

Kremlin: Russia Developing Ties With North Korea in All Areas, Including 'Sensitive' Ones



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with North Korean Foreign Minister in Moscow on Jan. 16, 2024.

MOSCOW (Reuters) — Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday that his country is developing its relations with North Korea in all areas, including “sensitive” ones.

North Korea’s foreign minister lauded comradeship ties with Russia on Tuesday and then held rare talks in the Kremlin with President Vladimir Putin, who has been invited by Kim Jong Un to visit Pyongyang.

Asked about the talks in Moscow, Peskov said the situation on the Korean peninsula was discussed, but that the main focus was on developing bilateral relations.

“The Democratic People’s

Republic of Korea is our very important partner, and we are focused on the further development of our relations in all areas, including in sensitive areas,” Peskov told reporters.

Putin has deepened ties with North Korea since sending troops into Ukraine in 2022, and the United States and its allies have condemned what they say have been significant North Korean missile deliveries to Russia.

Both Russia and North Korea have repeatedly dismissed the criticism. Moscow says it will develop ties with whatever countries it wants and that its cooperation with Pyongyang does not contravene interna-

tional agreements.

In mid-September, Putin and Kim met at a summit at the space center located in Russia’s far-eastern Amur region where they inspected the facilities and held talks on how Russia could help North Korea build satellites, as well as a possible arms deal.

At the time, the United States claimed its intelligence sources confirmed that Russia and North Korea were “actively advancing” in the weapons deal.

North Korea has been under harsh sanctions by the U.S. and the United Nations Security Council for years over its defensive nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The sanctions have, however, failed to halt the country’s nuclear program.

Pyongyang also says its missile drills are a “just countermeasure” against the joint U.S.-South Korea war games.

Russia has gone out of its way to publicize the renaissance of its relationship, including military ties, with North Korea, which was formed in 1948 with the backing of the then-Soviet Union.

Top NATO Officer Urges Allies, Leaders to Plan for Unexpected in Ukraine



In this photo provided by the Kharkiv Regional Administration, an apartment building damaged in a rocket attack is seen in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in the early hours of Wednesday, Jan. 17, 2024.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) — Ukraine is locked in an existential battle for its survival almost two years into its war with Russia and Western armies and political leaders must drastically change the way they help it fend off invading forces, top NATO military officer Admiral Rob Bauer said on Wednesday.

Over two days of talks in Brussels, NATO’s top officers are expected to detail plans for what are set to be the biggest military exercises in Europe since the Cold War later this year. The wargames are meant as a fresh show of strength from NATO and its commitment to defend all allied nations from attack.

As the war bogs down, and with U.S. and European Union funding for Ukraine’s conflict-ravaged economy held up by political infighting, Bauer appealed for a “whole of society approach” to the challenge that goes beyond military planning.

“We need public and private actors to change their mindset for an era in which everything was plannable, foreseeable, controllable and focused on efficiency to an era in which anything can happen at any time. An era in which we need to expect the unexpected,” he said as he opened the meeting.

“In order to be fully effective, also in the future, we need a warfighting

transformation of NATO,” Bauer added.

On Monday, UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps announced that his government would send 20,000 troops to take part in the NATO military exercises — known as “Steadfast Defender” — with many deployed in eastern Europe from February to June.

The UK will also send advanced fighter jets and surveillance planes, plus warships and submarines.

With ammunition stockpiles diminishing as allies send military materiel to Ukraine, the Norwegian government said Wednesday it was earmarking 2 billion kroner (\$192 million) to boost defense industry production capacity, saying there is “a need for large quantities of ammunition.”

Norway’s Defense Minister Bjørn Arild Gram said that “increasing capacity in the defense industry is important, both for Ukraine, but also to safeguard our own security.”

Half the funds will go to Nammo, a Norway-based aerospace and defense group that specializes in the production of ammunition, rocket engines and space applications, “to increase the production of artillery ammunition,” Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said.

In Brussels, Bauer said NATO would continue to support Ukraine long-term.

Football Star Benzema Files Defamation Complaint Against French Minister



File photo: Itihad’s French forward Karim Benzema reacts during the Saudi Pro League football match between Al-Ittihad and Al-Hilal at Prince Abdullah al-Faisal Stadium in Jeddah on September 1, 2023. © AFP

PARIS (AFP) — Karim Benzema has filed a complaint for defamation against French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, who last year said the former Real Madrid star had links with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Darmanin, a tough-talking right-winger with designs on the French presidency, criticized Benzema after the former France striker and 2022 Ballon d’Or winner posted on X (formerly Twitter) in mid-October in support of the inhabitants of Gaza, who, were victims of “unjust bombardments” carried out by Israel.

Darmanin reacted to Benzema’s post by alleging that the player “has a notorious link with the Muslim Brotherhood”, Islamist group with its origins in Egypt.

Benzema’s complaint, lodged by lawyer Hugues Vigier, and seen by

AFP, says these remarks “undermine” the player’s honor and reputation.

In his complaint, Benzema, who plays for Saudi club Al-Ittihad and is a Muslim, says he “has never had the slightest link with the Muslim Brotherhood organization, nor to (his) knowledge with anyone who claims to be a member of it”.

He added: “I am aware of the extent to which, because of my notoriety, I am being used in political games, which are all the more scandalous given that the dramatic events since October 7 deserve something quite different from this type of statement.”

The complaint has been lodged with the Cour de Justice, the only French court empowered to prosecute members of the government for offences committed while exercising their duties.

News in Brief

COPENHAGEN (AP) — A leading World Health Organization official has called for vigilance in the face of rising cases of respiratory diseases in Europe. Hans Henri P. Kluge, the WHO’s regional director for Europe, noted a surge in influenza infections and hospitalizations at a press conference in Copenhagen, and urged health systems to prepare for a likely increase in cases in the coming weeks. The Netherlands is currently grappling with an upswing in respiratory infections, according to the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). Various pathogens, including COVID-19, influenza virus and seasonal coronavirus are “now common” among the population, the RIVM said in its most recent update as of Jan 10.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) — Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed at least two times in 2022 along their Himalayan frontier where they have been involved in a bitter standoff since 2020, according to new details that have emerged from the Indian Army’s gallantry award citations. The incidents involved hand-to-hand combat and came as New Delhi and Beijing held a series of diplomatic and military talks to resolve their worst military conflict in decades. No deaths were reported in these incidents. At least 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops were killed in clashes in the area two years previously, in mid-2020. These skirmishes in India’s Ladakh region, the last of which is now known to have happened in November, 2022, show that the tensions along the undemarcated border continued much longer than previously reported.

BANGKOK (Reuters) — Around 20 people were killed in Thailand in an explosion on Wednesday at a fireworks factory north of Bangkok, police said, as authorities inspected the site but were yet to find survivors. It was not immediately clear what caused the incident, which took place mid-afternoon in Suphan Buri province about 120 km (74.56 miles) north of Bangkok, police said. “We cannot tell whether all the workers were killed. The officials are entering the site to investigate. They have not found any survivors,” Provincial governor, Nattapat Suwanprateep, told Reuters. A preliminary investigation put the death toll at 20, according to a police statement, with many injured.

HONG KONG (Reuters) — China’s population fell for a second consecutive year in 2023, as a record low birth rate and a wave of COVID-19 deaths when strict lockdowns ended accelerated a downturn that will have profound long-term effects on the economy’s growth potential. The National Bureau of Statistics said the total number of people in China dropped by 2.08 million, or 0.15%, to 1.409 billion in 2023. That was well above the population decline of 850,000 in 2022, which had been the first since 1961 during the Great Famine of the Mao Zedong era. Total deaths last year rose 6.6% to 11.1 million, with the death rate reaching the highest level since 1974 during the Cultural Revolution. New births fell 5.7% to 9.02 million and the birth rate was a record low 6.39 births per 1,000 people, down from a rate of 6.77 births in 2022.

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Serbian opposition supporters have been back in the streets, accusing President Aleksandar Vucic’s populist government of orchestrating fraud in last month’s parliamentary and local elections. The protesters want the Dec. 17 vote to be annulled and held again in free and fair conditions. Similar demonstrations were held for days after the elections. “The entire planet knows that the thief has been caught stealing,” opposition politician Marinika Tepic told the few thousand protesters. “There are no free and fair elections here. If we give up this fight, there will be no more elections.”

U.S., South Korea, Japan Conduct Naval Drills

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The United States, South Korea and Japan conducted perhaps their biggest-ever combined naval exercises in a show of strength against North Korea, South Korea’s military said Wednesday.

The training in waters off South Korea’s Jeju island, which involved an American aircraft carrier, was aimed at sharpening the countries’ combined response against North Korea, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

On Monday at Pyongyang parliament, Kim declared that North Korea would abandon its long-standing commitment to a peaceful unification with South Korea and ordered a rewriting of

North’s constitution to eliminate the idea of a shared statehood between the war-divided countries. He said South Koreans were “top-class stooges” of America who were obsessed with confrontation, and repeated a threat that the North would annihilate the South with its nukes if provoked.

Kim’s speech came a day after the North conducted its first ballistic test of 2024, which state media described as a new solid-fuel, intermediate-range missile tipped with a hypersonic warhead, reflecting its push to advance its lineup of weapons targeting U.S. military bases in Guam and Japan.

In response to the North’s activity, the United States and its

Asian allies have been expanding their combined military exercises. Kim condemns the demonstrations as invasion rehearsals, and the drills increasingly feature major U.S. military assets, including aircraft carriers, long-range bombers and nuclear-capable submarines.

South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said the trilateral naval drills — a three-day program that concluded Wednesday — involved nine warships, including U.S. aircraft carrier Carl Vinson and Aegis destroyers from South Korea and Japan. The drills usually involve around five vessels. South Korea’s military did not immediately confirm media assessments that the exercise was the country’s largest trilateral naval drill.

Winter Weather Snarls Air, Train Travel Across Europe



People walk in the snow at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany January 16, 2024.

FRANKFURT/OSLO (Reuters) — Freezing rain in central and southern Germany grounded hundreds of flights and disrupted train travel on Wednesday, while heavy snowfall in Norway’s capital led to the temporary closure of its main airport.

Germany’s massive Frankfurt airport cancelled all flights in early afternoon as jets could no longer be de-iced, but later resumed service with a limited capacity, a spokesperson said, adding that the situation remained uncertain.

Oslo airport also reopened but said it faced big delays that had left many passengers stranded.

Around 680 of the 1,047 scheduled Frankfurt arrivals and departures had been cancelled earlier in the day. At Munich airport 254 flights were cancelled and a smaller airport in the southern city of Saarbruecken ceased operations completely.

“This is extremely rare...there is so much snow that the pilots can’t see the lights on the ground so we’ve halted all incoming and outgoing flights,” said a spokesperson for Norway’s national airport operator Avinor.

For passengers, the cancellations meant stress and changes in plans.

In Oslo, Bente Jensen, 66, was unable to even reach the airport for a

return journey to her native Denmark as train services from the city centre were cancelled.

“It is not going very well... there seems to have been a combination of wind, snow and everything,” Jensen told Reuters after discussing her options with airport train staff alongside hundreds of other stranded passengers.

German rail operator Deutsche Bahn also warned of delays and cancellations because of winter weather, and said it was limiting the top speed for its high-speed ICE trains to 200 kph (124 mph) as a precautionary measure.

Its long distance services from Stuttgart and Frankfurt to Paris had been cancelled due to weather conditions in France, Deutsche Bahn said.

France’s weather service warned of black ice in 25 regions and floods in three other areas this afternoon.

In Norway, trains stopped in some areas in the east of the country due to the weather conditions, train operator Bane Nor said.

In Germany, an extreme risk of black ice and heavy snowfall would remain through Thursday in the affected regions, its weather service said.

Numerous schools in Germany’s centre and southern regions remained closed as on-site education was suspended for the day.