

TEHRAN – Describing missile industry as a key component of Iran's defense power, Defense Minister Brigadier General Muhammad Reza Ashtiani called for efforts to steadily update those capabilities in order to deal with threats. In a meeting with the ministry's Aerospace Industries Organization staff, General Ashtiani said diverse types of missile defense systems are considered a top priority in Iran's defense doctrine to counter a whole gamut of threats to the Islamic Republic. The minister also emphasized the need to update missile technologies and provide expert training and support for military forces.

TEHRAN – Iran has rejected as “unjustified and invalid” concerns voiced by the Joe Biden administration over Tehran's expansion of trade cooperation with other states, saying the latest agreements with Russia and Pakistan are in line with Iran's emphasis on the policy of good neighborliness. Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said the signing of an agreement on the completion of the Rasht-Astara railroad and inauguration of joint border projects with Pakistan are all part of Iran's “neighbor-oriented” policy.

Viewpoint

Iran, the Vital Link in the North-South Corridor

In 'Biggest Blow' to U.S., Assad Gets Warm Welcome at Arab Summit

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia (Dispatches) -- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was given a warm welcome at an Arab summit on Friday, winning a hug from Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince at a meeting of leaders, in a policy shift opposed by the U.S. and other Western powers.

Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman shook hands with a beaming Assad as the summit got underway, drawing a line under Arab enmity towards a leader who turned the tide of Syria's war on foreign-backed takfiri terrorism with help from Iran and Russia.

The summit featured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in attendance and Crown Prince Muhammad restating Riyadh's readiness to mediate in the war with Russia.

Oil powerhouse Saudi Arabia, once heavily influenced by the United States, has taken the diplomatic lead in the Arab world in the past year, re-establishing ties with Iran, welcoming Syria back to the fold, and mediating in the Sudan conflict.

In an apparent swipe at Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, who has backed militants and sent Turkish forces into swathes of northern Syria, Assad noted the “danger of expansionist Ottoman thought”.

Washington has objected to any steps towards normalization with Assad, saying there must first be progress towards a political solution to the conflict.

The Arab rapprochement with Assad gained momentum after China negotiated an agreement in March that saw Riyadh resume diplomatic ties with Iran.

Leading U.S. magazine Newsweek termed Assad's visit to Saudi Arabia as the “biggest blow” that President Joe Biden has received when it comes to his anti-Syria policies.

The publication cited the Syrian Mission to the United Nations urging Washington to end its illegal military presence in Syria and lift sanctions against the country.

The United States, maintained the mission, “must abandon its hostile policies towards Syria, start withdrawing its forces from Syrian territory, and stop supporting illegal militias and terrorist entities.”

“The economic crisis and the huge inflation that the Americans are suffering from requires that they stop wasting taxpayers' money on establishing illegal military bases in Syria under pretexts that have been proven false such as defending U.S. national security thousands of miles away from Washington,” it said.

The mission also urged the U.S. to “initiate the immediate lifting of the coercive measures imposed on the Syrians, which constitute collective punishment for them and the biggest obstacle to improving the

humanitarian and living conditions, and providing basic services such as electricity, water and health care”, Newsweek said.

Newsweek cited a State Department spokesperson as saying that “our sanctions remain in full effect, and they will not be loosened absent a resolution of the underlying conflict...”

Secretary of State Antony Blinken explicitly rejected the recent developments bringing Assad back into the Arab fold when he told a press conference that “we do not believe that Syria merits readmission to the Arab League”.

“It's a point we've made to all of our regional partners, but they have to make their own decisions,” Blinken said.

And yet, he said the Biden administration continues to “have shared goals when it comes to Syria with our partners”.

“So, I think the Arab perspective, as articulated through the Arab League, is they believe that they can pursue these objectives through more direct engagement,” Blinken stated. “We may have a different perspective when it comes to that, but the objectives that we have I think are the same. So, that's where the focus is.”

Assad has already visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman and is expected to visit other Arab states as well in the near future.

President Raisi Meets Tribal Heads in Zahedan



Persepolis Win Iran Pro League Title



Zionist Troops Fire on Palestinians Protesting 'Flag March' in Gaza



Pakistan, Iran Open First Border Market



Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, left, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi shake hands as they meet at the countries' frontier to open a major border marketplace on May 18, 2023.

TEHRAN — Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Thursday inaugurated the first border market as relations warm between the two countries, officials said.

The marketplace is the first of six to be constructed along the Pakistan-Iran border under a 2012 agreement signed by the two sides.

Sharif and Raisi also inaugu-

rated an electricity transmission line, which will provide some of Pakistan's remote regions with Iranian electricity.

In a televised meeting, Sharif, sitting next to Raisi, assured him Pakistan would do its best to improve security along the Iranian border. He added that both sides agreed to enhance trade and economic ties, and extended an invitation to Raisi to visit the Pakistani capital, Islamabad.

This is the first visit of its kind since 2013, when the two nations signed an agreement allowing Pakistan to import Iranian gas despite American opposition. Tehran at the time said that “the West has no right to block the project.”

Pakistan has close ties with Saudi Arabia, but has tried to maintain a relationship with Iran. Riyadh and Tehran, long-time rivals, restored ties earlier this year in a Chinese-brokered agreement.

On Thursday, Raisi and Sharif addressed a ceremony in a live broadcast from the Iranian side of the more than the 900-kilometer border between the two countries.

Raisi said the project had set the stage for Tehran and Islamabad to expand their economic and energy exchanges.

The transmission line would export 100 megawatts of Iranian electricity to Pakistan's border province of Baluchistan. The impoverished, natural resources-rich region already imports 100 megawatts of low-cost power from Iran.

“We are fully prepared to further deepen our relations with our neighboring country Pakistan in the energy sector,” the Iranian president said.

Islamabad's foreign exchange reserves have rapidly declined as the country faces a dire economic crisis. The cash-strapped South Asian nation of about 230 million people depends on energy imports to meet domestic needs.

The marketplace opened by the two countries Thursday links Iran's southeastern city of Pishin to Pakistan's southwestern city of Mand.

Raisi said the facilities would help create jobs and boost bilateral “retail trade” to help thousands of households on both sides of the remote, poverty-stricken regions.

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Hundreds Protest 'Imperialist' G7 Summit

HIROSHIMA (Dispatches) -- Hundreds of people on Friday protested here where the U.S.-led Group of Seven leaders met to stiffen sanctions on Russia, provide further support for Ukraine and discuss growing tensions with China.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who holds the rotating G7 presidency, met with U.S. President Joe Biden ahead of the summit that runs until Sunday. Officials said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would also attend in person over the weekend.

In a joint statement, the G7 leaders said existing measures against Russia would be broadened and any exports that could help it in its 15-month war with Ukraine would be restricted across the G7 countries.

“This includes exports of industrial machinery, tools, and other technology that Russia uses to rebuild its war machine,” they said, adding they would also try to restrict Russian revenues from trade in metals and diamonds.

Members of the G7 include the United States, Japan, Germany, Britain, France, Canada and Italy.

Ahead of the summit, Kishida and Biden discussed further strengthening what they called the deterrence of the Japan-U.S. alliance and decided to develop Japan-U.S.-South Korea cooperation.

“Biden is in the land of Hiroshima and he's brought a button along to fire a nuclear missile, I cannot forgive him for this. He needs to apologize to the people in Hiroshima,” protester and labor union member surnamed Niishima told Reuters.

Kishida, who represents Hiroshima in Japan's lower house of parliament, said he chose the city for the summit to focus attention on arms control.

Hiroshima, and another Japanese city, Nagasaki, were destroyed by U.S. nuclear attacks 78 years ago. The aerial bombings together killed up to 226,000 people, most of whom were civilians, and remain the only use of nuclear weapons in an armed conflict.

Hiroshima has become the scene of angry protests in recent days, condemning the “imperialist summit”, with police officers from across the country patrolling the area. Hundreds of protesters rallied from Wednesday to Thursday in front of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, also known as the Atomic Bomb Dome, at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, which will be closed until next Monday for the summit.

Carrying banners and signs such as “Crush the G7 Summit” and “No War-themed Conference”, the protesters chanted slogans such as “No Japan-U.S. leaders (Continued on Page 7)

UK Sees Wider Conflict With Russia, China

LONDON (Dispatches) -- British defense secretary Ben Wallace has warned of the threat of wider global conflict by the end of the decade as he called for a firm timetable for increasing UK military spending to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product.

“By the end of the decade, the world will be a more dangerous, unstable place and defense will be more critical to our lives,” he said, highlighting the risk of a wider conflict with Russia, the threat posed by a “rising China” and the rise of extremism in Africa.

The world is seeing “the end of the abnormal period [of peace] post-cold war”, he told the Financial Times. “I think a conflict is coming, whether it's hot or cold is to be seen . . . I think a conflict is coming with a range of adversaries around the world . . . We need to all be prepared for it.”

The warning by the UK defense secretary, who has been central in rallying wider European support for Ukraine, was accompanied by a plea to chancellor Jeremy Hunt to put a timeframe on the commitment to lift the defense budget from 2.1 percent to 2.5 percent of GDP.

In the Budget in March, Hunt promised the defense ministry an extra £11 billion over the next five years. The chancellor

also reiterated the government's “aspiration” to increase defense spending to 2.5 percent of GDP in the longer term but did not specify a timeframe.

Wallace said he welcomed the extra funding but added: “There's one plank left to go, which is a date.”

The UK's defense spending has fallen fairly steadily from a historic high of about 7 percent of GDP in the mid-1950s. Wallace has secured a series of one-off cash injections since taking over as defense secretary in 2019, but a significant proportion of this has gone towards big projects such as the new submarines to carry the country's nuclear deterrent, leaving the ministry's day-to-day budget squeezed.

Wallace highlighted that of all the services, the army was most in need of urgent investment, declaring it was “15 years behind and needs to modernize”.

He is preparing to unveil a refresh of the 2021 defense command paper, which set out plans to modernize the armed forces, and is preparing for another battle with Hunt over funding.

But he appeared to reject calls by critics to reverse his decision to cut 9,500 troops from the army, reducing it to 72,500 — its smallest size since the Napoleonic era — arguing (Continued on Page 7)