

Lavrov: West Teeters on Brink of War Among Nuclear Powers

MOSCOW (Reuters) — Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Monday that the support of the United States, Britain and France for Ukraine was stoking serious strategic risks that had raised the risk of a direct confrontation between the world's biggest nuclear powers.

Lavrov said the United States and NATO were obsessed with the idea of inflicting "strategic defeat" on Russia and there were risks in such confrontation that could lead to an increased level of nuclear danger.

"The Westerners are teetering dangerously on the brink of a direct military clash between nuclear powers, which is fraught with catastrophic consequences," Lavrov said.

Lavrov said: "Of particular concern is the fact that it is the 'troika' of Western nuclear states that are among the key sponsors of the criminal Kyiv regime, the main initiators of various provocative steps. We see serious strategic risks in this, leading to an increase in the

level of nuclear danger."

The three Western countries with nuclear weapons are the United States, Britain and France.

A top Russian lawmaker said on Monday Russia now has grounds to confiscate Western assets after the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation that would allow the potential transfer of seized Russian assets to Ukraine.

"Washington has passed a law on the confiscation of Russian assets in order to provoke the EU to take the same step, which will be devastating for the European economy," Vyacheslav Volodin, the Duma speaker and close ally of President Vladimir Putin, said.

"Our country now has every reason to make symmetrical decisions in relation to foreign assets," said Volodin.

Volodin said that of the \$280 billion of Russian assets frozen abroad, only \$5 to \$6 billion was in the United States while about 210 billion euros (\$224 billion) was in

the European Union.

NBC said the House passed the "REPO Act" which would allow the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden to confiscate billions of dollars' worth of Russian assets sitting in U.S. banks and transfer them to Ukraine for reconstruction.

Russia said its forces had advanced towards the town of Chasiv Yar in eastern Ukraine and seized control of the settlement of Bohdanivka, as Kyiv said it urgently needed promised U.S. support to fend off a full-scale offensive.

Control of Bohdanivka, located just to the west of the Russian-held city of Bakhmut, has been in doubt for some time.

The village lies some 5 kilometers (3 miles) east of Chasiv Yar, a heavily fortified hilltop town and forward artillery base for the Ukrainian army, providing protection for some of the area's largest cities including Kramatorsk and Slaviansk.

Report: Europe Fastest-Warming Continent



Burnt trees and a car after fire in Mandra, west of Athens, on July 19, 2023.

NAPLES, Italy (AP) — Europe is the fastest-warming continent and its temperatures are rising at roughly twice the global average, two top climate monitoring organizations reported Monday, warning of the consequences for human health, glacier melt and economic activity.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization and the European Union's climate agency, Copernicus, said in a joint report that the continent has the opportunity to develop targeted strategies to speed up the transition to renewable resources like wind, solar and hydroelectric power

in response to the effects of climate change.

The continent generated 43% of its electricity from renewable resources last year, up from 36% the year before, the agencies say in their European State of the Climate report for last year. More energy in Europe was generated from renewables than from fossil fuels for the second year running.

The latest five-year averages show that temperatures in Europe are now running 2.3 degrees Celsius (4.1 Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels, compared to 1.3 degrees Celsius higher globally, the report says — just shy of the targets under the 2015

Paris climate accord to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

"Europe saw yet another year of increasing temperatures and intensifying climate extremes — including heat stress with record temperatures, wildfires, heat waves, glacier ice loss and lack of snowfall," said Elisabeth Hamdouch, the deputy head of unit for Copernicus at the EU's executive commission.

The European report focuses this year on the impact of high temperatures on human health, noting that deaths related to heat have risen across the continent. It said more than 150 lives were lost directly last year in connection with storms, floods and wildfires.

The cost of weather- and climate-related economic losses in 2023 were estimated at more than 13.4 billion euros (about \$14.3 billion). Extreme weather fanned heat waves, wildfires, droughts and flooding, the report said.

High temperatures have contributed to a loss of glacier ice on the continent, including in the Alps — which have lost about 10% of their remaining glacier ice over the last two years.

Still, the report's authors pointed to some exceptions, such as how temperatures were below average in Scandinavia and Iceland even if the mercury was higher than average across much of the continent as a whole.

Papua New Guinea Raps Biden 'Loose Talk' Implying Cannibals Ate Uncle



U.S. President Joe Biden salutes next to members of the Kennedy family, at a campaign event at the Martin Luther King Recreation Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on April 18, 2024.

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape accused Joe Biden of disparaging the South Pacific island nation by implying that an uncle of the U.S. president had been eaten by "cannibals" there during World War II.

"Sometimes you have loose moments," James Marape said in an interview after Biden's contentious remarks.

Biden's comments offended a key strategic ally as China moves to increase its influence in the region.

The president spoke at a Pennsylvania war memorial last week about his

Army Air Corps aviator uncle Ambrose Finnegan, who was shot down over Papua New Guinea, which was a theater of heavy fighting.

"They never found the body because there used to be — there were a lot of cannibals for real in that part of New Guinea," Biden said, referring to the country's main island.

Marape said in a statement that Biden "appeared to imply his uncle never had been eaten by cannibals."

"President Biden's remarks may have been a slip of the tongue; however, my country does not deserve to be labeled as such," Marape said in a statement provided by his office to

The Associated Press on Monday.

"World War II was not the doing of my people; however, they were needlessly dragged into a conflict that was not their doing," Marape added.

The rift comes as Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese began a visit on Monday to Papua New Guinea, Australia's nearest neighbor.

Marape's statement was released on the same day he met China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Port Moresby to discuss building closer relations.

Marape also called on the U.S. to find its war dead in Papua New Guinea's jungles and to clean up the wreckage of war.

"The remains of WWII lie scattered all over PNG, including the plane that carried President Biden's uncle," Marape said.

"Perhaps, given President Biden's comments and the strong reaction from PNG and other parts of the world, it is time for the USA to find as many remains of World War II in PNG as possible, including those of servicemen who lost their lives like Ambrose Finnegan," he said.

"The theaters of war in PNG and Solomon Islands are many, and littered with the remains of WWII including human remains, plane wrecks, ship wrecks, tunnels and bombs. Our people daily live with the fear of being killed by detonated bombs of WWII," Marape added.

China Calls for 'Friendly Consultation' on Maritime Disputes



The 19th Western Pacific Naval Symposium kicked off in Qingdao City, east China's Shandong Province on Monday.

QINGDAO, China (AFP) — A senior Chinese defense official said Monday that Beijing sought to resolve maritime disputes through "friendly consultation", speaking at the formal opening of a naval forum attended by top brass from the United States and Russia.

Navy representatives from 29 countries including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, India and Australia are expected to attend the four-day Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao, on China's east coast.

They will discuss maritime peace and security, global maritime governance and relevant international laws, according to China's state-run Xinhua news agency.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the ruling Communist Party's Central Military Commission, called for parties to "work together to create peace and tranquility".

"China is consistently committed to resolving maritime disputes through friendly consultation directly with the countries party to them," Zhang said.

"But we will not permit arbitrary abuses, nor accept distortions of international law," he warned.

"We will legitimately uphold our rights in response to deliberate violations and resolutely take reasonable countermeasures in response to groundless provocations," Zhang said.

Washington and other capitals are on a collision course with China over self-ruled Taiwan, which is claimed by Beijing.

Beijing has also had repeated confrontations with U.S. ally the Philippines around disputed reefs in the South China Sea — a vital waterway China claims almost in its entirety despite an international court ruling that its claims are invalid.

Thousands of Filipino and American troops kicked off joint military exercises on Monday concentrated in the north and west of the archipelago nation, near both the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Among the officials at the opening ceremony on Monday was Russia's recently-appointed navy chief Alexander Moiseyev, as well as the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Stephen Koehler.

During a Sunday media tour, Chinese navy personnel in white uniforms held marches and signaling exercises with red and yellow flags at a submarine academy. Sailors also navigated chain-link fencing, monkeybars, hanging rubber tires and other obstacles as part of a training demonstration.

Qingdao is a major Chinese navy port, and a sleek grey destroyer, a supply ship and a submarine rescue vessel held open days on Sunday ahead of the navy's 75th anniversary.

Ecuadoran Referendum: Voters Approve Crackdown on Gangs



Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa attends an inauguration ceremony for a referendum that asks voters to support mostly security-related questions to fight rising violence, in Quito, April 21, 2024.

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — Ecuador's fledgling president got a resounding victory in a referendum that he touted as a way to crack down on criminal gangs behind a spiraling wave of violence.

An official quick count showed that Ecuadorians overwhelmingly voted "yes" to all nine questions focused on tightening security measures, rejecting only two more controversial economic proposals.

The quick count was announced by the head of the Electoral National Council, Diana Atamaint. It confirmed a private exit poll released hours before that indicated a resounding victory and sign of support for President Daniel Noboa, the scion of a wealthy banana exporting family.

Among the measures approved are President Noboa's call to deploy the army in the fight against the gangs, to loosen obstacles for extraditing accused criminals and to lengthen prison sentences for convicted drug traffickers.

Ecuador was traditionally one of South America's most peaceful countries, but it has been rocked in recent years by a wave of violence, much of it spilling over from neighboring Colombia, the world's largest producer of co-

caine. Last year, the country's homicide rate shot up to 40 deaths per 100,000 people, one of the highest in the region.

Noboa has rallied popular support by confronting the gangs head on. That task became more urgent in January when masked gunmen, some on orders from imprisoned drug traffickers, terrorized residents and took control of a television station while it was live on the air in an unprecedented show of force.

Following the rampage, the 36-year-old president decreed an "internal armed conflict," enabling him to use emergency powers to deploy the army in pursuit of about 20 gangs now classified as "terrorists."

The referendum, in which more than 13 million Ecuadorians were called to vote, contained measures to extend those powers and put them on firmer legal ground.

For some analysts, the Ecuadorian leader must show results to live up to people's support.

"This gives him some vigor," said Andrea Endara, analyst and professor at Casa Grande University. But "if the president does not begin to take actions to demonstrate that having voted 'yes' brings results to reduce insecurity, this support will quickly be diluted."

News in Brief

GUWAHATI, India (AP) — Voters at a handful of polling places in a northeastern Indian state went back to the polls amid tight security on Monday after violence disrupted the vote last week. Indian election authorities voided the results at 11 of Manipur state's nearly 3,000 polling stations after armed men damaged election machines during the first day of voting in national elections on Friday. Manipur has been wracked by ethnic violence between the state's two dominant ethnic groups since May 2023. Around 200 people have been killed and over 60,000 displaced as mobs have rampaged through villages and torched houses. The unrest broke out when Christian Kukis protested a demand by the mostly Hindu Meiteis for a special status that would let them buy land in hills that populated by Kukis and other tribal groups. The clashes have persisted despite the army's presence in Manipur, a state of 3.7 million people tucked in the mountains on India's border with Myanmar.

SEOUL (AFP) — North Korea has fired an unidentified ballistic missile into the sea off South Korea's east coast, Seoul's military said on Monday, the latest in an apparent volley of tests by Pyongyang this year. Tokyo also confirmed the launch, with the Japanese defense ministry saying "a suspected ballistic missile was launched from North Korea" in a post on X, formerly Twitter. Seoul-based specialist site NK News said that the "brief flight time, likely under ten minutes, points to the launch involving a short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) or 600mm multiple launch rocket system (MLRS)." The latest launch comes after UN sanctions monitoring against the nuclear-armed nation was upended last month by Russia. Pyongyang's ally Moscow in March used its United Nations Security Council veto to effectively end UN monitoring of violations of the raft of sanctions on Kim Jong Un's government for its nuclear and weapons program. On Friday, North Korea tested a "super-large warhead" designed for a strategic cruise missile, state media said, with Seoul's military confirming it had detected cruise missile launches around the same time.

BEIJING (AFP) — China said on Monday it would seek to strengthen ties with the Maldives, after pro-Beijing President Mohamed Muizuz won control of parliament in an election landslide. "China is willing to work with the Maldives to maintain traditional friendship (and) expand exchanges and cooperation in various fields," foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said. Beijing, he said, aimed to "continuously deepen the China-Maldives comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" as well as "accelerate construction of a community with a shared future for China and the Maldives, and better benefit the two peoples." "We congratulate the Maldives on successfully holding its parliamentary election and fully respect the choice made by the Maldivian people," Wang said. Provisional results from the Elections Commission of Maldives show Muizuz's People's National Congress (PNC) had secured more than two-thirds in the 93-member parliament.

JAKARTA (AFP) — Indonesia's constitutional court on Monday rejected a challenge to the country's presidential vote won by Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, after his main rival alleged rules were unfairly changed to allow the outgoing leader's son to run as his vice president. Prabowo, 72, was confirmed in February as the next leader of the world's third-biggest democracy, beating former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan and a third rival with 58.6 percent of the vote. The president-elect's campaign was mired in allegations that outgoing leader Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, had interfered in a bid to boost Prabowo's campaign. He was accused of engineering rule changes that allowed his eldest son Gibran Raka-buming Raka to run for vice president.

BOGOTA (Reuters) — Tens of thousands of Colombians marched to reject economic and social reforms being proposed by the leftist government of President Gustavo Petro, the latest in a series of demonstrations against Petro's policies. The reforms, which Petro says will fight deep inequality but which opponents say will damage the country's already-struggling economy, were key campaign promises for the 64-year-old leader, who took office in 2022. Despite gray skies and rain, some 70,000 people marched in Bogota, the capital, according to city government estimates, chanting "out with Petro," waving national flags and blowing on trumpets before gathering in the central Bolivar Square. The march comes after a Senate committee earlier this month rejected a proposed health reform aimed at stripping power from insurers and expanding access to healthcare, as the government took control of two major insurers it said had failed to correctly care for patients.

BEIJING (AFP) — Three people are dead and 11 others missing following storms that battered southern China, state media said Monday, with tens of thousands evacuated away from the torrential downpours. Heavy rain has descended upon the vast southern province of Guangdong in recent days, swelling rivers and raising fears of severe flooding that state media said could be of the sort only "seen around once a century." "The three deaths were reported in Zhaoqing City. They were trapped due to the rainfall and were found to have died at the site," state broadcaster Xinhua reported, citing local authorities. Eleven others remain missing as search and rescue efforts in the area continue to be carried out, said Xinhua. China is no stranger to extreme weather but recent years have seen the country whiplashed by severe floods, grinding droughts and record heat. More than 53,000 people have been relocated across Guangdong, Xinhua added.