

Taiwan 'to bolster' military ties with US

President Tsai tells visiting US lawmakers

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan will boost military exchanges with the United States to curb "authoritarian expansionism", President Tsai Ing-wen said yesterday after meeting with visiting US lawmakers.

The five-day US congressional visit comes after a top US defence official reportedly made a rare stopover to the self-ruled island while Washington-Beijing tensions flared over alleged Chinese spy balloons.

"Taiwan and the United States continue to bolster military exchanges," Tsai said after convening with the US delegation at her office in Taipei.

"Going forward, Taiwan will cooperate even more actively with the United States and other democratic partners to confront such global challenges as authoritarian expansionism and climate change."

Tsai did not provide further details on what the future exchanges might entail.

Washington diplomatically recognises Beijing over Taipei, but is also the self-governing island's most important international benefactor and supports Taipei's right to decide its future.

Beijing, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to seize it one day, opposes any official exchanges with the democracy and has reacted with anger to a flurry of trips to the island by US politicians in recent years.



PHOTO: REUTERS

People help to clean up debris at a bus station damaged after a shelling, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Kherson, Ukraine yesterday.

Ball in Iran's court

Says Blinken over nuke programme

REUTERS, Athens

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday it was up to Iran to engage to resolve a deadlock over its nuclear programme, and accused it of enabling Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Blinken, who was visiting Athens, said the United States was committed, together with Israel, to ensuring that Tehran "never acquire a nuclear weapon".

"That's not exactly news. The president (Joe Biden) has been very clear on the table to do that," Blinken told a news conference alongside his Greek counterpart, Nikos Dendias.

A 2015 agreement limited Iran's uranium enrichment programme to make it harder for Tehran to develop nuclear arms, in return for international sanctions being lifted. Iran consistently denies harbouring any nuclear weapon ambitions.



Thai election to be held in May: PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand will hold a general election in May, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said yesterday, with unofficial campaigning already under way.

The embattled premier, who came to power as army chief in a 2014 coup before taking over as PM after a controversial 2019 election, told reporters he would dissolve parliament in March. Under Thai constitutional rules, this would mean an election some time in May, with May 7 seen by many observers as the most likely date.

"I will dissolve (parliament). I said March so it will be March, so this would fit with May," he told reporters after a regular cabinet meeting. With the economy struggling and the vital tourism sector hit hard by the pandemic, the 68-year-old's popularity has been in the doldrums, but last month he announced a re-election bid at a rally.

Prayut will run under the banner of the newly created Ruam Thai Sang Chart party, with current ruling party Palan Pracharath Party (PPRP) last month naming Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan as its candidate for PM in the next election. Campaign billboards are already popping up around the country and the main opposition party Pheu Thai has been campaigning in its traditional strongholds in the northeast.

Pheu Thai is polling well but the current Thai constitution, drafted under junta rule, gives army-linked parties a strong advantage.

We back Beijing against the West

Top Putin ally tells top China diplomat; Beijing warns against 'fuelling the fire' in Ukraine conflict

AGENCIES

The secretary of Russia's powerful Security Council told China's top diplomat Wang Yi yesterday that Beijing was a top priority for Russian foreign policy and that the two countries must stick together against the West, Russian state news agencies reported.

Nikolai Patrushev, a close ally of President Vladimir Putin, also told Wang that Moscow backed China's position over Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, according to a statement cited by the RIA Novosti news agency.

The two were meeting in Moscow as China appears to be ramping up its diplomatic efforts to push for a peace settlement in Ukraine, and just hours after Putin announced Russia was suspending its participation in a landmark nuclear arms treaty with the United States.

"In the context of a campaign that is being waged by the collective West to contain both Russia and China, further deepening of Russian-Chinese cooperation and interaction in the international area is of particular importance," RIA cited Patrushev as saying during the meeting on Tuesday evening.

"I want to confirm our continued support for Beijing over the issues of Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong," Patrushev added.

In his turn, Wang Yi said the relationship between the countries is "rock solid".

"Chinese-Russian relations are mature in character: they are rock solid and will withstand any test in a changing international situation," Wang told "Comrade" Patrushev through a Russian

interpreter in remarks aired on state television.

Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a "no limits" strategic partnership just days before Russia invaded Ukraine last February, and Moscow has talked up its close ties with Beijing, which it sees as a partner in a powerful anti-Western tandem.

But Putin was forced last year to publicly acknowledge Xi had concerns over Russia's actions in Ukraine. While Putin used a major speech on Tuesday to outline his commitment to securing a Russian victory in Ukraine, Xi is expected to make a "peace speech" in China on Friday to mark the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion.

Wang was also due to meet Russian FM Sergei Lavrov today as part of the visit to Moscow - the latest stop in a European tour - and the Kremlin has not ruled out a possible meeting with Putin.

Earlier yesterday China's foreign minister Qin Gang said his country is "deeply worried" that the Ukraine conflict could spiral out of control and called on certain countries to stop "fuelling the fire" in an apparent dig at the United States.

"China is deeply worried that the Ukraine conflict will continue to escalate

or even spiral out of control" Qin said in a speech at a forum held at the foreign ministry.

"We urge certain countries to immediately stop fuelling the fire," he said in comments that appeared to be directed at the United States, adding that they must "stop hyping up today Ukraine, tomorrow Taiwan".

Also yesterday, China released a paper on the Global Security Initiative (GSI), Xi's flagship security proposal which aims to uphold the principle of "indivisible security", a concept endorsed by Moscow. Russia has insisted that Western governments respect a 1999 agreement based on the principle of "indivisible security" that no country can strengthen its own security at the expense of others.

Beijing has refrained from condemning Moscow's operation against Ukraine or calling it an "invasion" in line with the Kremlin, which describes the war as a "special military operation" designed to protect Russia's own security.

The United States casts China and Russia as the two biggest nation-state threats to its security. Xi has stood by Russian President Vladimir Putin, resisting Western pressure to isolate Moscow.



Cops disrupt

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was murdered in this city and the trial for that murder remains stalled while the accused walk around in public.

"In the afternoon, a police team led by officer-in-charge Anisur Rahman Mollah of Sadar Model Police Station came and ordered us to remove the banner. The officer informed us that there was an objection from the 'higher level' about our slogan. We then held our event by covering it with a piece of black cloth. This is also a form of protest. Our protest against misrule is a black cloth."

Bhavani Shankar Roy, president of the Jote, said what police did was an interference in freedom of expression.

Rafiqur Rabbi, an adviser of the Jote, said, "I strongly condemn what police did."

Contacted last night, Sadar Model Police Station Officer-in-Charge Anisur Rahman Mollah said, "We asked them to remove the banner on information that it could deteriorate law and order."

Putin suspends last nuke treaty with US

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hide their purpose -- to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia. It means to be done with us once and for all," he said.

"But they also cannot fail to realise that it is impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield," a defiant Putin told his country's political and military elite.

Cautioning the United States that it was stoking the war into a global conflict, Putin said that Russia was suspending participation in the New START Treaty, the last major arms control treaty between Moscow and Washington.

Signed by then-US President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, in 2010, the treaty caps the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads that the United States and Russia can deploy. It was due to expire in 2026.

"I am forced to announce today that Russia is suspending its participation in the

Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty," said Putin.

The Russian leader said, without citing evidence, that some people in Washington were thinking about resuming nuclear testing. Russia's defence ministry and nuclear corporation should therefore be ready to test Russian nuclear weapons if necessary, he said.

"Of course, we will not do this first. But if the United States conducts tests, then we will. No one should have dangerous illusions that global strategic parity can be destroyed," Putin said.

"A week ago, I signed a decree on putting new ground-based strategic systems on combat duty. Are they going to stick their nose in there too, or what?"

Russia and the United States have vast arsenals of nuclear weapons left over from the Cold War and remain, by far, the biggest nuclear powers. Between them, they hold 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads.

The New START Treaty limited both sides to 1,500

warheads on deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine ballistic missiles and heavy bombers. Both sides met the central limits by 2018.

In Warsaw, Biden also responded to an anti-West speech made by Putin.

"The West is not plotting to attack Russia as Putin said today," Biden said. "Millions of Russian citizens who only want to live in peace with their neighbours are not the enemy."

Biden stressed the West's continued support for Ukraine.

Putin "thought autocrats like himself were tough and leaders of democracy were soft and then he met the iron will of America and nations everywhere that refused to accept a world governed by fear," he said.

"There should be no doubt: our support for Ukraine will not waver, NATO will not be divided and we will not tire."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Russia's decision was "deeply unfortunate and

irresponsible" but that Washington was still willing to talk about the issue.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the move meant that "the whole arms control architecture has been dismantled".

Biden is due to meet today with the leaders of nine eastern Nato members which have been staunch supporters of Ukraine and where there are fears of the conflict spilling over.

In his speech, Putin accused the US-led Nato alliance of fanning the flames of the conflict in the mistaken belief that it could defeat Moscow in a global confrontation.

"They intend to transform a local conflict into a phase of global confrontation. This is exactly how we understand it all and we will react accordingly, because in this case we are talking about the existence of our country," Putin said.

When the Kremlin launched the offensive in Ukraine, its so-called "special military

CLIMATE PROTECTION Children challenge Austria's law

AFP, Vienna

Twelve minors yesterday filed a legal challenge with Austria's top court accusing the government of failing to revise an "inadequate" climate protection law, saying it was not sufficiently protecting their constitutional rights. A growing number of organisations and individuals around the world have turned to the courts to challenge what they see as government inaction on preventing climate change. The Austrian lawsuit, the first of its kind in the nation, claims a law dating from 2011 is not ensuring that children are shielded from the consequences of global warming. The challenge is being supported by Fridays for Future, the youth activist movement inspired by Sweden's Greta Thunberg, a spokeswoman said.

Sri Lanka set to postpone local polls

AFP, Colombo

Bankrupt Sri Lanka is set to postpone local elections due next month, according to a top official, prompting opposition protests yesterday that forced parliament to be adjourned. The March 9 vote was meant to be a key test of support for President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took office in July after months of protests over a dire economic crisis. According to a court submission by the Election Commission, the treasury has refused to fund the printing of ballot papers, fuel or police protection for polling booths. "I had given an undertaking to the Supreme Court recently that the poll will be held on time," Election Commission chief Nimal PUNCHIHewa told AFP. "But, I am now informing court that we won't be able to do it because the government is not releasing the necessary funds." The president previously said elections were impossible as state revenue was insufficient to pay salaries, pensions and maintain essential services. Wickremesinghe has implemented swingeing tax hikes and price rises in an effort to secure a bailout from the International Monetary Fund. Parliament was adjourned yesterday after opposition MPs carried placards to protest against what they said was a government attempt to avoid voter scrutiny.

No dedicated body yet to enforce it

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M Abu Sadeque, also a former director of the Housing and Building Research Institute, said, "Complying to the building code will ensure a life-saving system with enough fire-safety measures and earthquake resilience in buildings."

If buildings are constructed in accordance with the BNBC, there will be fewer fire incidents and casualties, he added.

"Most of the fire incidents in our country are caused by electric short circuits that happen due to lack of proper electrical design," he said.

Contacted, Kazi Wasi Uddin, secretary of ministry of housing and public works, said the ministry is working to form the BBRA, but it will take time.

"Currently, we are working on forming the Building Construction Committees by this month," he said.

fully controlled.

China, whose top diplomat Wang Yi arrived in Moscow yesterday, has cautioned against any nuclear escalation to the Ukraine war.

Foreign Minister Qin Gang said Beijing would "urge the countries concerned to stop adding fuel to the fire as soon as possible".

China has sought to position itself as a neutral party, while maintaining close ties with its strategic ally Russia.

Stoltenberg yesterday echoed US concerns that China could supply Russia with weapons to help it pursue its campaign in Ukraine.

The Western allies worry they are falling behind in supplying enough shells for Kyiv's artillery to fend off a renewed Russian offensive.

But if the fears -- first raised by Washington -- that China is preparing to deliver weapons to Russia are realised, they could fall even further behind in what would be a growing arms supply race.