



An aurora borealis, also known as Northern Lights, illuminates the night sky above the Yllas Fell in Kolari, Finnish Lapland, early yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

China, Iran eye deepening ties

Slams US sanctions, begin implementation of 25-year strategic agreement

REUTERS, Shanghai

China reaffirmed its opposition to unilateral sanctions by the United States against Iran as the Chinese and Iranian foreign ministers announced the launch of a 25-year cooperation agreement aimed at strengthening economic and political ties.

In a meeting on Friday in the city of Wuxi, in Jiangsu province, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also backed efforts to revive a 2015 nuclear deal between major powers and Iran.

Chief negotiators from Iran and Europe returned home for consultations as talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal reached a critical stage, state media in the Islamic republic said yesterday.

A summary of the meeting between Wang and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian was posted on China's foreign ministry website yesterday. Wang said the US bore primary responsibility for the ongoing difficulties with Iran, having unilaterally withdrawn from a 2015 nuclear deal between the major powers and Iran.

China and Iran, both subject to US sanctions, signed the 25-year cooperation agreement last March, bringing Iran into China's Belt and Road Initiative, a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure scheme intended to stretch from East Asia to Europe.

The project aims to significantly expand China's economic and political influence, and has raised concerns in the United States and elsewhere.

The foreign ministry summary said the agreement would deepen Sino-Iranian cooperation in areas including energy, infrastructure, agriculture, health care and culture, as well as cyber security and cooperation with other countries.

Few details of the secretive deal have been published, but the New York Times reported in 2020 that it would secure a regular supply of oil for China, citing a draft of the agreement leaked to the paper.

China has officially stopped importing oil from Iran, but analysts say Iranian crude is continuing to enter the country disguised as imports from other countries.



'Unfounded' claims

Says Russia as it rejects US allegations that it is preparing stage for invading Ukraine



AFP, Kyiv

The United States has accused Russia of sending saboteurs trained in explosives to stage a pretext to invade Ukraine, where government websites were knocked out in a cyberattack linked to Moscow.

The allegations and incident mark a striking new escalation in tensions over Ukraine, just after a week of talks between the West and Russia that sought a diplomatic solution.

Russia has amassed tanks, artillery and tens of thousands of troops near the border of Ukraine as it demands guarantees that its neighbour will never join Nato – which on Friday announced new cyber cooperation with Kyiv in response to the attack.

Detailing intelligence findings, the White House Friday said that Russia was “laying the groundwork to have the option of fabricating a pretext for invasion” by blaming Ukraine.

“We have information that indicates Russia has already prepositioned a group of operatives to conduct a false-flag operation in eastern Ukraine,” said Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary.

“The operatives are trained in urban warfare and in using explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces.”

US intelligence believes Russia could begin the operations several weeks before a military invasion, which could start between mid-January and mid-

February, Psaki said.

Russia has denied plans to invade Ukraine and quickly dismissed the latest US statements, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov calling them “unfounded”.

With the world on alert for any signs of invasion, government sites across Ukraine including of the emergencies ministry, education ministry and cabinet went down early Friday.

Ukraine was still conducting an investigation but preliminary indications suggested that “hacker groups associated with the Russian secret services may stand behind today's massive cyberattack on government websites”, foreign ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko said on Twitter.

European Union foreign ministers, meeting in the French city of Brest, promised support, with several saying that they had feared a cyberattack to set the stage for a Russian invasion.

US President Joe Biden has warned his counterpart Vladimir Putin in two telephone calls of severe economic consequences if Russia invades.

Moscow said the military drill was a response to what it sees as the growing presence of Nato in its sphere of influence, where it fiercely opposes the expansion of the Atlantic alliance.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Thursday that Moscow saw no reason to hold a new round of security talks with the West following what he saw as no progress in talks in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna.

Myanmar junta hits Suu Kyi with five new charges

AFP, YANGON

A Myanmar junta court has hit ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi with five new corruption charges related to the alleged hiring and purchase of a helicopter, sources close to the case told AFP.

The Nobel laureate, 76, has been detained since the February 1 coup last year which triggered mass protests and a bloody crackdown on dissent with more than 1,400 civilians killed, according to a local monitoring group.

Suu Kyi is facing a raft of criminal and corruption charges – including violating the country's official secrets laws – and if convicted of all of them could face sentences tallying more than 100 years of prison.

The charges were levelled against Suu Kyi on Friday afternoon and related to the hire, maintenance and purchase of a helicopter, the sources said. Former Myanmar president U Win Myint was also hit with the same charges.

A Myanmar court on Monday convicted Suu Kyi of three criminal charges related to illegally importing and owning walkie talkies and breaking coronavirus rules.

She was sentenced to four years in prison.

In December, she also received a two-year jail sentence for incitement against the military and for other coronavirus violations.



Tongans flee tsunami following volcanic eruption

AFP, Nuku'alofa

Frightened Tongans fled to higher ground yesterday after a massive volcanic eruption – heard in neighbouring countries – triggered tsunami warnings across the South Pacific. “A 1.2 metre tsunami wave has been observed at Nuku'alofa,” Australia's Bureau of Meteorology tweeted. The latest eruption of the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano came just a few hours after a separate Friday tsunami warning was lifted due to the eruption. The eruption was so intense it was heard as “loud thunder sounds” in Fiji more than 800 kilometres (500 miles) away, officials in Suva said.

Philippines to buy Indian missile system for \$375m

REUTERS, Manila

The Philippines has finalised a deal to acquire a shore-based anti-ship missile system from India for nearly \$375 million to beef up its navy, the Southeast Asian nation's defence minister said. Under the deal negotiated with the government of India, Brahmos Aerospace Private Ltd will deliver three batteries, train operators and maintainers, and provide logistics support, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said in a Facebook post late on Friday. It was conceptualised in 2017, but faced delays in budget allocation and due to the coronavirus pandemic. The new anti-ship system aims to deter foreign vessels from encroaching on the country's 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone.



We're arriving at the end of a long process... there's a better atmosphere since Christmas – before Christmas I was very pessimistic. Today I believe reaching an accord is possible.

EU foreign policy chief
Josep Borrell
on Iran nuclear deal

PARTICIPATION IN ASEAN MEETINGS

S'pore PM backs continued exclusion of Myanmar junta

REUTERS, Singapore

Singapore's leader said the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) should continue excluding Myanmar's junta from its meeting until it cooperates on an agreed peace plans.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in a video call on Friday urged the regional group's new chair, Cambodia, to engage all sides in Myanmar's conflict, Singapore's foreign ministry said yesterday.

Lee told his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen that Asean should continue inviting a non-political representative from Myanmar to its meetings and any decision to change that “had to be based on new facts”.

His remarks follow a controversial visit last week by Hun Sen to Myanmar, where he met Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military government whom Asean excluded from its leaders' summit for his failure to implement the five-point plan to end hostilities and

allow dialogue after a coup last year.

Malaysia's foreign minister, Saifuddin Abdullah, made similar comments on Thursday, saying some Asean members felt Hun Sen should have discussed his trip with fellow leaders beforehand, as it could be seen as recognising the junta.

Lee told Hun Sen any engagement with Myanmar needed to include “all parties concerned”, including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's ousted ruling party. The Singapore leader said that despite Myanmar's peace commitments, the military has made further attacks against its political opponents and imposed further prison sentences on Suu Kyi.

Hun Sen made some proposals to Lee on how to coordinate a ceasefire in Myanmar and deliver humanitarian assistance, according to the statement. Lee responded these could be complicated because there had been no access to all parties, although Singapore did not object to the idea in principle.



In this photo released yesterday by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), a railway-borne missile is launched during firing drills at an undisclosed location in North Korea. North Korea on Friday fired two railway-borne tactical guided missiles, the country's third weapons test this month despite a volley of new United States sanctions. PHOTO: REUTERS