

US declares full-on rivalry with China

AFP, Washington

In the buzzwords of George W Bush's administration, China needed to become a "responsible stakeholder." For Barack Obama, China had an interest in embracing "the rules-based international order."

President Donald Trump's message to Beijing is, true to his character, starker. Trump, his Vice President Mike Pence vowed, "will not back down."

On Thursday, Pence delivered one of the most hawkish speeches by a senior US official since the two countries restored ties four decades ago.

Pence assailed China as a military aggressor, a prolific thief of US technology and, controversially, as interfering in American elections.

Yet in a sign that the United States still sees a need for China, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will visit on Monday after his latest negotiations in North Korea, the nuclear-armed regime which counts on Beijing as its diplomatic and economic lifeline.

Pompeo, speaking to the traveling press on his way to Asia, said China was "determined to support our efforts" on North Korea despite the high tensions.

Pence in his speech said the United States still hoped for improved relations with China but otherwise drew a bleak picture.

He said the United States will keep ramping up its military spending to counter a rising Beijing and he renewed threats to more than double the \$250 billion in tariffs placed on Chinese products.

"I do think that this marks a significant change in the bipartisan approach to China that has dominated over the last several decades," said Jamie Fly, a former official in the George W Bush administration who heads the Asia program



at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Pence's speech "doesn't completely preclude cooperation on narrow areas like North Korea, but it's much more clear in the US assessment of Chinese intentions and China's goal of really replacing the US and pushing back US power," he said.

While Trump and Pence are polarising figures, the hard line on China has been increasingly shared across the US political spectrum.

US business leaders, who long advocated warm ties with China as they coveted the world's largest consumer market, have cooled markedly toward Beijing amid complaints of widespread industrial espionage, which Beijing denies.

A survey published in August by the Pew Research Center found that the percentage of Americans who viewed China favorably had fallen to 38 percent.

Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, a Mandarin-speaking China expert who now heads the Asia Society in New York, in a recent speech said that "engagement," for decades the narrative in relations for both Washington and Beijing, "is now officially and effectively dead."



Rescue workers and a soldier remove a victim of last week's earthquake in the Balaroa neighbourhood in Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, yesterday. Inset, Susi Rahmatia, 26, holds her two kids after they were found at a shelter in Palu on Friday seven days after the earthquake and tsunami.

PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

INDONESIA QUAKE AND TSUNAMI

Search ops winding down

More than thousand feared missing as villages may be left as mass graves

AFP, Palu

More bodies were unearthed from the earthquake-and-tsunami-ravaged Indonesian city of Palu yesterday, as authorities move closer to calling off the search for the dead trapped under flattened communities and declaring them mass graves.

Officials yesterday said the death toll had climbed to 1,649 with more than a thousand feared still missing in the seaside city on Sulawesi island.

More than 82,000 military and civilian personnel, as well as volunteers, have descended on the devastated city, where relief groups say clean water and medical supplies are in short supply.

After days of delays, international aid has slowly begun trickling into the disaster zone where the UN says almost 200,000 people need humanitarian assistance.

But hopes of finding anyone alive a full eight days later have all but faded, as the search for survivors morphs into a grim gathering of the dead.

The search for survivors has not officially been called off.

But security minister Wiranto said the government had been discussing with local leaders and religious figures as to when the worst-hit areas would be declared mass graves, and left untouched.

"We have to make a decision as to when the search for the dead will end. Then, we later must decide when the

Disease fears grow as more bodies found; toll reaches 1,649

area will be designated a mass grave," he told reporters late Friday.

Concerns are growing that decomposing bodies could pose a ticking time-bomb for public health.

Thousands of survivors continued to stream out of Palu to nearby cities in the aftermath of the disaster.

Hospitals remain overstretched and short on staff and supplies.

In Karawana village, nurse Iyong Lamatowa can offer little more than antibiotics and painkillers to treat those flocking to a makeshift clinic with badly-infected wounds.

Project HOPE, a medical NGO, said only two of its 82 staff in Palu had reported for duty since the quake.

The United Nations said Friday it was seeking \$50.5 million "for immediate relief" to help victims.

Getting vital supplies to the affected areas has proved hugely challenging, with the number of flights able to land at Palu's small airport still limited, leaving aid workers facing gruelling overland journeys.

Oxfam had sent water treatment units and purification kits to Palu and Swiss aid teams on the ground were providing drinking water and emergency shelter, both said in statements Saturday.

Indonesia sits along the world's most tectonically active region, and its 260 million people are vulnerable to earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions.

Many lives spared by earlier shake

REUTERS, Lende Tovea

The lives of many villagers living at the epicentre of a devastating earthquake that struck Indonesia's Sulawesi island and killed more than 1,600 people were spared because they had been terrified by a smaller one that hit three hours earlier.

A coastal strip dotted with villages north of the devastated city of Palu was cut off for nearly a week by landslides blocking its single road link after the major 7.5 magnitude quake struck late in the afternoon on Sept. 28.

But the way is now open and aid is starting to trickle in to the area that rescue workers feared had been obliterated.

While destruction is extensive, with many houses destroyed, villagers yesterday said countless lives were saved by a 6.1 magnitude quake that struck about 20 km (12 miles) to the south about three hours earlier.

"Luckily most people were already outside," said Rahman Lakuaci, chief of Lende Tovea village in Sirenja district.

Authorities have yet to conduct a tally of casualties in Sirenja and the other districts near the epicentre north of Palu, but Lakuaci estimated dozens of people had been killed in the area.

The city of Palu, on the other hand, 78 km (48 miles) away, suffered heavy casualties, with hotels, shopping malls and countless houses destroyed in the quake and by a tsunami that scoured the city's oceanfront shortly after.

But that did not happen near the epicentre of the quake and, even though many villagers ran up into the hills rising to the east of the coastline, tsunami waves did not crash into the small fishing communities and pretty beaches.



A Yemeni holds the leg of a child suffering from malnutrition at a treatment centre in a hospital in the capital Sanaa, yesterday. Nearly 10,000 people have been killed in Yemen since 2015, when Saudi Arabia and its allies joined the government's war with the Huthis. The war has triggered what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with more than three-quarters of Yemen's population needing aid and 8.4 million people at risk of famine. PHOTO: AFP

S Arabia backs down from blocking UN climate report

AFP, Incheon

Oil giant Saudi Arabia backed down at the last minute yesterday from obstructing the adoption of a major report by the UN's climate science panel, sources told AFP.

With the threat removed, the meeting of the 195-nation panel in Incheon, South Korea -- deep into overtime -- swiftly approved the report on how to cap global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit), and what a 1.5C world might look like.

The Saudis had objected to the inclusion of a passage emphasising the need for sharp reductions in the use of fossil fuels -- Saudi Arabia's main export.

"Saudi Arabia withdrew its blockage of the passage when their objection was about to be formally recorded in a footnote," said a participant in the meeting.

"It was a game of chicken, and the Saudi's blinked first."

In the case of an impasse, the chairs of an IPCC meeting can override an objection from one or a few countries, recording it in a

footnote.

The 500-page report -- based on 6,000 peer reviewed studies -- under review at the meeting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a collaborative effort of the world's top climate scientists.

At issue was a passage in the summary stating that voluntary national commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, annexed to the 2015 Paris climate treaty, will fail to limit warming to 1.5C.

Current pledges would at best yield a 3C world by century's end, far above the 2C cap mandated by the Paris Agreement. These so-called "nationally determined contributions" run from 2020 to 2030 for most countries, including Saudi Arabia, and to 2025 for a few others.

The passage goes on to note that capping global warming under 1.5C "can only be achieved if global CO2 emissions start to decline well before 2030". As a consequence, scientists and climate activists have called on countries to ratchet up their carbon-cutting pledges as soon as possible.



'Love working with Trump' Saudi crown prince downplays Trump's harsh comments

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has praised the kingdom's relationship with the current US administration just days after President Donald Trump warned that the Middle East country would not survive "two weeks" without US support.

"I love working with him (Trump)," the crown-prince told the US-based Bloomberg publication, adding that the two leaders had "achieved a lot in the Middle East, especially against extremism, extremist ideologies, terrorism and Daesh (the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant)".

The 33-year-old said it was normal for allies to have disagreements and one must ultimately accept that "any friend will say good things and bad things".

"So, you cannot have 100 percent friends saying good things about you, even in your family. You will have misunderstandings. So, we put that in that category."

At a Mississippi campaign rally on Wednesday, Trump took a jab at Riyadh and said the country would not last "two weeks" if Washington withdrew its military support.

"We protect Saudi Arabia. Would you say they're rich? And I love the king, King Salman. But I said 'King - we're protecting you - you might not be there for two weeks without us,'" Trump said.

Beijing tight-lipped on missing Interpol chief

Int'l police body demands 'clarification' from China

AFP, Beijing

Interpol demanded an official "clarification" from China on the whereabouts of its missing police chief yesterday, after reports said he was detained for questioning on arrival in his homeland.

Beijing has remained silent over the mysterious disappearance of Meng Hongwei, who was last seen leaving for China in late September from the Interpol headquarters in Lyon, southeast France, a source close to the enquiry told AFP.

His wife has since reported him missing.

"Interpol has requested through official law enforcement channels clarification from China's authorities on the status of Interpol President Meng Hongwei," Jurgen Stock, the secretary-general of the international police body said in a statement.

"Interpol's General Secretariat looks

forward to an official response from China's authorities to address concerns over the President's well-being."

It is the latest high-profile disappearance in China, where a number of top government officials, billionaire business magnates and even an A-list celebrity have vanished for weeks or months at a time.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to a request for comment from AFP.

But news of his absence was swiftly followed by speculation that the 64-year-old Meng -- who also serves as a vice-minister of China's Ministry of Public Security -- had been swept up in Beijing's secretive anti-corruption campaign.

Citing an anonymous source, the South China Morning Post said authorities from the country's disciplinary commission had snatched Meng upon arrival in Beijing.



Kavanaugh all set for US SC

Key senators pave way for Trump nominee after days of drama

AFP, Washington

The US Senate is expected to confirm conservative judge Brett Kavanaugh as the next Supreme Court justice yesterday -- offering President Donald Trump a big political win and tilting the nation's high court decidedly to the right.

The months-long battle over Kavanaugh's nomination has gripped Washington, laying bare the partisan gridlock on Capitol Hill and the political polarisation of America just a month before midterm elections.

The Senate vote, set to begin from 3:30 pm (1930 GMT), will bring an end to a raucous nomination process defined by harrowing testimony from a woman who says Kavanaugh tried to rape her when they were teenagers -- and his fiery rebuttal.

If Kavanaugh is confirmed, Trump will have succeeded in having his two picks seated on the court -- a major coup for the Republican leader less

than halfway through his term.

His promotion to the Supreme Court will also stand as a demoralising defeat for Democrats who battled hard to block the 53-year-old judge at all costs.

Kavanaugh's confirmation was all but sealed on Friday when he won the support of key Senate Republican



Susan Collins



Joe Manchin

Susan Collins and conservative Democrat Joe Manchin.

Their statements of support brought the number of senators supporting Kavanaugh to 51 in the 100-member chamber.