

Macron Insists France Won't Be U.S. 'Vassal' on Taiwan



French President Emmanuel Macron defends his push for more European autonomy from the U.S.

PARIS (AFP) - French President Emmanuel Macron has stood by his controversial comments on Taiwan, saying that being a U.S. ally did not mean being a "vassal".

Macron -- wrapping up a state visit to the Netherlands during which he has also faced protests over pension reforms -- said France still backed the "status quo" on Taiwan.

But the French president appeared to stick by remarks in an interview at the weekend, in which he said Europe should not be a "follower" of either Washington or Beijing or get caught up in any escalation.

"Being an ally does not mean being a vassal... doesn't mean that we don't have the right to think for ourselves,"

from U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican on the foreign affairs committee, who suggested Washington might leave the EU to handle the Ukraine conflict by itself.

Taiwanese Parliament Speaker You Si-kun on Tuesday argued that France had forsaken its motto of 'liberty, equality, fraternity', and that advanced democracies should not "ignore the lives and deaths of people in other countries", adding that Macron's comments left him "puzzled".

Meanwhile, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire stated that Macron was "perfectly right to demand European independence and sovereignty", while the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, noted that "quite a few" leaders of EU countries think like Macron, even though they "wouldn't say things the same way".

When asked about the French president's comments on Monday, the US State Department announced that France is a long-standing ally and that occasional disagreements do not detract from the "deep partnership" with Paris. As for the EU position, a State Department spokesman cited a recent speech by the bloc's President, Ursula von der Leyen, which described China as "a national and economic security threat", and stated that there is "immense convergence" between Washington and Brussels on the matter.

Philippines Stoking Regional Tension With U.S. Bases Pact, China Envoy Says



FILE PHOTO: U.S. soldiers practice firing a machine gun as part of the annual US-Philippines joint military exercises called "Balikatan" at Fort Magsaysay, Nueva Ecija province, Philippines, April 13, 2023.

MANILA (Reuters) - The Philippines is "stoking the fire" of regional tension by offering expanded military base access to the United States, whose goal is to interfere in China's affairs with Taiwan, Beijing's ambassador to Manila said on Friday.

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The Philippines early this month identified four more bases that Washington can use under an expanded Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the locations of

training exercises and interoperability between U.S. and Philippine forces to ensure that we're even better prepared for future crises," its spokesperson Kanishka Gangopadhyay said in a phone message.

The Philippines' foreign ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

EDCA, signed in 2014, underlines the strategic importance of the Philippines to its former colonial ruler the United States, coming at a time of concern over China's conduct in the South China Sea and tension over self-ruled Taiwan.

The EDCA allows U.S. access to Philippine bases for joint training, pre-positioning of equipment and building of facilities, but it is not a permanent presence and President Ferdinand Marcos Jr has assured China the bases would not be used in any offensive action.

But Huang took aim at the Philippines over the U.S. pact and said it should be mindful of the welfare of the many overseas Filipino workers, or OFWs, who are based in nearby Taiwan.

"The Philippines is advised to unequivocally oppose 'Taiwan independence' rather than stoking the fire by offering the U.S. access to the military bases near the Taiwan Strait, if you care genuinely about the 150,000 OFWs," Huang said.

U.S. Airman Arrested Over Pentagon Documents Leak

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Massachusetts Air National Guard member was arrested Thursday in connection with the disclosure of highly classified military documents about the Ukraine war and other top national security issues, an alarming breach that has raised fresh questions about America's ability to safeguard its most sensitive secrets.

The guardsman, an IT specialist identified as 21-year-old Jack Teixeira, was taken into custody



A member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard was arrested by the FBI on Thursday in connection with the leaking of classified documents that have been posted online, Attorney General Merrick Garland announced Thursday.

North Korea Tests New Solid-Fuel ICBM, Warns of 'Extreme' Horror



This photo provided April 14, 2023, by the North Korean government, shows what it says is the test-launch of Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile Thursday, April 13, 2023 at an undisclosed location, North Korea.

SEOUL (Reuters) - North Korea announced on Friday it had tested a new solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a development set to "radically promote" its forces, which experts said would facilitate missile launches with little warning.

Leader Kim Jong Un guided Thursday's test, and warned it would make enemies "experience a clearer security crisis, and constantly strike extreme uneasiness and horror into them by taking fatal and offensive counter-actions until they abandon their senseless thinking and reckless acts", North Korean state media said.

Analysts said it was the North's first use of solid propellants in an intermediate-range or intercontinental ballistic missile, a key task to deploying missiles faster during a war.

South Korea's defense ministry said North Korea was still developing the weapon, and that it needed more time and effort to master the technology, indicating that Pyongyang might carry out more tests.

North Korean state media outlet KCNA released photos of Kim watching the launch, accompanied by his wife, sister and daughter, and the

missile covered in camouflage nets on a mobile launcher. A state media video showed the Hwasong-18 missile blasting off from a launch tube, creating a cloud of smoke.

The development of the Hwasong-18 will "extensively reform the strategic deterrence components of the DPRK, radically promote the effectiveness of its nuclear counterattack posture and bring about a change in the practicality of its offensive military strategy," KCNA said, using the initials of the country's official name.

South Korea and the U.S. air forces staged drills hours after the report, involving American B-52H bombers that joined F-35A, F-15 and F-16 fighter jets, Seoul's defence ministry said.

"By deploying U.S. strategic assets with increased frequency and intensity, the two countries will continue demonstrating our strong alliance's will that we will never tolerate any nuclear attack from North Korea," the ministry said in a statement.

North Korea has criticized recent U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises as escalating tensions, and has stepped up weapons tests in the past months.

Sudan's Army Says Paramilitary Mobilization Risks Confrontation

KHARTOUM (Reuters) - Sudan's army has warned of a risk of confrontation after mobilizations by a powerful paramilitary group, underlining growing strains between the rival forces and a potential complication in moves to restore civilian rule.

It could spell prolonged strife across a vast country already dealing with economic breakdown and flare-ups of tribal violence.

The mobilization by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo represented a "clear violation of law," the army said in a rare comment on a dispute that has hampered a planned transition to democracy.

"These movements and deployments happened without the agreement of the leadership of the armed forces or even coordination with it," the army spokesman said.

"Their continuation will lead to

more tension and divisions that could lead to insecurity in the country."

Western ambassadors from the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe said they were "deeply concerned" by the escalation which they said threatened to derail ongoing talks.

The RSF emerged from militias involved in the conflict in Darfur which broke out 20 years ago, and has been accused of human rights abuses. It operates under its own legal code and chain of command.

The RSF joined with the military to overthrow long-ruling Islamist strong man Omar Hassan al-Bashir in a coup in 2019. The two forces then carried out another coup in October 2021.

Relations between the military and the RSF have since deteriorated, forcing a delay in the signing of an internationally backed agreement with political parties for a two-year, civilian-led transition to free elections.

The army statement advised politicians not to get involved in tensions inflamed by negotiations on the integration of the RSF within the military as part of the new deal.

Dagalo, better known in Sudan as Hemedti, has said he regrets the coup and supports the UN, Western- and Gulf-backed transition deal to help prevent the resurgence of pro-Bashir Islamists, a concern shared by civilian political parties.

In a call with special envoys from the United States, UK and Norway, Hemedti said he was committed to an initial framework deal signed in December, according to a statement from his office late on Thursday.

News in Brief

LONDON (Reuters) - Ukrainian troops have been forced to withdraw from some parts of Bakhmut in the face of a renewed Russian assault on the ruined battlefield city, Britain said on Friday, with Moscow pressing to achieve a victory before Ukraine's expected counteroffensive. Ukrainian officials say Russia has been drawing down troops from other areas on the front for a major push on Bakhmut, which Moscow has been trying to capture for nine months to reenergize the all-out invasion it launched more than a year ago. On Friday, Russia Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Russia will conduct missile launches and torpedo tests as part of a surprise inspection of its Pacific naval fleet. The drills come amid heightened tension in the Asia-Pacific region, as the United States and South Korea conduct joint air exercises following an intercontinental ballistic missile test by North Korea. "The main objective of this inspection is to increase the ability of the Armed Forces to repel the aggression of a probable enemy from the direction of ocean and sea," Shoigu said on state television.

BEIJING (Reuters) - China and Brazil should deepen practical cooperation, and tap potential to work together in sectors including agriculture, energy, and infrastructure construction, Chinese President Xi Jinping was quoted as saying by state media on Friday. In a meeting with visiting Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Beijing, Xi said China has made relations with Brazil a diplomatic priority, state broadcaster CCTV reported.

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australia's most powerful tropical cyclone in eight years lashed its northwest coast with winds gusting to an apparent record of 289 kilometers (180 miles) per hour Friday but skirted larger population centers and resulted in no immediate reports of injuries. Cyclone Ilsa crossed the Pilbara coast of Western Australia state as a Category 5 storm, the most severe, but weakened to Category 2 as it moved inland, Australia's Bureau of Meteorology said. Damage was still being assessed in the path of Ilsa, which made landfall in the early hours 150 kilometers (93 miles) northeast of the iron ore export town of Port Hedland in the rural area of Pardoo.

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A strong earthquake shook parts of Indonesia's main island of Java and tourist island of Bali on Friday, causing panic but there were no immediate reports of serious damage or casualties. The U.S. Geological Survey said the magnitude 7.0 quake was centered 96.5 kilometers (59.8 miles) north of Tuban, a coastal city in East Java province, at a depth of 594 kilometers (369 miles). Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysical Agency said there was no danger of a tsunami but warned of possible aftershocks. The agency put a preliminary magnitude at 6.6. Variations in early measurements are common.

TEXAS (Reuters) - More than 18,000 cows died after an explosion and fire at a family dairy farm in west Texas, marking the deadliest such barn blaze on record in the United States. Firefighters rescued one employee from the South Fork Dairy near Dimmitt on Monday as flames raced through a building and into holding pens, according to images and statements from the Castro County Sheriff's Office. The cause of the fire was under investigation and it was not immediately possible to contact members of the family who own the farm in one of Texas' biggest milk production counties. The blaze prompted calls from the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), among the oldest U.S. animal protection groups, for federal laws to prevent barn fires which kill hundreds of thousands of farm animals each year.