

Trump presses Xi on trade, N Korea

Hails 'tremendous progress'; Chinese state media says confrontation not inevitable

REUTERS, Palm Beach

President Donald Trump pressed Chinese President Xi Jinping to do more to curb North Korea's nuclear program and help reduce the gaping US trade deficit with Beijing in talks on Friday, even as he toned down the strident anti-China rhetoric of his election campaign.

Trump spoke publicly of progress on a range of issues in his first US-China summit - as did several of his top aides - but they provided few concrete specifics other than China's agreement to work together to narrow disagreements and find common ground for cooperation.

As the two leaders wrapped up a Florida summit overshadowed by US missile strikes in Syria overnight, Xi joined Trump in stressing the positive mood of the meetings while papering over deep differences that have caused friction between the world's two biggest economies.

Trump's aides insisted he had made good on his pledge to raise concerns about China's trade practices and said there was some headway, with Xi agreeing to a 100-day plan for trade talks aimed at boosting US exports and reducing China's trade surplus with the United States.

Speaking after the two-day summit at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also said that Xi had agreed to increased cooperation in reining in North Korea's missile and nuclear programs - though he did not offer any new formula for cracking Pyongyang's defiant attitude.

Tillerson said Trump had accepted Xi's invitation to visit



Well wishers place flowers at a makeshift memorial outside a department store in Stockholm yesterday, the day after a hijacked truck plunged into a crowd in a pedestrian shopping area.

3 quakes rock Philippines

REUTERS, Manila

Hundreds of residents of coastal areas in a province south of the Philippine capital fled to higher ground fearing a tsunami yesterday after a series of earthquakes on the main island of Luzon.

Three quakes ranging in magnitude from 5.0 to 5.9 struck Batangas province, about 90 kms south of Manila, around 3:00pm over a period of about 20 minutes, said the US Geological Survey.

Renato Solidum, head of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology, said the event was an "earthquake swarm" in a local faultline but had not been powerful enough to cause a tsunami.

Batangas officials said there were no reports of casualties, but power was cut off in some areas and cracks had been reported in homes and some commercial buildings. Landslides were also reported in some towns, they said.



China and that they also agreed to upgrade a US-China dialogue by putting the two presidents at the head of the forum.

"We have made tremendous progress in our relationship with China," Trump told reporters as the two delegations met around tables flanked by large U.S. and Chinese flags. "We will be making additional progress. The relationship developed by President Xi and myself I think is outstanding.

"And I believe lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away," he added, without providing details.

Xi also spoke in mostly positive terms.

China's official Xinhua news agency said Xi had encouraged the United States to take part in the "One Belt, One Road" plan, Xi's signature foreign policy initiative aimed at infrastructure development across Asia, Africa and Europe, seen in some policy circles as a partial answer to the pivot to Asia strategy of Trump's predecessor Barack Obama.

Chinese state media yesterday cheered the meeting as one that showed the world that confrontation between the two powers was not inevitable and established the tone for the development of US-China relations.

Suspect device found in truck

AFP, Stockholm

Swedish police found a suspect device in the truck that ploughed into a Stockholm crowd killing four in Europe's latest such terror attack, officials said yesterday.

The alleged driver, who is in custody, is a 39-year-old man from Uzbekistan who was already known to Swedish police, authorities said.

"We have found a device in the vehicle that doesn't belong there ... A technical examination is ongoing, we can't go into what it is right now ... whether it's a bomb or a flammable device," police chief Dan Eliasson told reporters.

Intelligence agency chief Anders Thornberg added that the Uzbek suspect "has appeared in our intelligence gathering in the past".

"There is nothing to indicate that we've got the wrong man. On the contrary, the suspicions have strengthened," Eliasson added.

The suspected driver was detained on Friday in Marsta, a suburb north of Stockholm. According to several media outlets, he is an IS supporter.

Intelligence agency Sapo said meanwhile it was hunting for "possible accomplices or networks that may have been involved in the attack."

Flags flew at half-mast across Stockholm yesterday as the city slowly returned to normal a day after the attack.

A stolen beer truck ploughed into a crowd of people at the corner of the bustling Ahlens department store and the Drottninggatan pedestrian street

STOCKHOLM 'TERRORIST ATTACK'
Sweden arrests suspected driver of Uzbek nationality

on Friday afternoon, above ground from Stockholm's central subway station.

Fifteen people were injured, nine of whom remained in hospital yesterday.

It was the third terror attack in Europe in two weeks, coming on the heels of assaults in London and St Petersburg, although there has been no immediate claim of responsibility.

Previous attacks using vehicles have occurred in London, Berlin and the

southern French city of Nice, all of them claimed by the so-called Islamic State (IS).

Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, who said Sweden will hold a minute's silence tomorrow in memory of the victims, has beefed up Sweden's border controls.

"Terrorists want us to be afraid, want us to change our behaviour, want us to not live our lives normally, but that is what we're going to do. So terrorists can never defeat Sweden, never," Lofven said.

An attack on Stockholm was just a matter of time, the head of the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defence College, Magnus Ranstorp, told AFP.

"It was pretty expected, the police and intelligence agency have practised for this several times the past year... We just didn't know when it was going to happen," he said.

In 2014, IS called for attacks on citizens of Western countries and gave instructions on how they could be carried out without military equipment, using rocks or knives, or by running people over in vehicles.

ETA ends armed separatist campaign

REUTERS, Bayonne

Basque militant group ETA effectively ended an armed separatist campaign after almost half a century yesterday, leading French authorities to the sites where it says its caches of weapons, explosives and ammunition are hidden.

ETA, which killed more than 850 people in its attempt to carve out an independent state in northern Spain and southwest France, declared a ceasefire in 2011 but did not give up its remaining arms.

Founded in 1959 out of anger among Basques at political and cultural repression under General Francisco Franco, ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna - Basque Country and Freedom) gained notoriety as one of Europe's most intractable separatist groups.

Yesterday's handover, via intermediaries, of its weapons in the French city of Bayonne will not mean the end of the



NEWS IN brief

10 Taliban gunmen killed in Lahore

AFP, Lahore

Pakistani police yesterday killed 10 Taliban gunmen in an early morning shootout in Lahore, officials said, with several militants tied to a February bombing in the eastern city dying in the skirmish. The gunfight erupted as authorities were escorting five members from the Pakistani Taliban to an arms cache when they were ambushed by gunmen aiming to free the group, said police.

Venezuela bans top opposition leader

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan authorities yesterday banned a top opposition leader from public office for 15 years, the latest move in an increasingly tense power struggle in the crisis-hit country. Henrique Capriles was one of the leaders of mass demonstrations this week against socialist President Nicolas Maduro that led to clashes with police. One protester died.

20 killed in Myanmar wedding boat crash

AFP, Yangon

At least 20 people were killed when a boat carrying scores of wedding guests collided with a river barge in Western Myanmar, authorities said yesterday, with more feared drowned as rescuers searched for 9 missing persons. The boat sank Friday evening in a river near Patheingyi, a port city west of commercial capital Yangon. It was believed to be carrying around 60 passengers.



People participate in a demonstration against the recent US strike in Syria, in New York, US, on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

Strike kills 15 near Syria's IS-held Raqa

AFP, Beirut

At least 15 civilians, including four children, were killed in a suspected US-led coalition airstrike yesterday near the Islamic State group's Syrian bastion Raqa, a monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 17 people were injured in the strike on Heneyda, and that the death toll could rise further because several of the wounded were in serious conditions.

The Britain-based group said the strike was suspected to have been carried out by the US-led coalition fighting IS in Syria and Iraq.

Heneyda is around 25 kilometres (15 miles) west of the city of Raqa, the target of a major operation led by a Kurdish-Arab alliance of fighters and backed by the US-led coalition.

MISSILE STRIKES ON SYRIA AIRBASE

US sends message to N Korea, China

AFP, Seoul

The US missile strike on Syria contained a clear message to North Korea and its main ally China, but not one strong enough to push Pyongyang off its nuclear weapons path, analysts said.

While the timing was largely coincidental, the fact that US President Donald Trump ordered the strike while hosting a summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping carried particular resonance given that the North's nuclear ambitions - and how best to thwart them - was among the top agenda items of their meeting.

And exercising the military option added some extra weight to Trump's recent threat of unilateral action against Pyongyang if Beijing fails to help curb its neighbour's nuclear weapons programme.

Kim Yong-Hyun, a professor at Dongguk University said the strike against Syria was a statement of intent that was meant for a wide readership.

"It signals to Pyongyang that the US has a new sheriff in town who isn't hesitant about pulling his gun from the holster," Kim said.

But while the move might give the North pause, it is unlikely to deter a leadership that views nuclear weapons as the sole guarantee of its future survival.

"In the long term, US military actions overseas won't help curb the North's nuclear pursuit," Kim said.

The North has carried out five nuclear tests -- two of them last year -- and expert satellite imagery analysis suggests it could well be preparing for a sixth.

And Pyongyang has shown no sign of reining in a missile testing programme ultimately aimed at securing the capability to deliver a nuclear warhead to the continental United States.

The question then arises as to what impact the US president's willingness to exercise his military muscle may have on China's thinking. China is North Korea's economic

lifeline and as such enjoys more leverage over its maverick neighbour than any other country.

While China has clearly lost patience with Pyongyang's nuclear provocations, it is extremely wary of any response that might bring about North Korea's collapse and chaos on its doorstep.

"From the Chinese point of view, there is still room to explore a path for a diplomatic solution", Wang said.

Jia Qingguo, a professor of International Relations at Beijing University, said the North's nuclear arsenal and highly sensitive geopolitical position meant the fallout of any military action could be catastrophic.

"A small kick could provoke big disasters. It's not like Iraq," Jia said.

Although China's state media went strong on photos and coverage of the Xi-Trump summit, it gave little space to news of the strikes against Syria, with few editorials or commentaries.

AFP, Washington

The US Senate confirmed Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court Friday, culminating a 13-month fight over the vacancy and rewarding President Donald Trump by bringing a conservative tilt back to the bench.

The federal judge from Colorado crossed the finish line in a 54-45 vote, one day after Trump's Republicans controversially changed Senate rules to circumvent a Democratic blockade of his nomination.

"Today is a new day," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said ahead of the vote, seeking to put a positive stamp on what has been a contentious congressional process for the new Republican administration.

Gorsuch is "going to make an incredible addition to the court," McConnell said. "He's going to make the American people proud."

The White House said Gorsuch -- the youngest nominee in a generation -- will be

sworn in by Chief Justice John Roberts on Monday at 9:00am in a private ceremony.

The 49-year-old judge has been hailed by Republicans as a worthy successor to towering conservative justice Antonia Scalia, who died in February 2016 as the presidential race was gaining steam.

The nine-justice court has had one seat vacant for more than a year amid the ensuing political battle, with Democrats and Republicans trading bitter accusations of blame.

The Supreme Court is the final arbiter of many of the most sensitive issues of American life and law. Its members are appointed for life, so their influence is long-lasting.

Gorsuch's confirmation is destined to shape the bench just as Trump is seeking approval of a key plank of his political platform: his executive order that halts entry to the United States from citizens of several Muslim-majority nations.

The so-called travel ban has been halted in lower federal courts, but experts expect it will make its way to the Supreme Court.

