

'World facing changes never seen in a century'

China President Xi calls on army to be battle-ready

REUTERS, Shanghai

China's armed forces must strengthen their sense of urgency and do everything they can to prepare for battle, President Xi Jinping told a meeting of top brass on Friday.

China is keen to beef up its armed forces amid territorial disputes in the South China Sea and escalating tension with the United States over issues ranging from trade to the status of Taiwan.

The official Xinhua news agency said Xi told a meeting of the top military authority that China faced increasing risks and challenges, and the armed forces must work to secure its security and development needs.

Xi, who is also chairman of the Central Military Commission, said the armed forces must devise strategies for the new era and take on responsibilities for preparing and waging war.



"The world is facing a period of major changes never seen in a century, and China is still in an important period of strategic opportunity for development," he was quoted as saying.

He said the armed forces needed to be able to respond quickly to emergencies, needed to upgrade their joint operations capabilities and nurture new types of combat forces.

Xi's comments followed his remarks on Wednesday that China still reserved the right to use force to achieve "reunification" with Taiwan and prevent the island's independence.

Xi's Taiwan speech came just days after US President Donald Trump signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act into law, reaffirming the US commitment to the island's security.

China still sees Taiwan as part of its territory to be reunified, despite the two sides being ruled separately since they split in 1949 after a civil war.



"Yellow Vest" anti-government protesters run as teargas shells are launched by security personnel during clashes on a street in Rouen, north-western France yesterday, part of a day of national demonstrations. Inset, A protester is being arrested by security personnel in Rouen. France's "yellow vest" protestors were back on the streets as a government spokesman denounced those still protesting as hard-liners who wanted only to bring down the government.

PHOTO: AFP

Democratic allies should rally to protect Taiwan from China: Tsai

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's president yesterday called on allies to help defend its sovereignty, accusing China of waging a "deliberate campaign" to undermine the island's democracy by refusing to talk to her government.

Relations between Taiwan and China have been at a low since Tsai came to power in 2016, refusing to acknowledge that the self-ruled island is part of "one China".

Beijing unilaterally cut off communication with her administration and stepped up military drills around the island as well as poaching several of its dwindling diplomatic allies.

Tsai's comments capped a week of escalating rhetoric between the two neighbours, sparked by a landmark speech from Chinese president Xi Jinping on Wednesday.

Xi described Taiwan's unification with the mainland as "inevitable" and reiterated Beijing's willingness to use force if necessary, especially if Taiwan ever declares formal independence.

He also said Beijing was willing to talk to political parties and groups in Taiwan that recognised their "one China" principle -- a reference to the main opposition parties.

"If the international community fails to speak up for and assist Taiwan under the circumstances we face today, I have to ask which country will be next?"



Tsai hit out at Beijing's willingness to bypass her elected government as "a continuation of its deliberate campaign to undermine and subvert our democratic process and create division in our society".

The schism is one of profound geopolitical importance. The United States diplomatically recognises China over Taiwan but it remains Taipei's staunchest political and military ally.

Tsai said China's increasingly muscular rhetoric towards Taiwan was a test of whether democratic allies would protect each other.

"If the international community fails to speak up for and assist Taiwan under the circumstances we face today, I have to ask which country will be next?" she asked.

Xi has been touting the "one country, two systems" model for Taiwan. A version was implemented in Hong Kong after Britain handed the city back to China in 1997 as a way to guarantee the kind of liberties and government unseen on the authoritarian mainland.

But sliding freedoms in Hong Kong in recent years have done little to endear the Taiwanese people to the idea of a similar deal for them from Beijing.

ARREST OF EX-US MARINE ON SPYING CHARGES

Moscow accuses Washington of detaining Russian citizen

REUTERS, Moscow

The Russian Foreign Ministry yesterday said the United States had detained a Russian citizen, days after Moscow arrested the former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan on suspicion of spying.

Whelan was arrested by Russia's Federal Security Service on Dec 28. His family have said he is innocent and that he was in Moscow to attend a wedding.

The ministry said the United States detained Russian citizen Dmitry Makarenko on the Northern Mariana Islands on Dec 29 and had moved him to Florida.

"... Makarenko, born in 1979, has arrived on Saipan Island with his wife, underage children and elderly parents. He was detained by FBI personnel at the airport right after his arrival," the ministry said.

The US Embassy in Moscow could not immediately be reached for comment.

The accusations from both sides could further complicate a strained relationship between Moscow and Washington, despite the professed desire of Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin to build a personal

rapport.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said this week Washington had asked Moscow to explain Whelan's arrest and would demand his immediate return if it determined his detention is inappropriate.

Britain cautioned Russia on Friday that individuals should not be used as diplomatic pawns. Whelan also holds a British passport.

The Russian ministry said in its statement Moscow diplomats had not been able to reach Makarenko in Florida and said Washington had yet to explain his detention.

Before Moscow gave details of Makarenko's detention, experts had speculated that Moscow could exchange Whelan for Russian nationals held by Washington.

Commenting on that possibility, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said yesterday:

"I see no reasons to raise this issue in context of exchanges. We should undergo all the procedures needed in this situation," Interfax news agency quoted Ryabkov as saying.



Pompeo heads to ME to shore up alliances

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will tour eight Middle East capitals next week in an effort to shore up crucial alliances strained by the Yemen war, US plans to exit Syria and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Pompeo leaves on Tuesday for the eight-day trip to Amman, Cairo, Manama, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Riyadh, Muscat, and finally Kuwait City, the State Department announced on Friday.

In addition, according to the White House last week, a stop in Baghdad is possible, though the State Department could not confirm it.

The trip was confirmed two weeks after President Donald Trump announced unexpectedly that the US would pull its troops out of Syria, stunning allies and sparking concerns of a vacuum in the war-torn country that could be filled by Iran.

Pompeo is scheduled to make a keynote address in Cairo, his second stop, where he will underscore the trip's overall message that "the United States is not leaving the Middle East," a senior State Department official told journalists Friday.

At the same time, Washington wants its Middle East allies to shoulder more of the burden in maintaining regional security and stability, amid fears of a resurgence of extremist groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State as US forces pull back.

Pompeo is under pressure to counter the impression given to US allies in the region by Trump's December 19 announcement that the US withdrawal from Syria would take place immediately.

Nearby countries, led by Israel, are nervous that their regional arch-rival Iran will be able to expand its presence in Syria with the possible resumption to full power of Tehran's ally President Bashar al-Assad.

CALIFORNIA BOWLING ALLEY SHOOTING

3 killed, 4 injured

CNN ONLINE

A shooting at a bowling alley late Friday left three men dead and four people injured in Southern California, authorities said.

Police said they were called to the Gable House Bowl in Torrance shortly before midnight. A witness said that gunshots rang out after a fight inside the building.

"Bowlers were diving under the benches," the witness, Dana Scott, told RMG News. "The people that were still bowling on the lanes were on the floors, underneath the seats, behind the benches."

No arrests were immediately reported. In a news release, Torrance police said they were "working to identify the suspect(s) involved."

"Upon arrival, officers discovered multiple subjects with gunshot wounds inside the location," the Torrance Police Department's news release reads.

The names of the slain and injured weren't immediately released.

Video from RMG News showed numerous firefighters or other first responders tending to people outside.

The Gable House Bowl is open until 3 a.m. on Saturday mornings. The complex also offers laser tag and a bar, its website says.

Torrance is about 20 miles from Los Angeles.

According to health authorities, nearly 40,000 people died in the United States as a result of firearms in 2017 -- a figure that includes suicides.



Syrians stand in a street next to debris and rubble from buildings which were damaged by reported air strikes in the rebel-held town of Orum al-Kubra, in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo, yesterday. Airstrikes by Syrian regime ally Russia hit the west of Aleppo province late on Friday, the first such raids in the area since a deal between Moscow and rebel backer Ankara to stave off a massive regime offensive on the wider Idlib region in September 2018.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump slams newly elected House Democrat's impeachment vow

AFP, Washington

A Democratic congresswoman kicked off her term with an expletive-laced vow to impeach Donald Trump, testing her party's discipline and earning a chiding Friday from the president.

As a clip of Michigan Democrat Rashida Tlaib's animated comments circulated widely on social media, Trump tartly dismissed the threat of impeachment, while the newly elected Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi appeared loath to reign in the congresswoman's language.

"How do you impeach a president who has won perhaps the greatest election of all time?" Trump said on Twitter, saying Democrats only consider impeachment "because they know they can't win in 2020."

At an event hours after her swearing-in on Thursday, Tlaib told supporters that "we are gonna go in there and we're gonna impeach the mother*****."

The crowd roared, and Tlaib hugged



her critic's comments, he said they were "disgraceful," and "highly disrespectful to the United States of America."

"I think she dishonored herself and I think she dishonored her family, using language like that," he added.

Doubling down on her outburst,

supporters.

Salty language by US lawmakers -- or presidents, for that matter -- is nothing new. Trump, hardly the paradigm of verbal decency, last year derided African nations as "shithole" countries, after all.

But when Trump was asked about

Tlaib -- the first Palestinian-American elected to Congress -- tweeted Friday: "I will always speak truth to power. #unapologeticallyMe."

Tlaib found support on Twitter, where #ImpeachTheMF was a trending item in the United States on Friday night, with more than 110,000 tweets.

Republicans have bridled at Tlaib's comments, using them to portray Democrats as seeking politically-motivated retribution against Trump rather than common ground.

"We watched a new freshman stand up, use this language, get cheered by their base, and we watched a brand new speaker say nothing to her," top House Republican Kevin McCarthy said.

"That action should not stand."

Even if Democrats believe some of Trump's actions clear the threshold of "high crimes and misdemeanors," Pelosi has downplayed the prospects of impeachment, saying it's "not something that I'm stirring the pot on."

Bolton warns Syria against use of chemical arms

REUTERS, Tel Aviv

US National Security Advisor John Bolton yesterday warned the Syrian government that it should not see the impending US military withdrawal from the country as an invitation to use chemical weapons.

"There is absolutely no change in the US position against the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and absolutely no change in our position that any use of chemical weapons would be met by a very strong response, as we've done twice before," Bolton told reporters on his plane shortly before landing in Tel Aviv, Israel.

"So the regime, the Assad regime should be under no illusions on that question."

Bolton added: "As we elaborate how the withdrawal is going to occur and the circumstances, we don't want the Assad regime to see what we do as representing any diminution in our opposition to the use of weapons of mass destruction."

Russia probe grand jury given 6-month extension

AFP, Washington

The Russia collusion investigation of Special Counsel Robert Mueller will continue to loom darkly over the White House for some time to come after a judge gave an extension to a secret grand jury empaneled in the probe.

An official of the Federal District Court in Washington confirmed on Friday that Chief US District Judge Beryl Howell had granted the extension, as the jury's original 18-month mandate was to expire on Saturday.

But there was no information on how much longer the grand jury will be able to work, amid speculation that Mueller is nearing the end of his wide-ranging investigation.

The grand jury is believed to be weighing a number of potential charges against members of President Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign team, some of whom have already been indicted.

The Mueller probe has already issued indictments against 33 people, including three former top Trump aides, has secured guilty pleas in seven cases, and a trial conviction in another.

Normally a grand jury is empaneled for a maximum of 18 months, and a maximum six-month extension is permitted.

Howell's office would not say how long an extension she gave Mueller, who was appointed in May 2017.

The probe has been conducted in intense secrecy, and given rise to speculation that President Trump himself could be a target, for possible collusion between his campaign and Russia in the 2016 electoral campaign, and perhaps for obstruction of justice.

The White House has confirmed that Trump has answered written questions from Mueller, though details of the questions and answers have not been released.