

# Jintao's US visit not expected to bridge deep divides

AFP, Beijing

After a tumultuous year that saw a shift in power between the world's two biggest economies, Chinese President Hu Jintao heads to Washington this week for a carefully orchestrated visit -- but one that is not expected to bridge the deep divisions plaguing ties.

Hu and US President Barack Obama will be at pains to put a positive spin on the complex relationship between their countries when they hold talks in Washington at a small dinner on Tuesday and again on Wednesday.

But there will be many contentious issues on the table.

Gripes over the value of the yuan, trade disputes, US arms sales to Taiwan, the Dalai Lama's US visit, the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, Internet freedom and naval rivalries in the Pacific, have dogged relations.

Even if both sides "share the view that they have more interest in cooperation than open hostilities", according to Jia Qingguo, a US expert at Peking University, the shift in the power balance has complicated matters.



Hu Jintao

"China's sheer weight has grown to the point Beijing now has greater capacity to resist American policies" and "is growing more assertive on security issues", the Eurasia Group said.

Aware of the diplomatic pitfalls ahead, the US and China have painstakingly prepared Hu's state visit, his first since Obama took office in 2009.

The January 18-21 trip will include a state dinner at the White House on Wednesday evening, talks with US lawmakers and a stop in the midwestern city of Chicago.

Senior officials have shuttled between the two capitals including US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who travelled to China last week to restore military ties suspended one year ago by Beijing.

China meanwhile has again pledged to allow more flexibility in the yuan exchange rate -- a key issue for US lawmakers -- and made moves aimed at making it a global currency.

But the pomp and circumstance that will meet Hu is unlikely to mask nagging problems.

Last week, US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner warned China's yuan policy is not "tenable", and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pressed Beijing on human rights.



PHOTO: AFP

A handout picture released by the Iraqi premier's office yesterday shows Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu (L) at a meeting with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki during which he congratulated him on forming a new government at the start of a one-day visit to Baghdad.

## NEWS IN brief

### Syria gets first US ambassador since 2005 fallout

AFP, Damascus

Robert Ford, the first US ambassador to Syria since 2005, arrived yesterday in Damascus on a challenging mission to re-engage the two countries which disagree on a raft of important issues.

"United States Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford arrived in Damascus today in the afternoon," the embassy said in a statement.

"Ambassador Ford's appointment represents a tangible American action to try to find common interests between Syria and the United States through more regular and direct discussion with the Syrian government and people," it said.

### Indonesia backs E Timor's Asean membership bid

AFP, Medan

Indonesia yesterday voiced support for East Timor's bid to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"Asean now has 10 members and we've heard that Timor Leste wishes to join and we openly support it," Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa told reporters, using the country's official name.

There has been no formal discussion on the membership yet "but Timor Leste has already conveyed its wish openly", he said at a retreat for the regional bloc's foreign ministers on the island of Lombok.

His comments demonstrate how the relationship between Jakarta and Dili has improved in

### Fake monks jailed for China police assault

AFP, Beijing

A court in China has sentenced 21 fake monks to up to 11 years in jail for attacking police officers and toll booth operators in separate incidents last year, state media said yesterday.

The men, who had been pretending to be from the famed Shaolin temple and earned money in Inner Mongolia by selling beads and fake medicines, assaulted police after several so-called monks were detained last July, the official Xinhua news agency said.

In another incident in August a group of fake monks armed with steel pipes attacked toll booth operators in Baotou city after they demanded the

### Sri Lanka mine fears shifted as floods recede

AFP, Colombo

Unexploded mines planted during Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist war may have shifted during recent floods, officials said yesterday, as residents started to return to their badly-damaged homes and farms.

"There is a possibility that undetected mines could have shifted during floods and moved downstream," military spokesman Ubaya Medawala told AFP. "But we haven't had any mine casualties in the eastern regions in recent times."

The government's disaster management centre in Colombo said 38 people were confirmed dead with another four missing, as water levels dropped in some areas and residents ventured back home to

### US drones shot down outside Iran airspace

AFP, Tehran

Iran shot down two US navy drones outside its airspace in the Gulf, ILNA news agency quoting a top military commander as saying yesterday.

The head of Guards' air force, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, said on January 2 that his forces had shot down two drones after they "violated" Iranian territory.

Yesterday, General Gholam Ali Rashid, the deputy chief of staff of Iran's armed forces, said the unmanned aircraft were shot down outside the airspace of the Islamic republic.

## IVORY COAST CRISIS Mediators in fresh bid to bridge gaps

AFP, Abidjan

The African Union's mediator in Ivory Coast's deadly leadership standoff is to return to Abidjan this week for his latest bid to bridge the yawning gap between two increasingly entrenched presidents.

AU mediator and Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga flew to Abuja yesterday to meet the head of west African regional bloc ECOWAS, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, after which he will head to crisis-stricken Abidjan.

The AU and 15-member Economic Community of West African States have struggled to mediate between Ivory Coast's embattled strongman Laurent Gbagbo and the man the world says won a November 28 presidential runoff.

Gbagbo rival Alassane Ouattara has for weeks been holed up in an Abidjan hotel resort, with United Nations peacekeepers and northern ex-rebels protecting his camp from the army which remains loyal to the incumbent.

A cascade of African leaders have shuttled between the two men sworn in as president in recent weeks, with ECOWAS threatening military action as a last resort if Gbagbo refuses to hand over power.

"We want dialogue to begin between the Ouattara camp and president Gbagbo," the incumbent's spokesman Ahoua Don Mello told AFP yesterday.

## Swiss whistleblower to hand over data to WikiLeaks

AFP, Geneva

Swiss whistleblower Rudolf Elmer is planning to handover to WikiLeaks two CDs containing data of around 2,000 bank clients who may have been evading taxes, according to an interview published yesterday.

"The documents show that they are hiding behind bank secrecy, possibly to avoid taxes," Elmer, a former Swiss banker, told Swiss newspaper Sonntag.

The data is to be handed over on Monday, during a press conference in London during which WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange would also be present, said Sonntag.

However, the information would not be published immediately on the whistleblower website, said Elmer, noting: "WikiLeaks will go through the data, and if they really

deal with tax evasion, they will be published later."

According to Elmer, the clients listed on the two discs include multimillionaires, multinationals and hedge funds from several countries, including Switzerland, the United States, Germany and Britain.

The data also implicate around 40 politicians.

Elmer said that the data stem from "at least three financial institutions and cover the period of 1990 and 2009."

Elmer, who was a director at Bank Julius Baer in Cayman Islands, is to appear before a Zurich court on Wednesday to answer to charges of bank secrecy violation, after he passed on clients' data to WikiLeaks in 2007.

The move led to tax evasion prosecutions in several countries against these clients.

## S Korea ship pursues hijacked vessel

AFP, Seoul

South Korea has ordered a warship to chase a cargo ship hijacked by suspected Somali pirates, a Seoul official said yesterday, as President Lee Myung-Bak urged "all possible measures" to rescue the ship and crew.

The destroyer Choi Young was sent to pursue the Samho Jewelry, a 11,500-tonne South Korean chemical freighter seized in the Indian Ocean, a presidential spokeswoman said.

Lee held an emergency meeting yesterday and urged officials to take "all possible measures" to rescue the ship and crew, she said.

Samho Jewelry was carrying eight South Koreans, two Indonesians and 11 crew from Myanmar when it was hijacked on its way from the United Arab Emirates to Sri Lanka.

## Tunisia, Lebanon show Mideast unstable Says Netanyahu

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday that regional political instability shows the Jewish state must seek ironclad security clauses in any peace treaty with the Palestinians.

While not referring to any state by name, his comments at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting came after a popular revolt against Tunisian strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and the collapse of the Lebanese government.

"The region in which we live is an unstable region, everybody can see that today. We see it in several places in the broader Middle East," said Netanyahu.

"There can be changes in governments that we do not foresee today but will take place tomorrow."

"The lesson is that we have to stick to the principles of peace and security in any agreement that we make," said the Israeli premier.

"We do not know if such an agreement will be honoured but we shall increase the

## Tunisia holds new govt talks after revolt

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's main political parties held talks yesterday to form a national unity government as soldiers patrolled the streets amid fears of a backlash by supporters of ousted strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Officials said the government would now investigate killings of civilians during the wave of protests that led to Ben Ali's abrupt departure after 23 years in power and look into allegations of corruption of his inner circle.

"I'm meeting Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi," Maya Jribi, head of the Democratic Progressive party (PDP), the main opposition party, told AFP.

Around 1,500 protesters held a peaceful rally in the central Tunisian town of Regueb in which they condemned the political talks in the capital saying the new government would not be truly democratic, a local trade union leader said.

The army broke up the rally as protests are banned under the rules of a state of emergency declared in the country on Friday. Regueb was the scene of several violent

protests in the run-up to the ouster of Ben Ali.

Representatives of two parties banned under Ben Ali -- the Communist party and the Islamist Ennahdha party -- were excluded from the government talks.

The head of Ennahdha, Rached Ghannouchi, who lives in exile in London, said earlier that he intended to return to Tunisia after Ben Ali's ouster, adding: "The Tunisian intifada has succeeded in collapsing the dictatorship."

Meanwhile some cafes re-opened in the centre of the capital Tunis -- the scene of violent clashes in the days running up to Ben Ali's abrupt departure on Friday -- as the army continued its lockdown of the city centre.

Long queues were seen outside the few bakeries and groceries open.

A French photographer from the EPA agency hit in the head by a tear gas canister during the protests in central Tunis on Friday died of his injuries yesterday, his relatives and a source at the French consulate told AFP.

## Afghan bomb kills 9 civilians

AFP, Mazar-i-sharif

Nine civilians were killed by a roadside bomb in Baghlan province, northern Afghanistan, as they travelled to a wedding yesterday, police and local officials said.

Six women, two men and a child died in the blast, which happened as the vehicle travelled from Pul-e-Khumri, the provincial capital, to a village in the province, on a road often used by foreign forces.

It was not immediately clear who was responsible for the blast.

"A mine struck a civilian minibus," provincial governor Abdul Majeed told AFP.

"Nine civilians -- six women, a child and two men -- have been killed. The road is often used by the PRT (provincial reconstruction team) soldiers."

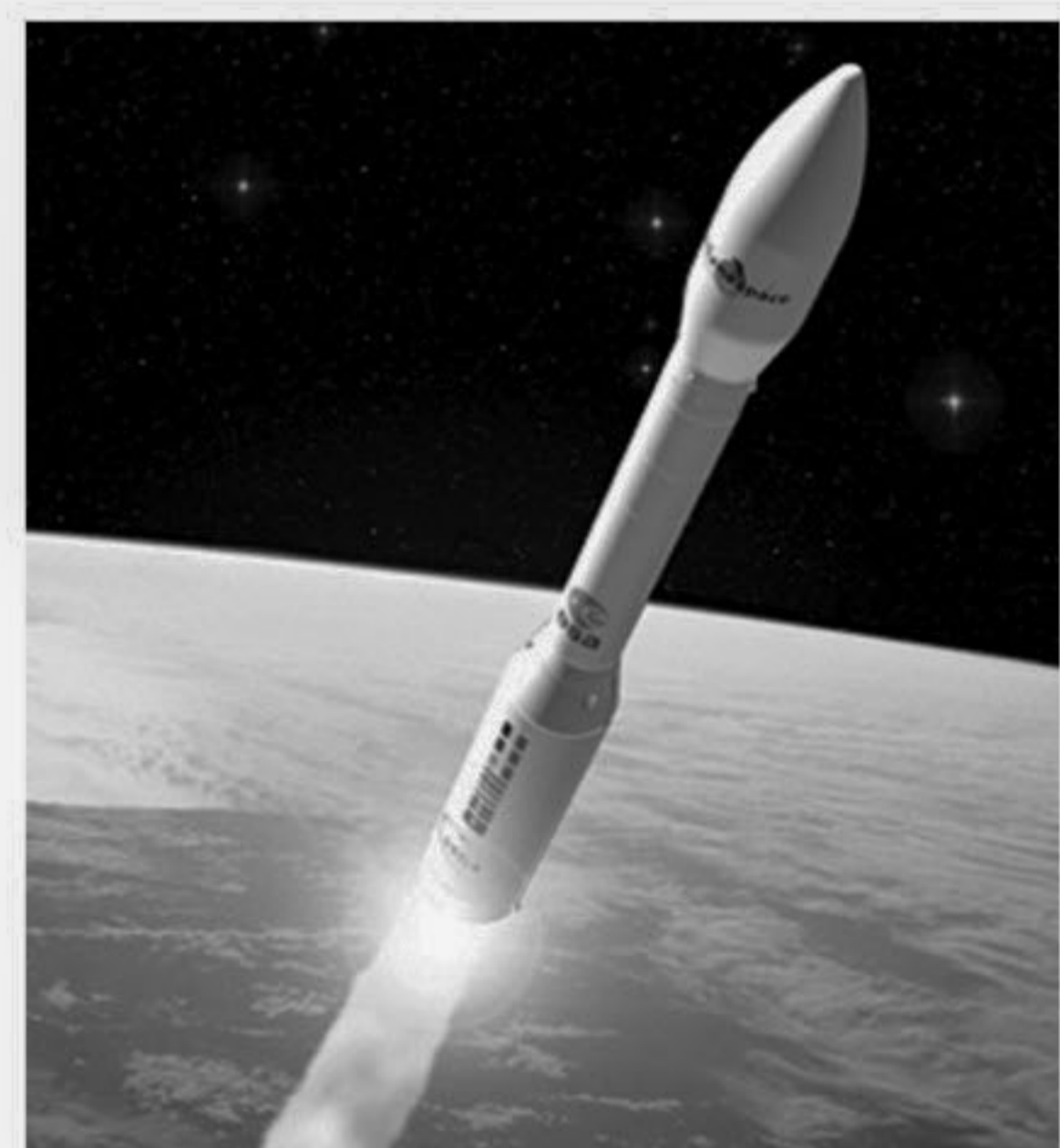


PHOTO: BBC

The new Vega launcher will be the smallest of the three rockets.

## 2011 'year of rockets' for Europe

BBC ONLINE

Twenty-eleven will be the "year of launchers", says European Space Agency director-general Jean-Jacques Dordain.

Europe expects to have three different rockets operating from its French Guiana spaceport in the coming months.

The workhorse Ariane 5 will be joined by the Russian Soyuz vehicle and a new small launcher called Vega.

At his annual Paris press conference to preview the year ahead, Mr Dordain said this represented a major change in the way Esa conducted its space activities.

And he told the BBC everyone might be surprised at how complex an undertaking this would be.

"For 30 years we have exploited one launcher, the best launcher in the world, Ariane - but it was one launcher," he explained.

"From this year, we will exploit three launchers in parallel - Ariane, Soyuz and Vega. It will introduce some constraints because the traffic will be much heavier from [the spaceport], and I'm not so sure we've yet totally understood the constraints which are linked to the exploitation of three launchers instead of one."

A completely new launch facility has been constructed for Soyuz in French Guiana, allowing the Russian-built vehicle to shift some of its operations to the European spaceport from its traditional home of the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

The launch complex will have its qualification review in April with the expectation that the first Soyuz lift-off occur sometime between 15 August and 15 September. The rocket will carry into orbit two spacecraft for Europe's Galileo satellite-navigation system.

Vega will use the old Ariane 1, 2 and 3 pad, which has been renovated for the purpose.