

China blasts US over 'hysterical' balloon claim

AFP, Munich

China's top diplomat Wang Yi yesterday blasted the United States's reaction to what Washington has called a Chinese spy balloon as "hysterical and absurd", in uncharacteristically strong remarks against the top Western power.

Addressing a gathering of world leaders at the Munich Security Conference, Wang said US President Joe Biden's administration has a "misguided" perception of Beijing.

And he accused Washington of trying to "smear" the Asian giant while it itself was implementing policies that ran counter to its paradigms such as free trade.

"There are many balloons from many countries in the sky. Do you want to down each and every one of them?" Wang charged.

"We urge the United States not to do such preposterous things simply to divert attention from its own domestic problems."

The United States has been in a state of alarm since a

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China's top diplomat Wang Yi slams "hysterical" US

huge white balloon from China was spotted over a series of top secret nuclear weapons sites, before being shot down just off the east coast on February 4.

Beijing denies it uses spy balloons and says the craft was for weather research. Subsequently it accused Washington of sending its own espionage balloons over its territory -- something that the US has denied.

But asked if he was planning a huddle with the US delegation, Wang reacted combatively.

Washington, he said, had the wrong view of China as a serious geopolitical challenge and a threat to the United States.

"This is a misguided perception of China and with this perception, the United States is using all of its means to smear and clamp down China, and is co-opting other countries to do the same," he said.

Wang accused the US instead of "100 percent protectionism, 100 percent self-servingness, 100 percent unilateral action" in its own economic policies like the Chips Act.

"We hope the US side would take a pragmatic and proactive attitude towards China and work together with China to return our bilateral ties to accept a track of sound development," he added.



Mustafa Avci, 33, who was stuck under rubble for 261 hours, meets his daughter Almire for the first time and reunites with his wife Bilge, following a deadly earthquake, at a hospital in Mersin, Turkey. Almire was born on the day of the earthquake. The photo was taken on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

ISRAEL'S SETTLEMENT EXPANSION PLAN US criticism 'meaningless'

AGENCIES

Political analysts say the United States' criticism of Israeli settlement expansion plans is meaningless, pointing to Washington's apparent refusal to support a UN Security Council resolution calling on Israel to halt settlements.

Palestinian rights advocates say the contradiction underscores President Joe Biden's unwillingness to meaningfully counter violations that Israel's far right government has committed against Palestinians.

Israel's security cabinet had announced last week that it would legalise nine settlements in the occupied West Bank following a series of attacks in east Jerusalem, including one that killed three Israelis.

These so-called "wild" settlements were built without authorisation from the Israeli government.

The foreign ministers of five Western powers -- Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States -- said on Tuesday they were "deeply troubled" by the Israeli government's decision.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also criticised Israel's plans on advancing settlements. President Joe Biden's administration maintains its "firm opposition to the settlement expansion," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

Without action, mere statements against Israeli policies are "meaningless", said Khalil Jahshan, executive director of the Arab Center Washington DC, a think tank.

"Israel knows it's just an expression of dissatisfaction. Whether it's a 'regret' or 'deep concern', whatever the diplomatic term du jour is, still the administration will not do

anything practical about it to hold Israel responsible for its behaviour," Jahshan told Al Jazeera.

Multiple media outlets have reported that the draft resolution could be up for a vote by the 15-member body as early as Monday.

"The contradiction of the Biden administration's stated position 'opposing' Israel's settlement expansion yet rejecting any attempt to hold them legally accountable is proof of their complicity in the continuation of Israeli occupation and apartheid," said Tariq Kenney-Shawa, US policy fellow at Al-Shabaka, a Palestinian think tank.

"It's simple -- every US administration has said they oppose anything that will endanger a two-state solution, yet none have taken action to stop Israel's illegal expansion," Kenney-Shawa added in an email.

SUSPECTED IS ATTACK Death toll rises to 68 in Syria

BEIRUT, Lebanon

The death toll from an attack blamed on the Islamic State group in Syria has risen to 68, a war monitor said yesterday, the deadliest attack in over a year.

"A total of 61 civilians and seven soldiers have been killed in the attack," said Rami Abdel Rahman, who heads the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The Britain-based Observatory, which has a wide network of sources inside Syria, said the attack had been carried out on Friday by jihadists on motorcycles who opened fire on truffle hunters.

The attack takes the total number murdered in suspected IS attacks in the Syrian desert to 90 since February 10, with a string of other killings in recent days, the monitor said.

IS group did not immediately claim the attack on its usual channels.

Syrian state media had reported 53 deaths Friday, after the attack southwest of the town of Al-Sokhna, in the desert east of Homs.

It was the deadliest attack by IS since January last year, when they stormed a prison in the Kurdish-controlled northeastern city of Hasakeh in a bid to free fellow jihadists.

Philippines 'will not lose one inch' of territory: Marcos

AFP, Manila

President Ferdinand Marcos said yesterday the Philippines "will not lose one inch" of territory, following the latest maritime incident between Manila and Beijing in the disputed South China Sea.

Manila accused a Chinese security vessel of "aggressive actions", saying it used a military-grade laser light against a Philippine patrol boat in the disputed waters -- over which China claims almost complete sovereignty.

The February 6 incident has escalated into a diplomatic row, with Marcos later summoning Beijing's ambassador in Manila to express "serious concern" over the rising frequency of maritime events.

Yesterday, he warned cadets at a military academy of "heightened geopolitical tensions that do not conform to our ideals of peace and threaten the security and stability of the country" as well as Asia and the rest of the world.

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