

SUSPECTED SURVEILLANCE BALLOON

US will preserve dialogue with China despite rift

Says top diplomat Wendy Sherman

AFP, Washington

The United States will work to maintain lines of communication with China despite a rift over an alleged surveillance balloon, a top US diplomat said Wednesday.

The United States and China have “never stopped communicating and trying to understand each other” despite the cancellation this month of a visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, said his deputy, Wendy Sherman.

“We have, we are and we will maintain open lines of communication with the PRC so we can responsibly manage the competition between our countries,” Sherman said, using the acronym of the People’s Republic of China.

“We do not see conflict with the PRC. We believe in the power of diplomacy to prevent miscalculations that can lead to conflict,” she said in a speech at the Brookings Institution.

Referring to talk among US hawks to extract the United States from China’s economy, Sherman said, “We’re not talking about decoupling anywhere. De-risking where it makes sense -- absolutely.”



She said, however, that the United States would remain firm on concerns with China including human rights in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, its use of “economic coercion” and its “threatening behavior” against Taiwan.

Sherman, in response to a question, declined to say if Blinken would meet China’s foreign policy supremo Wang Yi later this week when both attend the Munich Security Conference.

But she indicated that Blinken’s trip to China was postponed rather than canceled, saying, “We hope to put it back on the schedule.”

President Joe Biden ordered the shootdown of the balloon after it crossed US territory, including over areas with sensitive military sites. US officials said it was a surveillance balloon but that it provided limited intelligence.

Beijing insisted that the balloon was for weather surveillance and had gone astray and has accused the United States of sending its own balloons over China, charges denied by Washington.

Tensions spiked last year after a visit by then House speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan.



A demonstrator gestures near a bank, set on fire, during a protest organized by Depositors’ Outcry, a group campaigning for angry depositors, against informal restrictions on cash withdrawals and deteriorating economic conditions in Beirut, Lebanon yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

‘Time is now’

Nato chief tells Turkey to ratify Sweden, Finland membership bids

AFP, Ankara

Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg told Turkey yesterday it was time to finally ratify Sweden and Finland’s bids to join the Western defence alliance.

Stoltenberg arrived in Ankara 10 days after Turkey was hit by a massive earthquake that has claimed nearly 40,000 lives across the country’s southeast and parts of Syria.

“In your time of need, Nato stands with Turkey,” Stoltenberg said.

But he also stressed the urgency of Ankara dropping its resistance to the Nordic neighbours’ bids to join the Western defence alliance.

“I continue to believe that the time is now to ratify both Finland and Sweden,” Stoltenberg said after talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Finland and Sweden dropped decades of military non-alignment and applied to join the US led defence alliance in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Turkey and Hungary remain the only members of the 30 nation alliance that have failed to ratify the two bids by votes in parliament.

All 30 states must approve a new country’s membership. The Hungarian legislature is expected to approve both bids by March.

Turkey has signalled it is ready to receive Finland into the alliance -- but not Sweden.

“We could evaluate Finland’s Nato membership process separately from Sweden,” Cavusoglu said yesterday.

“Turkey’s position on the membership of the two countries has been clear and unambiguous from the beginning.”

Turkish President Recept Tayyip Erdogan’s main complaint has been with Sweden’s refusal to extradite dozens of suspects that Ankara links to outlawed Kurdish groups and a 2016 coup attempt.

“Both can be ratified now,” Stoltenberg said. “But the main issue is not that they are ratified together. The main issue is that they are ratified as soon as possible.”



Russia batters Ukraine with missile strikes

Kyiv says it shoots down 16 of 32 missiles; Nato to keep ramping up military aid for Kyiv

REUTERS, KYIV

Russia battered Ukraine with multiple missile strikes yesterday as its troops sought to advance in the east, Kyiv said, while Western allies pledged to keep military aid flowing for an intended Ukrainian spring counter-offensive.

Following a pattern of heavy bombardments at times of Ukrainian battlefield or diplomatic advances, Russia launched 32 missiles in the early hours, Ukraine’s Air Force said.

Half were shot down, it added, a lower rate than normal.

Among them, air defences in the south downed eight Kalibr missiles fired from a ship in the Black Sea, Ukrainian officials said. Other missiles struck northern and western Ukraine as well as the central regions of Dnipropetrovsk and Kirovohrad.

Russia has usually carried out its heaviest strikes in daylight, targeting energy facilities. But Ukrainian officials said the overnight bombardment had no major impact on power.

They believe Moscow is adapting strategy, including using air balloons for reconnaissance.

“The Russians have changed their tactics somewhat. They conduct active reconnaissance, use false targets,” Andriy Yermak, head of the Ukrainian presidential staff, wrote on the Telegram messaging app.

Ukraine did not say why fewer missiles had been knocked out than

usual but it has previously reported lower success rates when Russia fired Soviet-era Kh-22 missiles.

Bolstered by tens of thousands of reservists, Russia has intensified ground attacks across southern and eastern Ukraine in recent weeks, and a major new offensive appears to be shaping as the first anniversary of its February 24 invasion nears.

The conflict has killed tens of thousands of people, pulverised

Wednesday it was touting Ukrainian retreats in parts of the eastern province of Luhansk.

As Ukraine burns through munitions fast and clamours for heavier firepower, including tanks and fighter jets, Nato alliance nations are ramping up production and promising more.

President Volodymyr Zelensky’s army has received vast amounts of aid, particularly from the United States which has committed more than \$27.4 billion since the conflict began.

Senior U.S. officials have advised Ukraine to hold off with a major counter-offensive until the latest supply of U.S. weaponry is in place and training has been provided.

“We have to ensure that this spring it is truly felt that Ukraine is moving towards victory,” Zelensky said.

He thanked Norway for pledging \$7 billion over five years, its largest aid programme ever for a single recipient nation.

Russia calls the invasion a “special military operation” against security threats and has cast deliveries of heavy weapons to Ukraine as proof that the West is escalating the war.

Kyiv and its allies call Russia’s actions a land grab.

In the latest of a stream of foreign dignitaries to visit Ukraine, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen was set to meet Zelensky. It was the first such visit from a senior Israeli official since the war began.



People hold smoke flares during a demonstration on the fifth day of nationwide rallies organised since the start of the year, against a deeply unpopular pensions overhaul, in Nice, southeastern France, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Racist US shooter jailed for life

AFP, New York

A white supremacist who murdered 10 Black people during a live-streamed supermarket rampage in New York state last year was sentenced to life in prison Wednesday during an emotional hearing that saw a man lunge for the shooter.

Payton Gendron, 19, had pleaded guilty to a state charge of domestic terrorism motivated by hate over the massacre in Buffalo in May, which carries a mandatory penalty of life without parole.

The convicted teen, who told the court he was “very sorry” for his actions, still faces dozens of federal hate crime charges that could see him receive the death penalty.

“There can be no mercy for you, no understanding, no second chances. The damage you have caused is too great,” Erie County Court judge Susan Egan told Gendron, handing down the life term. Gendron, wearing an orange jumpsuit and glasses, had to be escorted out of the courtroom when an audience member rushed at him during emotional statements by relatives of victims.

The unidentified man was restrained by security and the hearing resumed several minutes later.

BABY FORMULA

Most health claims not backed by science: study

AFP, Paris

The vast majority of health claims used to advertise baby formula worldwide are not supported by rigorous scientific evidence, a study said yesterday, leading researchers to urge the breast milk substitutes be sold in plain packaging. The study comes a week after a group of doctors and scientists called for a regulatory crackdown on the \$55-billion formula industry for “predatory” marketing which they said exploits the fears of new parents to convince them not to breastfeed. Breastfeeding is widely recognised to have huge health benefits for babies. The World Health Organization and the US CDC recommend breastfeeding exclusively during the first six months of a newborn’s life. However that recommendation is followed for less than half of infants globally, according to the WHO. Daniel Munblit, an honorary senior lecturer at Imperial College London and an author of the new study, said researchers were not on a “crusade” against infant formula, which should remain an option for mothers who cannot or choose not to breastfeed.

Mpox still a global health crisis: WHO

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization said Wednesday that despite a drop-off in cases, it still considers mpox, previously known as monkeypox, an international health emergency. WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus reached that conclusion following the recommendations of the UN health agency’s emergency committee, which met last Friday. “The committee has advised me that in its view, mpox remains a global health emergency, and I have accepted that advice,” Tedros told reporters. Officials noticed a surge in what was then called monkeypox infections last May among men.

EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

\$826m pledged to UN fund

AFP, Geneva

During the first-ever pledging conference for education in emergencies and protracted crises, countries and other donors vowed yesterday to fund \$826 million for Education Cannot Wait’s work for the next four years. The UN fund estimates that 222 million children around the world have had their education disrupted by conflict or climate-related disasters, including nearly 80 million who never set foot in school. Since 2016, Education Cannot Wait has raised more than \$1 billion to build schools and buy educational materials as well as provide daily meals and offer psychological services. The aid helps nearly seven million children in 32 countries. ECW had said it needs to mobilise an additional \$1.5 billion for its work between 2023 and 2026, with the goal of reaching an additional 20 million children. The lack of education has real and immediate consequences. Children sometimes end up on the streets, facing threats of violence, human trafficking, recruitment by armed groups or, for girls, forced marriage. “We’ve seen around the world that hope dies when a convoy carrying refugees gets lost at sea. Hope dies when goods trying to get the refugees in besieged cities doesn’t get through,” Gordon Brown, chair of ECW and the UN special envoy for education, told the conference.