

BEHIND-THE-SCENES BIDEN ADMIN OUTREACH

N Korea unresponsive

REUTERS, Washington

North Korea has not responded to behind-the-scenes diplomatic outreach since mid-February by President Joe Biden's administration, including to Pyongyang's mission to the United Nations, a senior Biden administration official told Reuters on Saturday.

The disclosure of the so-far unsuccessful US outreach, which has not been previously reported, raises questions about how Biden will address mounting tensions with Pyongyang over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

It also adds a new dimension to a visit America's top diplomat and defense secretary will make next week to South Korea and Japan, where concerns over North Korea's nuclear arsenal are expected to be high on the agenda.

The senior Biden administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, offered few details on the diplomatic push. But the official said there had been efforts to reach out to the North Korean government "through several channels starting in mid-February, including in New York."

"To date, we have not received any response from Pyongyang," the official said.

North Korea's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Biden administration has so far been cautious in publicly describing its approach to North Korea, saying it

is carrying out a comprehensive policy review following former President Donald Trump's unprecedented engagement with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Trump's efforts failed to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

The Biden administration official said it appeared there had been no active dialogue between the United States and North Korea for more than a year, including at the end of Trump's administration, "despite multiple attempts during that time by the United States to engage."

The US official declined to speculate about how the silence from Pyongyang would impact the Biden administration's North Korea policy review, which was expected to be completed in the coming weeks.

During his election campaign, Biden described Kim as a "thug" and said he would only meet him "on the condition that he would agree that he would be drawing down his nuclear capacity."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has held out the possibility of additional sanctions, in coordination with allies, to press North Korea to denuclearize.

Sanctions have so far failed to convince Kim to give up his nuclear weapons.

A confidential UN report found that North Korea maintained and developed its nuclear and ballistic missile programs throughout 2020 in violation of international sanctions, helping fund them with some \$300 million stolen through cyber hacks.



Women mourn at a memorial site at the Clapham Common Bandstand, following the kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard, in London, Britain, yesterday. London's police force which dragged mourners from a vigil for a woman whose suspected killer is a police officer faced a backlash from the public and politicians yesterday, with the government demanding it account for its actions. The disappearance of Sarah Everard, 33, as she walked home on the evening of March 3 has provoked a huge outpouring of grief and dismay in Britain at the failure of police and wider society to tackle violence against women.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Pentagon chief sees Asia ties as deterrent against China

AFP, Honolulu

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Saturday he was traveling to Asia to boost military cooperation with American allies and foster "credible deterrence" against China.

Austin kicked off via Hawaii, seat of the American military command for the Indo-Pacific region, his first foreign visits as Pentagon chief.

"This is all about alliances and partnerships," he told reporters on the trip that is to include meetings with key allies in Tokyo, New Delhi and Seoul.

"It's also about enhancing capabilities," he added, recalling that while the United States was focused on the anti-jihadist struggle in the Middle East, China was modernizing its army at high speed.

"That competitive edge that we've had has eroded," he said. "We still maintain that edge. We are going to increase that edge going forward."

"Our goal is to make sure that we have the capabilities and the operational plans... to be able to offer a credible deterrence to China or anybody else who would want to take on the US," he added.

Lloyd will be joined in Tokyo and Seoul by Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

This tour in Asia of the heads of diplomacy and defense of the United States follows an unprecedented summit of the "Quad", an informal alliance born in the 2000s to counterbalance a rising China.

GROWING US, CHINA RIVALRY

Choosing sides not an option

S'pore PM says his country, many others in tight spot as superpowers jostle for supremacy

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

It will not be possible for Singapore to choose between the United States and China, given the extensive ties the Republic has with both superpowers, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said yesterday.

Many other countries are in a similar situation, he added during an interview with the BBC, saying they would be hard pressed if forced to pick a side.

"I hope the time does not come," he said when asked which one Singapore will choose when the time comes.

The past few years have seen a significant deterioration in ties between the US and China, with their rivalry set to continue in spite of the change in administration in Washington.

With both sides exerting their influence on allies and partners, it has become harder for countries to stay in the middle. The administration of US President Joe Biden, for instance, has called for a review of how the country buys strategic goods, saying that it will work with like-minded countries.

Asked if it is realistic to sit on the fence in light of these developments, Lee said: "I do not think we are the only ones in this boat."

"It could happen before you expect it, if there is a mishap."

Singapore Prime Minister LEE HSIEN LOONG on US-China military conflict



He cited the European Union, which had signed an investment agreement with China before Biden took office.

Reiterating Singapore's position of assessing and making a judgment as to which course of action is in its best interests, Lee said: "Generally, it is that we want to be friends with both, but we have to find our own way forward."

He also noted that competition and tension between both superpowers is inevitable in the Asia-Pacific region. But he emphasised that they have to coexist.

Unlike the former Soviet Union which had an unsustainable economy and was pushed to the brink during the Cold War, China's economy has a lot of resilience, tremendous energy and creativity, and people who are on the move and

are making great progress, he added.

The US, too, may have serious political schisms and problems, but has got tremendous vitality and attraction for people around the world, he added.

"It has come back from many difficult spots before. In that situation, unless the two powers decide to coexist, they are both in for a hard time, and so are we," he said.

Asked whether the US had to accept that it is no longer number one, Lee said: "The US is still number one, but number two is not so far behind. That is what is difficult for the US to accept."

On tensions escalating, he pointed out that a real military conflict between both countries "could happen before you expect it, if there is a mishap."

However, Lee added that the odds of a military clash are not yet high, but it is more likely now than five years ago, as domestic calculations have become paramount for both sides.

"It is understandable. China is in a new position now, and you have to set a different balance in your relationship with the world," he added.

"What the world was prepared to grant you in an earlier phase now has to be reworked, and that is quite difficult for a country to accept."

NEW 'PROPAGANDA' CHARGES

Zaghari-Ratcliffe back in Iran court

AFP, Tehran

British-Iranian dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe yesterday appeared in a Tehran court to face new charges of "propaganda against the system", a week after she finished serving a five-year sentence, her lawyer said.

The hearing has dashed hopes of family and supporters for a swift release of the 42-year-old, in a case that has heightened diplomatic tensions between London and Tehran.

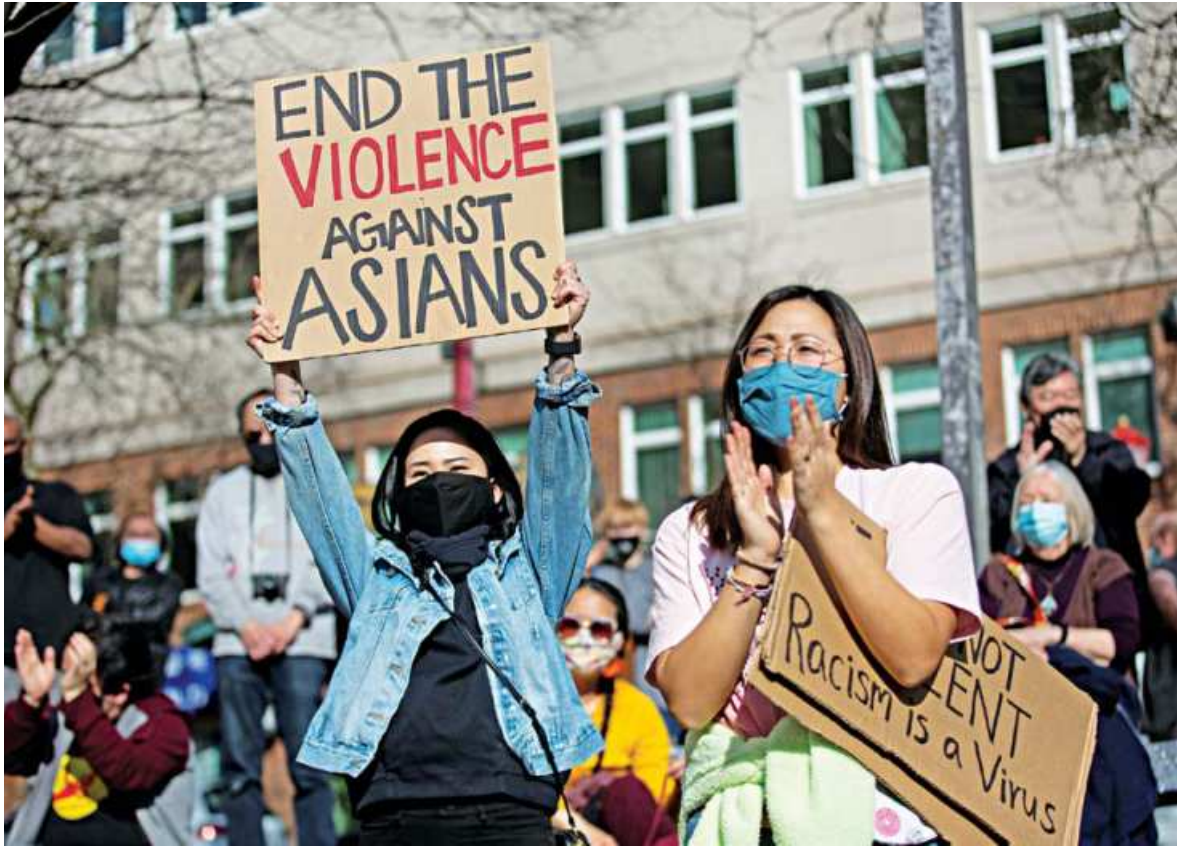
"The hearing took place in a very calm and good atmosphere, in the presence of my client," her lawyer Hojjat Kermani told AFP, adding that the judgement would be handed down at a later and unspecified date.

According to Kermani, she is now being prosecuted for "propaganda against the system for having participated in a rally in front of the Iranian embassy in London" in 2009.

"Given the evidence presented by the defence and the legal process, and the fact that my client has also served her previous sentence, I hope that she will be acquitted," the lawyer added.

In London, her Member of Parliament Tulip Siddiq said that "no verdict was given", but added that "it should be delivered within a week".

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was detained while on holiday in 2016 and convicted of plotting to overthrow the regime in Tehran -- accusations she strenuously denied. The mother-of-one was working at the time as a project manager for Thomson Reuters Foundation, the media organisation's philanthropic wing.



Dawn Cheung and Victoria Do clap and cheer while listening to speakers during a protest against anti-Asian hate crimes, organized by the Asian American Pacific Islanders Organizing Coalition Against Hate & Bias, at Hing Hay Park in the Chinatown-International District of Seattle, Washington, U.S., on Saturday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Japanese worshippers 'walks on fire' to pray for safety

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japanese worshippers yesterday prayed for the safety of themselves and their families by walking barefoot with Buddhist monks over smouldering coals at an annual festival near Mt Takaosan.

The fire-walking was more tense than usual because participants were required to wear masks and maintain social distancing due to the coronavirus pandemic. The festival was also limited to 1,000 participants. Last year, it wasn't open to the public because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Passing your body through the flames cleanses your soul and delivers your prayers to Buddha," said Koshou Kamimura, a Buddhist monk from Takaosan Yakuouin Temple.

"Historically, Mt. Takaosan is an important place to pray for deliverance from plagues, so I felt we should hold the festival this year with certain precautions."

The festival, called hiwatari matsuri in Japanese, has a history of about 50 years at Mt. Takaosan.

The monks set fire to wood and Japanese cypress leaves, creating an intense bonfire. The monks then doused the flames with water, collected the embers and laid them



out in two strips, over which they walked barefoot while chanting.

Worshippers followed the monks, wearing masks due to the coronavirus. Some monks carried small children over the embers as dark smoke billowed into the air.

Tokyo is preparing to host the Summer Olympics this year, delayed from 2020 because of the coronavirus, with domestic opinion polls showing people favour limiting the number of spectators at the games.

"Coronavirus infections are spreading globally, so I prayed that it doesn't spread any further," said Eriko Nakamura, 46, as Buddhist monks chanted in the background.

Pakistan couple expelled by univ after public proposal

AFP, Lahore

A university in deeply conservative Pakistan expelled two students who embraced after getting engaged on campus, after a video of the incident spread on social media this week.

In the clip, a female university student gets down on one knee and proposes to her boyfriend; the couple can then be seen hugging and holding bouquets of flowers as onlookers cheer them on and film the scene.

The University of Lahore said the pair had acted "in violation of university rules".

It added in a statement on Friday that they had failed to appear before a disciplinary hearing and were later expelled for "serious infraction of the code of conduct".

Public displays of affection between couples -- whether married or not -- are viewed as culturally and religiously unacceptable.

Many women in patriarchal Pakistan find it hard to defy tradition, with much of the society still operating under a strict code of honour.

The couple has refused to apologise.

"We did nothing wrong, and we are not sorry for this," Hadiqa Javaid tweeted.

"Can anyone explain to us what wrong we did by proposal in public in University of Lahore?", her fiance Shehryar Ahmed said, adding that couples had previously proposed to each other on campus.

They said they had received online threats for the show of affection.

Condemning the university's decision, the Progressive Students' Collective union on Saturday tweeted that "moral policing in universities has become a norm lately".

Some universities in Pakistan have barred female students from wearing jeans, tank-tops or makeup, while others regulate interactions between male and female students.

It was an accident, not an attack

India's EC says on Nandigram incident; fiery WB CM, on wheel chair, stages rally

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Election Commission yesterday ruled out that there was any attack on West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in Nandigram, saying it was an accident.

The EC, after reviewing the reports sent by two of EC's special poll observers deputed in West Bengal and the state government on the incident, concluded that Mamata sustained injuries while campaigning due to "lapse on the part of her security in charge," said the sources.

There were allegations that the door of her SUV was pushed while she was campaigning in Nandigram on Wednesday evening after filing her nomination from the constituency. Mamata fell down and sustained injuries on her left leg and waist.

Her leg in a bandage and ensconced in a wheelchair, Mamata yesterday returned to the assembly election campaign pitch and said nothing will keep her from protecting the democratic rights of the people.

The 66-year-old led a rally from Mayo Road



in central Kolkata to Hazra in the south, said "I am hurt and unwell, but my goal remains intact. ... I will continue to roam around Bengal on this wheelchair. If I go on bed rest, who will reach out to the people of Bengal?" she said.

The ruling came after West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress raise its concerns EC over the Nandigram incident, which they termed as premeditated. On the other hand, the BJP too had moved the EC and demanded an impartial probe into the incident and that the video footage of the incident be made public.

Meanwhile, Suwendhu Adhikari, who has

switched over to the BJP from TMC recently, yesterday attacked his former party saying those who have given promotions to the police officers responsible for the 2007 Nandigram police firing, which left 14 people dead, have no right to seek votes from the people of the area.

Mamata has left her Bhowanipore constituency in Kolkata to fight Adhikari in Nandigram where an anti-land acquisition movement against the then leftist government catapulted her party to power in 2011.

YASHWANT SINHA JOINS TRINAMUL On Saturday, former Union finance minister Yashwant Sinha joined the Trinamul Congress in the presence of Lok Sabha leader Sudip Bandopadhyay, Rajya Sabha leader Derek O'Brien and Bengal's minister for panchayat and rural affairs Subrata Mukherjee at Trinamul Bhavan.

"The democratic stature of our republic is in danger. Today, almost every institution of democracy has become weakened and unfortunately, the judiciary is also among them," he said as he explained why joined TMC.