and analysts doubt this time will be different.

"This is a toxic Congress. It is rejected by 88 percent of the population, according to polls," said Alonso Cardenas, a public policy specialist in Lima.

Cardenas said Congress has been widely discredited -- the branded by one civil association as "the most corrupt" institution in the country.

"Congress, like almost all the political class in Peru, lives with its back to the country. It doesn't understand" the people, said Roger Santa Cruz of the Antonio Ruiz de Montoya University in Lima.

In the early hours of Saturday, following seven hours of debate, lawmakers voted against bringing forward elections from April 2024 to October this year.

That proposal, from opposition politician Hernando Guerra Garcia, came after beleaguered president Dina Boluarte said Friday that she had told her ministers to suggest

December as a possible date for a general election.

Protesters have kept pressure on the authorities since December 7, the day ousted president Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve parliament and rule by decree. Demonstrators want immediate elections, Boluarte's resignation and dissolution of Congress.

Castillo's supporters, many of them peasants and Indigenous peoples from the countryside, have blocked roads, forced some airport closures, and clashed with security forces in Lima and other cities.

Boluarte is from the same left-wing party as Castillo -- she was his vice president before his arrest -- but her support since then has come from the conservative opposition.

Now "the alliance that supports Boluarte is cracking," said Cardenas.

The left has demanded a referendum on rewriting the constitution as a condition for supporting advanced elections, but that has little support elsewhere.

Congress is fractured into at least 10 political forces, with no strong leaders or dominant personalities, the experts say.

Boluarte's resignation would not end the crisis, Cardenas and Santa Cruz said, as there is no experienced, unifying figure to replace her.

Peru is no stranger to political instability. Since 2018, it has been led by no fewer than six presidents who span the political spectrum.

## Drought Drives 22 Million to Hunger in Horn of Africa



A woman tries to get clean water in Kajido, Kenya on Nov. 13, 2022.

K'ELAFO, Ethiopia (AFP) -- From southern Ethiopia to northern Kenya and Somalia, around 22 million people are at risk of hunger as the worst drought in four decades grips the Horn of Africa.

In the afflicted areas, inhabitants -- who eke out a living mainly from herding and subsistence farming -- are experiencing their fifth consecutive poor rainy season since the end of 2020.

The United Nations says 12 million people in Ethiopia, 5.6 million in Somalia and 4.3 million in Kenya are "acutely food insecure".

The overall figure has almost doubled from 13 million at the start of 2022, the UN's World

Food Program said in a January 23 report.

Across the region, 1.7 million people have been driven from their homes by a lack of water and pasture, it said.

The Horn of Africa is one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change, and extreme weather events are occurring with increased frequency and intensity.

Since 2016, eight of the 13 rainy seasons have seen below average rainfall, according to data from the US-based Climate Hazards Center.

The last famine was declared in Somalia in 2011, when 260,000 people -- half of them children under the age of six -- died of hunger, partly because the interna-

tional community did not act fast enough, according to the UN.

At that time, the region had encountered two poor rainy seasons, compared to five in the current drought.

Crops, already ravaged by a locust invasion between 2019 and 2021, have been wiped out and livestock has suffered a similar fate.

The UN's humanitarian agency OCHA estimated in November that 9.5 million cattle had perished.

Humanitarian groups warn that the situation is only likely to worsen, with the next rainy season from March to May also expected to be below average.

Dire conditions in the Horn have been amplified by the war in Ukraine, which has contributed to soaring food and fuel costs, disrupted global supply chains and diverted aid money away from the region.

Somalia is the hardest hit country, with the drought affecting more than half of its population, about 7.85 million people.

In December, OCHA said the troubled nation was technically not yet in the grip of full-blown famine thanks to the response of aid agencies and local communities.

But people were nevertheless suffering "catastrophic" food shortages, it said, warning that if assistance is not scaled up, famine is expected in southern Somalia between April and June.

## Opposition Urges Unity Against Saied After 90% Shun Election

TUNIS (AFP) -- Tunisia's main opposition coalition urged a united front against President Kais Saied after just 11.3 percent of Tunisians voted Sunday in a second-round poll for a toothless parliament in the politically divided nation.

"Almost 90 percent of Tunisian voters ignored this piece of theatre and refused to be involved in the process," Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, head of the National Salvation Front, told journalists.

"I call on political groups and civil society to join hands to work for change, in the form of Kais Saied's departure and early presidential elections."

Following a similar turnout in December's first-round vote, Sunday's poor participation was another blow to Saied, who has stripped the legislature of its powers and granted himself far-reaching authority since his dramatic 2021 power grab in the birthplace of the Arab Spring protests.

On July 25, 2021, Saied sacked the government and froze parliament before dissolving it and pushing through a new constitution -- granting him almost unlimited powers and sweeping away the system that had emerged from the 2011 revolt.

The latest poll was seen as the final pillar of Saied's transformation of politics, ushering in a new legislature that will have almost no authority to hold the president or government to account.

The National Salvation Front, which includes the Islamist-

inspired Ennahdha party, said the low turnout exposed "the total failure" of Saied's project, and said it would not recognize the new parliament.

Chebbi urged key bodies including the powerful UGTT trade union federation, which has hesitated to openly oppose the president, to join forces.

Speaking after voting ended at 6:00 pm (1700 GMT), electoral board chief Farouk Bouasker said 887,638 out of more than 7.8 million registered voters had taken part in the poll, which followed December's widely boycotted first round.

Tunisians were divided over the poll.

Mohamed Abidi, 51, a waiter in Tunis, said there was "no way" he would vote.

"Saied isn't listening to anyone to find solutions for our situation. The whole economy is suffering but he's not interested -- he only wants to keep his place in the presidential palace," he said.

But in the southwestern town of Kasserine, Mokhtar Hermasi said he was doing his "electoral duty" despite a "bland campaign".

The head of the polling station where he voted said numbers picked up throughout the day, and many of those casting ballots were older.

According to the electoral board's initial figures, just five percent of those who voted were aged under 26, and more than two-thirds were men.



LONDON (Reuters) -- Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened him with a missile strike during a phone call in the run up to the invasion of Ukraine. Johnson, speaking to the BBC for a documentary, said the Russian leader had asked him about the prospects of Ukraine joining NATO, to which he had responded it would not be "for the foreseeable future".

"He threatened me at one point, and he said, 'Boris, I don't want to hurt you but, with a missile, it would only take a minute' or something like that. Jolly," Johnson said, recalling the "very long" and "most extraordinary" call in February 2022 which followed a visit by the then prime minister to Kyiv. Relations between Moscow and London had sunk to their lowest level in decades even before the Ukraine war, on the back of the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in the British city of Salisbury in 2018.

GENEVA (AFP) -- Three years to the day after the World Health Organization sounded the highest level of global alert over Covid-19, it said Monday the pandemic remains an international crisis.

"The WHO director-general concurs with the advice offered by the committee regarding the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and determines that the event continues to constitute a public health emergency of international concern," the UN health agency said in a statement.

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) -- India's Supreme Court will consider petitions next week against a government order blocking the sharing of clips of a BBC documentary that questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership during riots in 2002 in the western state of Gujarat. The government has dismissed as a biased "propaganda piece" the film released last week, titled "India: The Modi Question", and blocked the sharing of any clips from it on social media.

The Supreme Court will take up the petitions next week, Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud said in court on Monday. A New Delhi-based lawyer, M L Sharma, opposed the government's move in one of the petitions to the Supreme Court. Modi, who aims for a third term in elections next year, was chief minister of Gujarat in February 2002, when a suspicious incident sparked one of the worst outbreaks of religious bloodshed in independent India. In attacks across the state at least 1,000 people were killed, most of them Muslim, as crowds roamed the streets for days, targeting the religious minority. But activists put the toll at more than twice that, at about 2,500.

TOKYO (AFP) -- A Japanese former soldier who was sexually assaulted by her colleagues said Monday she is suing the government and the perpetrators over the "superficial" apologies and mistreatment she received. Last year, Rina Gonoji went public about the assaults she was subjected to, after an investigation was dropped on the grounds of insufficient evidence. The military subsequently acknowledged the assaults and harassment that occurred in 2021, but only after public pressure by Gonoji, including a petition signed by over 100,000 people demanding an investigation. In December, five Japanese soldiers were dismissed over the case, but Gonoji said Monday the apologies she has received were "superficial" and lawyers for the assailants continued to trivialise the incidents in discussions over a settlement. While Japan may rank high on education and healthcare for women, its male-dominated society has long lagged behind industrial peers in placing women in boardrooms and in high public office. Government data shows just four percent of rape victims report the crime to police.

JOHANNESBURG (AFP) -- Gunmen opened fire on a group of people celebrating a birthday at the weekend in a township in South Africa, killing eight and wounding three others, police said Monday. The birthday celebrant was among those gunned down in the mass shooting in the southern port city of Gqeberha, formerly Port Elizabeth. The motive of the attack is yet unknown. Shootings are common in South Africa, which has one of the world's highest murder rates, fuelled by gang violence and alcohol. South Africa last year saw string of shootings that killed nearly two dozen at separate bars in working class suburbs in Johannesburg and in the eastern city of Pietermaritzburg.

MELBOURNE (Reuters) -- Rio Tinto Ltd apologized on Monday for the loss of a tiny radioactive capsule that has sparked a radiation alert across parts of the vast state of Western Australia. The radioactive capsule, believed to have fallen from a truck, was part of a gauge used to measure the density of iron ore feed which had been entrusted to a specialist contractor to transport. The loss may have occurred up to two weeks ago. Authorities are now grappling with the daunting task of searching along the truck's 1,400 kilometer (870 mile) journey from north of Newman - a small town in the remote Kimberley region - to a storage facility in the northeast suburbs of Perth - a distance longer than the length of Great Britain. The incident is another headache for the mining giant following its 2020 destruction of two ancient and sacred rock shelters in the Pilbara region of Western Australia for an iron ore mine.