

US flexes muscles on China

Pentagon chief warns Beijing against provocative behavior, proposes Asia-Pacific security network

Chinese construction on a South China Sea islet claimed by the Philippines would prompt "actions being taken" by the United States and other nations, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter warned yesterday.

Speaking at a security summit in Singapore, Carter said Beijing risks building a "Great Wall of self-isolation" with its military expansion in the contested waters, but he also proposed stronger bilateral security cooperation to reduce the risks of a mishap.

"I hope that this development doesn't occur because it will result in actions being taken both by the United States, and actions being taken by others in the region that will have the effect of not only increasing tensions but isolating China," Carter said when asked about Scarborough Shoal in a forum also attended by senior Chinese military officials.

Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, who heads the Chinese office of international military cooperation, quickly attacked the Pentagon chief's remarks, telling journalists they reflected a "Cold War mentality".

He said any sanctions against China will "definitely result in failure". Hong Kong's South China Morning Post has

reported that China plans to establish an outpost on the shoal, located 230 kilometres (140 miles) off the Philippines, which considers it part of its exclusive economic zone.

Beijing claims nearly all of the strategically vital sea and has developed contested reefs into artificial islands, some topped with airstrips.

Manila says China took effective control of Scarborough Shoal in 2012, stationing patrol vessels and shoos away Filipino fishermen, after a two-month stand-off with the Philippine Navy.

Carter declined to elaborate when later pressed on what "actions" Washington might take.

The US warning comes ahead of a ruling from the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague on a case brought by the Philippines against China, which has shunned the proceedings and says it will not recognise any ruling.

The Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam have competing claims in the sea, which encompasses vital global shipping routes and is believed to have significant oil and gas deposits.

Beijing's territorial claims, based on controversial historical records, have also pitted it against the US, which has conducted patrols near Chinese-held islands to press for freedom of navigation.



Thousands of people take part in a candlelight vigil to mark the 27th anniversary of the crackdown of pro-democracy movement at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, at Victoria Park in Hong Kong yesterday. Nearly three decades after the crackdown, the communist regime continues to forbid any debate on the subject, mention of which is banned from textbooks and the media, and censored on the Internet.

Modi, Ghani inaugurate \$290m dam

AFP, Herat

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Afghanistan yesterday to inaugurate a \$290 million hydroelectric dam with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the latest Indian investment which highlights strengthening ties between the two countries.

The 42 megawatt Salma dam in western Herat province, bordering Iran, is the second major Indian project after a new parliament complex built under New Delhi's robust development partnership with Afghanistan.

Modi and Ghani jointly pressed the button on a remote-controlled console, sending torrents of water gushing down the dam as celebrations erupted with balloons released in the colours of the Indian flag.

"I want to give the good news to my people that 'Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam' is the prologue to construction of a series of dams that we have undertaken so that our provinces have access to electricity, water, food and work," Ghani said at the ceremony.

Construction on Salma dam, which will boost Afghanistan's power capacity and help irrigate thousands of hectares of farmland in a parched landscape, had been stalled by decades of conflict.

"Afghans and Indians dreamt of this project in the 1970s," Modi said. "Today the brave Afghan people are sending a message that the forces of destruction, death, denial and domination shall not prevail. It is a historic moment of emotion and pride in the relations between Afghanistan and India."

India, the fifth largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan, has been a key supporter of Kabul's government and has poured more than \$2 billion into the country since the Taliban was toppled from power in 2001.

Syria army thrusts into Raqa

Kurds advance from north; Iraqi forces gain ground in Fallujah

AFP, Beirut

Russian-backed Syrian troops pushed into the Islamic State group's bastion province Raqa yesterday, threatening to catch the jihadists in a pincer movement as US-backed Kurdish-led fighters advance from the north.

The lightning advance from the southwest with Russian air support brought the army to within 40 kilometres of the Euphrates Valley town of Tabqa, site of the country's biggest dam, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights said.

The dam, 40 kilometres upstream from the jihadists' de facto Syrian capital Raqa city, is also the target of the Washington-backed offensive which Kurdish-led fighters launched late last month.

It was the first time that government troops had entered Raqa province since they were ousted by IS fighters in August 2014.

Regular army troops were backed by militia newly trained by the regime's ally Russia, Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

He said that the twin offensives which threaten to cut off IS-held Raqa from jihadist-held territory along the Turkish border raised suspicions that Moscow and Washington were covertly coordinating operations by their respective Syrian allies.

WAR AGAINST IS IN IRAQ, SYRIA



Members of Iraqi government forces help a man who fled the violence in his village of Saqlawiyah, north west of Fallujah.

PHOTO: AFP

Meanwhile, Iraqi forces gained new ground from the Islamic State group yesterday in a key area west of the jihadist bastion of Fallujah, security sources said.

Fighters from the army, the police and from the Hashed al-Shaabi -- a paramilitary organisation dominated by Tehran-backed Shia militias -- entered the centre of Saqlawiyah.

The town lies around 10 kilometres northwest of Fallujah and control of the rural area around it is key to cutting off the city which Iraqi forces are trying to retake.

German resolution has no value: Erdogan

AFP, Istanbul

The German parliament resolution recognising as genocide the massacres of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire has "no value" and won't change Turkey's position on the matter, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday.

"The issue here is not the Armenians... The Armenian issue is used all over the world as a convenient blackmail against Turkey and has even started to be used as a stick," he said in a televised speech.

Erdogan said he wondered how German officials could look Turkey's leaders in the face after Thursday's vote in the Bundestag, which prompted Ankara to withdraw its ambassador and warn of further consequences.

But he said it was "too early" to talk of economic measures against Germany. And he said the dispute with Berlin should not be a factor in Turkey's wider relationship with the European Union, acknowledging it would also do Turkey no good "to act with hate".

"The decision taken by the German parliament has no value whatsoever," Erdogan said in comments to Turkish newspapers including the Hurriyet daily while on a trip to Africa.

"Our position on 1915 is well known... and this kind of decision is not going to change what we think about our history. But they also overlook the fact they face the risk of losing a friend like Turkey."

Armenians say some 1.5 million of their people were killed in a genocidal campaign by Ottoman forces to wipe them from Anatolia, but Turkey has long refused to recognise the killings as genocide.



NEWSIN brief

Lightning hurts dozens at German rock festival

BBC ONLINE

At least 51 people were injured, eight seriously, when lightning struck at a rock festival in western Germany early yesterday. Organisers of the Rock am Ring festival, which is headlined by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, said lightning hit at 00:30 local time. Police told German media two people had to be resuscitated. The Rock am Ring festival also suffered lightning strikes last year.

MH17 probe results due within months

AFP, The Hague

Initial results from a criminal inquiry into the downing of a Malaysia Airlines flight over war-torn eastern Ukraine nearly two years ago will be available within months, Dutch prosecutors have said. The results are expected to shed light on the exact type of missile used to shoot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 passengers and crew on board, and exactly

Turk gets 108 yrs for refugee sex assaults

AFP, Istanbul

A court in Turkey has sentenced a Turkish man to 108 years in jail for sexually assaulting at least eight Syrian children at a flagship refugee camp, reports said yesterday. The 29-year-old man, identified only as Erdal E, worked as a cleaner at the tented refugee camp in Nizip near the Syrian border. He was found guilty of sexually abusing eight children in the camp's toilets in exchange for payments.

At least 33 killed in Algeria bus crash

AFP, Algiers

At least 33 people were killed and 22 others injured when a truck collided with a bus which burst into flames in Algeria early yesterday, authorities said. The accident took place at 2:50 am near the city of Aflou, 400 kilometres south of the capital Algiers, the APS news agency said quoting the civil defence. The bus slammed into a rocky embankment after the collision and caught fire, it said.

Philippine troops seize Islamic militant camp

AFP, Butig

Philippine troops captured an Islamic militant training camp after a 10-day battle, officials said, as part of operations to clear insurgents from a remote jungle region. The offensive against the Maute group, one of several Filipino Muslim armed organisations which have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, left four soldiers dead and 15 others wounded, a Philippine military commander told AFP.



A man paddles inside a canoe in a flooded street of Savonnières near Tours following heavy rainfalls on the Cher region in France yesterday. The rain-swollen River Seine in Paris began receding after reaching its highest level in three decades, easing fears about devastating floods sent the Louvre and other riverside museums scrambling to protect their treasures.

'I want us to run scared whole time'

Obama warns Democrats on US election

REUTERS, Miami

President Barack Obama warned Democrats on Friday that they need to work hard to defeat likely Republican nominee Donald Trump in the Nov 8 presidential election but must avoid violence like that at a rally in California this week.

"Strange things can happen in an election like this if we're not working hard, if we're not engaged, if we're not participating," Obama told donors at a fundraiser for the Democratic National Committee.

"I want us to run scared the whole time," he said. Obama decried the clashes between supporters of likely Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump and protesters on Thursday at a rally in San Jose, California.

"We saw in San Jose these protesters starting to pelt stuff at Trump supporters; that's not what our democracy's about," Obama said. "There's no room for violence. There's no room for shouting. There's no room for a politics that fails to at least listen to the other side, even if you vehemently disagree," he said.

He noted the "constant" television coverage of Trump, saying "celebrity and fame is such a driver in this culture." Obama said Republicans have "no coherent economic theory."

"Being able to say it's immigrants or it's gays or it's somebody that is taking something away from you - that's the essence of the message that the Republican nominee is delivering," he said.

Meet the world's oldest university graduate

AFP, Tokyo

A 96-year-old Japanese man is potty at the prospect of breaking more records after being recognised as the world's oldest university graduate with his degree in ceramic arts.

Sprightly senior Shigemi Hirata received his Guinness World Records certificate on Friday after earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in ceramics from Kyoto University of Art and Design in March, local media reported yesterday.

Born on a Hiroshima farm in 1919 -- the year of the first non-stop transatlantic flight and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles -- Hirata is something of a celebrity on campus.

"Students whose name I don't even know call out to greet me," he told Japan's Yomiuri newspaper. "That gives me a lot of energy. It looks like it's my fate to live a long life. I've been blessed with

the people around me." Hirata, who took 11 years to complete his ceramic arts course after taking up pottery as a pensioner, insisted he was not done setting records.

"My goal is to live until I'm 100," he said. "If I'm fit enough it might be rather fun to go to graduate school."

Hirata, who served in the navy during World War II and has four great-grandchildren, added: "I'm so happy. At my age it's fun to be able to learn new things."

Japan's perky pensioners regularly set eye-popping records as the silver-haired generation enjoy longer and healthier lives. Last year, 100-year-old Mieko Nagaoka became the world's first centenarian to complete a 1,500-metre freestyle swim, 20 years after she took up the sport.

Many elderly Japanese remain physically active long after other people have given up the ghost.



Shigemi Hirata

Boko Haram attack in Niger kills 32

AFP, Niamey

Thirty-two troops have been killed in a clash with Boko Haram jihadists on Niger's border with Nigeria, Niger's defence ministry said yesterday.

"Hundreds of assailants" attacked a military post at Bosso on Friday evening, it said in a statement that gave a "provisional toll" of 30 Nigerien and two Nigerian soldiers killed and 67 wounded.

"On the enemy's side, several dead and injured were taken away," the ministry said. "Our defence and security forces carried out a counter-attack this morning which enabled them to retake all positions in the town of Bosso. The situation is under control and calm has returned." Since February 2015, Niger has been plagued by Boko Haram attacks in its southeast region.

Meanwhile, Nigerian troops killed 19 Boko Haram militants during clashes in northeast Borno state, while two soldiers suffered gunshot wounds, the army said yesterday.

Acting upon an intelligence report on the presence of Boko Haram fighters in the militants' Chukungudu camp, troops and civilian JTF (joint task force) members, launched the attack on Friday.

EU REFERENDUM Former Labour leaders unite against Brexit

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Britain will leave the EU if Labour voters do not turn out to vote in the referendum, according to a letter signed by every living former Labour leader or acting leader of the party, but not the current incumbent, Jeremy Corbyn.

The letter warns that Brexit could lead to "a profound and permanent loss" for the UK and warns: "If Labour stays at home, Britain leaves."

While the letter, signed by former prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, ex-Labour leaders Neil Kinnock and Ed Miliband, and former acting leaders Harriet Harman and Margaret Beckett, says that they join with the current leadership in urging a Remain vote, the absence of Corbyn's signature may be read as an implicit criticism of the current leader's approach to the EU referendum campaign.

A longstanding critic of the EU before he became leader, Corbyn has been accused of being too tentative in his backing for a Remain vote.

In a major speech this week he said there was an "overwhelming case" for staying in, but focused his message on the dangers of a Conservative government renegotiating Britain's relationship with the EU, and argued for "remain - and reform" in Europe.

By contrast, the ex-leaders' letter, published in The Guardian, offers a warm endorsement of the EU's role in British life: "Labour's values are inherent to Europe's virtues," it says.

