

As Biden Visits Asia,

China Launches South China Sea Drills



of Japan. The Defense Ministry described it as "routine training" aimed at boosting performance that is "in line with relevant international law and international practice, and not targeting any party."

China also flew a pair of long-range nuclear-capable H-6 bombers through the area on Wednesday, Chinese media reports said.

Meanwhile Friday, the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan and its strike group left their home port at Yokosuka, Japan, for a "routine at-sea period," the 7th Fleet said.

Biden arrived in South Korea on Friday. While in Japan, he will meet Tuesday with fellow leaders of the Indo-Pacific strategic alliance known as the Quad, a group that includes Australia, India and Japan.

China views the grouping as a part of a U.S.-led push to impede its economic and political rise and frustrate its attempts to intimidate self-governing Taiwan into accepting its demand to unify with the mainland.

On Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticized what he called negative moves by Washington and Tokyo against Beijing during a video call with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi.

"What arouses attention and vigilance is the fact that, even before the American leader has set out for the meeting, the so-called joint Japan-U.S. anti-China rhetoric is already kicking up dust," Wang said, according to China's Foreign Ministry.

lands.

China routinely protests such missions, labeling them deliberate provocations that endanger peace and stability.

Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan also exercise overlapping claims in the South China Sea. The Philippine coast guard said Friday it had established outposts on three islands in the contested waters, a move that will likely be frowned upon by Beijing.

Since the beginning of the month, China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, has been conducting a mission in the Sea

BEIJING (Dispatches) — China is holding military exercises in the South China Sea coinciding with U.S. President Joe Biden's visits to South Korea and Japan.

China's Maritime Safety Administration office in the southern island province of Hainan said the drills began Thursday and will continue through Monday.

It said other aircraft and vessels will be prohibited from entering the area but gave no further details.

The U.S. insists on the right to operate freely in the sea and frequently sails warships close to militarized Chinese-held is-

Russia Vows 'Countermeasures' as NATO Looks Set to Expand



Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has said Moscow will create 12 military units and divisions in the western region in response to Sweden and Finland.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia will create new military bases in the western portion of the country, in what Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu described as "adequate countermeasures" to Finland and Sweden's bid to join NATO.

In a speech on Friday, Shoigu said the bid by the two Nordic countries was among several military threats that have increased in recent years along Russia's northwestern border.

Those threats also included the United States stepping up strategic bomber flights, sending warships to the Baltic Sea and intensifying training exercises in the region with its NATO partners, he said.

"Tension continues to grow in the zone of responsibility of the Western Military District. We are taking adequate countermeasures," Shoigu said, as Moscow's forces continue their operation in Ukraine.

"By the end of the year, 12 military units and divisions will be established in the Western Military District," he added.

This will be accompanied by a surge in military equipment and weapons. "This year, we intend to get more than 2,000 pieces of such equipment," Shoigu said.

Security concerns driven by Russia's operation, which began on February 24, led Finland and Sweden to break from longstanding policies of neutrality and move to join NATO.

Finland shares 1,340km-long (830

miles) land border with Russia, while Sweden shares a maritime boundary.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed on Thursday that he had received their applications to join the bloc, in what could represent one of the most significant changes in Europe's security architecture in decades.

U.S. Senate Passes \$40bn in Aid for Ukraine

The U.S. Senate has approved more than \$40 billion in new "aid" for Ukraine, which has been the site of a Russian military operation since February.

The legislative body gave its blessing to the monumental package on Thursday, with 86 votes in favor and 11 against, the Bloomberg news agency reported.

"The message this sends is that the United States is committed, that we are going to stand with any country that is a democracy when there is an autocracy that attempts to overrun it," Idaho Republican Jim Risch alleged.

This comes after objections by Kentucky Senator Rand Paul had delayed passage of the bill for an entire week.

"If Congress really believed giving Ukraine \$40bn was in our national interest, they could easily pay for it by taxing every income taxpayer \$500," Paul tweeted on Thursday.

The bill cleared the House of Representatives last week on a 368 to 57 vote.

News in Brief

CHICAGO (AP) — Two people are dead and another eight wounded following a shooting near a fast food restaurant just blocks from Chicago's famed Magnificent Mile shopping district that sent bystanders scattering, authorities said. The shooting happened about 10:40 p.m. Thursday near a McDonald's on the city's Near North Side. One person was taken into custody and a weapon was recovered, police said in statement.

IGALI (Reuters) - Rwanda expects the first group of 50 asylum seekers to be transferred from Britain by the end of May, a government spokesperson said. In April the British government announced plans to send people seeking asylum to the East African country, but earlier this month said it expected lawyers to lodge claims to prevent their removal. The British government has started to notify those who are likely to be relocated, with the first flights expected to take place in the coming months, Britain's home office said in a statement.

BOGOTA (Reuters) - Leftist Colombian presidential candidate Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla vowing to tackle grating inequality, held a big lead ahead of the May 29 vote, a poll showed late on Thursday, though center-right rival Federico Gutierrez saw an uptick in support. Petro, who was the mayor of Bogota between 2012 and 2015, had 40.6% support, according to pollster Invamer. That is three percentage points lower than what he had in an April 22 poll. Gutierrez, the former mayor of Colombia's second-biggest city Medellin, has 27.1% support, up from the 26.7% he got in April.

SEOUL (Reuters) - Two U.S. Secret Service agents who were working on Joe Biden's trip to Asia are being sent home after one was accused of drunkenly assaulting a South Korean the day before the president arrived in Seoul, officials said. A Yongsan district police official told Reuters that one of the agents was arrested in the early hours of Thursday after getting into a fight over a taxi.

DILI (Reuters) - East Timorese independence figure and Nobel laureate Jose Ramos-Horta was inaugurated as the country's fifth president on Friday, pledging to dedicate his time in office to strengthen national unity and forge closer relations with China. Ramos-Horta, who spent decades as the exiled spokesperson for the guerrilla movement during Indonesian occupation, previously served as president from 2007 to 2012 and prime minister and foreign minister before that. read more Thousands travelled to watch the inauguration in the capital Dili, with the 72-year-old sworn in just before midnight in a ceremony replete with fireworks and cannon fire.

BRICS Members Back China's Call for Expansion



BEIJING (SCMP) - The BRICS countries have backed a Chinese suggestion that the bloc should be expanded, but have not named the candidate countries.

A joint statement by the foreign ministers of the bloc - whose other members are Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa - following an online meeting on Thursday supported its first expansion in a decade, but said they needed to clarify relevant guiding principles, standards and procedures.

Although no candidate countries have been named, earlier this year Argentine President Alberto Fernandez said he wanted his country to join, and

analysts have said Indonesia is another likely candidate.

Brazil, Russia, India and China initially formed the bloc in 2009, with South Africa joining in 2010.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi repeated Beijing's position calling for peace talks and criticized Western countries for providing arms to Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia.

"Delivering arms cannot bring peace to Ukraine, and pressure by sanctions cannot solve the European security dilemma," Wang said, according to a readout from the Chinese foreign ministry.

He said China opposes the weaponization of international economic and

financial cooperation and coercing other countries to choose sides. He also called for an effort to reduce the spillover effect of the war, which has hit international trade and food supplies "especially in supporting vulnerable developing countries to tide over the difficulties".

The minister also urged the other BRICS countries to be "independent" and "fair" over Ukraine.

Without naming the United States, Wang called on the bloc to resist the creation of "parallel systems" to divide the world.

He also said BRICS nations should oppose all kinds of unilateral sanctions and "long-arm jurisdiction".

The 25-point joint statement issued after the meeting included pledges to work together on issues such as global governance, climate change, anti-terrorism, arms control, human rights, and AI technology.

China and Russia also expressed support for the three other members playing a greater role in the United Nations.

The other eight participants were Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, Senegal, the United Arab Emirates and Thailand.

Jiang Shixue, director of the Centre for Latin American Studies at Shanghai University, said the expansion of BRICS is seen as an "irreversible trend" by many observers.

Poll: Biden's Approval Dips to Lowest of Presidency

WASHINGTON (AP) - President Joe Biden's approval rating dipped to the lowest point of his presidency in May, a new poll shows, with deepening pessimism emerging among members of his own Democratic Party.

Only 39% of U.S. adults approve of Biden's performance as president, according to the poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Research, dipping from already negative ratings a month earlier.

Overall, only about 2 in 10 adults say the U.S. is heading in the right direction or the economy is good, both down from about 3 in 10 a month earlier. Those drops were concentrated among Democrats, with just 33% within the president's party saying the country is headed in the right direction, down from 49% in April.

Of particular concern for Biden ahead of the midterm elections, his approval among Democrats stands at 73%, a substantial drop since earlier in his presidency. In AP-NORC polls conducted in 2021, Biden's approval rating among Democrats never dropped below 82%.

The findings reflect a widespread sense of exasperation in a country facing a cascade of challenges ranging from inflation, gun violence, and a sudden shortage of baby formula to a persistent pandemic.

Republicans have not been warm to Biden for a while. Less than 1 in 10 approve of the president or his handling of the economy, but that's no different from last month.

Gerry Toranzo, a nurse and a Republican in Chicago, blames Biden for being forced to pinch pennies by taking steps like driv-

ing slower to conserve gas after prices have skyrocketed during his administration.

Overall, two-thirds of Americans disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy. That rating is largely unchanged over the last few months, though elevated slightly since the first two months of the year.

But there are signs that the dissatisfaction with Biden on the economy has deepened. Just 18% of Americans say Biden's policies have done more to help than hurt the economy, down slightly from 24% in March. Fifty-one percent say they've done more to hurt than help, while 30% say they haven't made much difference either way.

The percentage of Democrats who say Biden's policies have done more to help dipped from 45% to 37%, though just 18% say they've done more to hurt; 44% say they've made no difference.

UN: 18 Million People Facing Severe Hunger in Sahel Region

LONDON (AP) - The United Nations is warning that 18 million people in Africa's Sahel region face severe hunger in the next three months, citing the effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, the coronavirus pandemic, climate-induced shocks and rising costs.

The hunger crisis may press increased numbers of people to migrate out of the affected areas, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said on Friday.

The largest number of people are at risk of severe hunger across the region since 2014, and four countries — Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger — are facing "alarming levels", with nearly 1.7 million people facing emergency levels of food shortages there, ac-

cording to the UN agency.

Parts of the Sahel region, a vast territory stretching across the south of the Sahara Desert, have faced their worst agricultural production in more than a decade. Food shortages could worsen as the lean season arrives in late summer, Tomson Phiri, spokesman for the UN's World Food Program, said.

"The situation is definitely going to get worse before it gets better," he told reporters in Geneva. "We may see more people trying to make ends meet by migrating: It's a very, very likely possibility."

Many people from the region are among migrants who seek to travel north to Europe in hopes of economic opportunity, more stability and safety.