

# China assures Russia, India of deepening ‘co-operation’

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang assured his Russian and Indian counterparts of deepening bilateral ties, promising that “coordination and cooperation” will only grow stronger, in a show of solidarity with two of China’s biggest neighbours.

Qin met in India on Thursday with other foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a bloc of nations spanning most of Eurasia, with Beijing seeking to preserve stable relations with countries in the region as ties with the West, particularly Washington, remain tense.

During his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the sidelines of the SCO meeting, Qin said China is “willing to maintain communication and coordination with Russia to make tangible contributions to the political settlement of the crisis” in Ukraine.

The two sides also agreed to strengthen communication and coordination with other SCO member-states and maintain the bloc’s “unity”, according to a statement from the Chinese foreign ministry yesterday.

They additionally agreed to strengthen coordination in the Asia-Pacific, the ministry said, without giving details.

In a separate meeting with Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyan Jaishankar, Qin said China is willing to deepen “coordination and cooperation” on international and regional issues with India and bring ties back to a “healthy” track of development.

China’s ties with India have deteriorated since 2020, when their troops clashed on a disputed Himalayan border and 24 people were killed. Last month, Beijing published a map showing Arunachal Pradesh, claimed by India, as part of Tibet, angering New Delhi.

Qin told Jaishankar that the situation on the border is “generally stable”.

“We should draw experience and lessons from history, grasp bilateral relations from a strategic height and a long-term perspective, respect each other, learn from each other, and achieve mutual success,” Qin told Jaishankar.

Currently the SCO bloc includes Russia, India, China, Pakistan and four Central Asian countries. Iran and Belarus are expected to be inducted into the SCO at a summit in New Delhi in July.



Britain’s King Charles meets well-wishers during a walkabout on the Mall outside Buckingham Palace ahead of his and Camilla, Queen Consort’s coronation, in London, Britain yesterday. Charles, 74, and his wife Camilla will be crowned at London’s Westminster Abbey today in a glittering but solemn religious ceremony with traditions dating back some 1,000 years, followed by a procession, resplendent with pomp and pageantry.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# RUSSIAN MERCENARIES vow to quit Bakhmut

Blame lack of ammunition; Ukraine says they are piling in

REUTERS, Kyiv

Russia’s main mercenary group yesterday announced plans to pull out of the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, but Ukraine said the mercenaries were reinforcing their positions to try to seize it before Russia marks victory in World War Two next week.

Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin said his men had been starved of ammunition and would expect the army to take their place in Bakhmut next Wednesday, jeopardising what has long been Russia’s main target in its attempt to carve up its neighbour.

“My lads will not suffer useless and unjustified losses in Bakhmut without ammunition,” Prigozhin said in a video accompanying a written withdrawal announcement addressed to the head of general staff, the defence ministry, and President Vladimir Putin as supreme commander.

The announcement said “bureaucrats” had held back supplies despite knowing that Wagner’s target date to capture the city was May 9, when Moscow holds its World War Two Victory Day.



“If, because of your petty jealousy, you do not want to give the Russian people the victory of taking Bakhmut, that’s your problem,” Prigozhin added in the video.

Ukrainian troops have been pushed back in recent weeks but have clung on in the city to try to inflict as many losses as possible on their Russian opponents ahead of Kyiv’s planned big push against the invading forces along the 1,000 km (620 mile) front line.

It was not clear if Prigozhin, who often makes impulsive comments, would go ahead with the withdrawal if his men got extra ammunition or if the row might even be a smokescreen.

A senior Ukrainian official said Russia was bringing Wagner mercenary fighters from along the front line to Bakhmut so as to capture it by Victory Day.

“We are now seeing them pulling (fighters) from the entire offensive line where the Wagner fighters were, they are pulling (them) to the Bakhmut direction,” Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Maliar said on Ukrainian television.

The Kremlin declined to comment on Prigozhin’s statement.

But the threat and the video highlighted the pressure Russian forces are under as Ukraine makes the final preparations for a counter-offensive backed by thousands of Western-donated armoured vehicles and freshly trained troops.

Ukraine said two people had been killed in the eastern Donetsk region and nine wounded over the past 24 hours and electricity distribution networks had been damaged by shelling in Donetsk and the southern Kherson region.

Russia has been largely untouched by the conflict, but Russian news agencies reported a second drone attack in as many days on the Ilsky oil refinery in the south yesterday, causing a fire but no casualties.

ENDING J&K SPECIAL STATUS

# Pak-India talks hurt by Delhi’s decision: Pak FM

REUTERS, Goa



Pakistan’s foreign minister yesterday said India’s decision to end the special status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) territory in 2019 has undermined the environment for holding talks between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. The onus was on India to create a conducive environment for talks, Foreign Minister

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari told reporters on the sidelines of a meeting of regional bloc Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the Indian state of Goa. The visit by Bhutto-Zardari to India is the first by a Pakistani foreign minister to Delhi in over a decade and has garnered a lot of media attention in both countries. The two have fought three wars, share frosty relations and have downgraded their diplomatic ties. The Pakistani foreign minister said, however, that despite his rare visit to India, there was no change in the status of diplomatic relations. But he added that politics and foreign policy should not hold “hostage” sporting ties between the rivals. “I hope we’re in a position to not have sports suffer as a result of foreign policy,” Bhutto-Zardari said when asked if Pakistan would send its team to India for the event.

# SUNAK’S ELECTORAL TEST UK Tories suffer losses in local polls

AFP, London

Britain’s ruling Conservatives yesterday suffered high-profile losses as results poured from Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s first major electoral test since he took office last year. In the depths of the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades, the local council elections held Thursday across swathes of England illuminated the main parties’ standing ahead of a UK-wide general election expected next year. Sunak admitted it was not looking good for his Tories. “It’s always disappointing to lose hard-working Conservative councillors,” the prime minister told Sky News. But he vowed to press ahead with the “people’s priorities” – including halving double-digit inflation, restoring economic growth, and stopping boatloads of migrants crossing the Channel. The vote counting will only be complete later yesterday, just as Britain gears up for today’s coronation of King Charles III. But the main opposition Labour party crowed that the trend was already clear from the 230 English districts electing more than 8,000 council seats. “These results have been a disaster for Rishi Sunak as voters punish him for the Tories’ failure,” said Shabana Mahmood, Labour’s national campaign co-ordinator. “These results show that we are on course for a majority Labour government,” she added. By 9:20 am (0720 GMT), 62 councils had declared their results. Sunak’s Conservatives had lost 228 seats – one-third of the total they were defending so far.

## ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN TALKS

# Peace deal ‘within reach’: Blinken

AFP, Washington

A peace deal to end Armenia and Azerbaijan’s three-decade-old dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave is “within reach” after four days of talks in Washington, US top diplomat Antony Blinken said Thursday.

The discussions between Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov did not result in a deal to end the territorial conflict between the two ex-Soviet republics, but Blinken said progress had been made.

“The two sides have discussed some very tough issues over the last few days, and they’ve made tangible progress on a durable peace agreement,” the secretary of state said.

“I hope that they see and I believe that they do, as I do, that there is an agreement within sight, within reach,” he said.

Blinken added later that the

two sides “demonstrated a sincere commitment” to normalizing relations and ending their longstanding conflict.

“Both Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed in principle to certain terms and have a better understanding of one another’s positions on outstanding issues,” he said.

The two countries put out identical statements following the talks, saying they had laid out their positions on normalization.

“The Ministers and their teams advanced mutual understanding on some articles of the draft bilateral Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations,” the statements said.

Both sides acknowledged, however, “that the positions on some key issues remain divergent.”

Armenia and Azerbaijan were both republics of the Soviet Union and gained their independence when it broke up in 1991.

The two sides have gone to war

twice over disputed territories, mainly Nagorno-Karabakh, a majority-Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan.

Tens of thousands were killed in the wars, one lasting six years and ending in 1994, and the second in 2020, which ended in a Russia-negotiated peace deal.

But clashes have broken out regularly since then.

Azerbaijan injected new tensions last week when it placed a checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor, the only land link between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia views the move as a violation of a ceasefire negotiated between the two sides.

The four days of talks between Mirzoyan and Bayramov took place out of the view of media in a secure State Department facility in Arlington, a suburb of the US capital.

Ahead of the talks, a US official said they wanted the sides to sit down together and the primary aim was to move toward normalizing relations.

# One dead, 4 hurt in Nepal helicopter crash

AFP, Kathmandu

One person was killed and four were injured when a helicopter crashed in eastern Nepal yesterday, officials said, the latest in a string of aviation accidents in the country.

The chopper had dropped off goods for a hydroelectricity project in Sankhuwasabha and was heading to another destination in the same district.

“Two helicopters were deployed to rescue five people injured soon after the crash, including the pilot. We have (to) report that one person has died,” said Jagannath Niroula, a spokesman for Nepal’s civil aviation authority.

Three people were being airlifted to Kathmandu for treatment, Niroula said. The fourth person was also being brought to the capital.

The spokesman said he had not received details on the cause of the crash.

# ANTI-TERROR OP 5 Indian soldiers killed in Kashmir blast

REUTERS, New Delhi

Five Indian Army soldiers were killed and one wounded during an operation against militants in Kashmir yesterday, the army said.

Indian defence forces have launched several operations in the Rajouri sector of the Himalayan region since unidentified attackers opened fire on an Indian Army vehicle last month.

A military search team came across a group of militants in an area which is “thickly vegetated with rocky and steep cliffs” yesterday morning, the army said in a statement.

“The terrorists triggered an explosive device in retaliation,” the army said.

Two soldiers died in the attack and another three succumbed to their injuries later in the day, it added.

“Indian Army columns have been conducting relentless intelligence-based operations to flush out a group

of terrorists involved in an ambush on an army truck in the Tota Gali area of Bhata Dhurian in the Jammu region,” said an army spokesperson.

He said that additional troops from the vicinity have been directed to the site of the encounter.

According to the army, initial reports suggest a group of terrorists is trapped in the area and there is a “likelihood of casualties in the terrorist group”.

The incident appeared to be a repeat of an October 2021 operation in the Rajouri-Poonch region, when five soldiers were killed in an encounter with terrorists.

During the operation that followed, four more army soldiers were killed in an ambush by terrorists. After a month-long operation, no terrorist could be tracked down, reports NDTV.

Kashmir is claimed in full but ruled in part by nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan.

# Dhaka, Moscow sign nuclear fuel deal

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supplying the Russian arms industry with components, technology and raw materials for missile fuel, aiding Moscow’s continuing onslaught on Ukraine, reported The Washington Post in January.

TVEL and its parent company Atomenergoprom are not in the sanction list, in what can be viewed as a relief for Bangladesh which has little choice to power the Russian-made reactors of the \$12.65 billion nuclear power plant in Ishwardi, Pabna.

As per the agreement, Russia will not charge Bangladesh for nuclear fuel for the three years of the plant’s commissioning.

The agreement was signed by Md Shaikat Akbar, project director of Rooppur nuclear power plant,

and AV Diary, vice-president of Atomstroy Export, in the Russian city of Novosibirsk. Kamrul Ahsan, Bangladesh’s ambassador to Russia, and Jahedul Hasan, deputy director of Rooppur nuclear power plant, was present among others.

Originally, the first unit of the 2,400MW Rooppur nuclear power plant was supposed to start commercial operation in December 2023, but it is now gunning for an early 2025 start date for commissioning.

The ambitious project has run into a snag after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent Western sanctions on the Soviet nation’s apparatus.

Already, Bangladesh has run into difficulty servicing a \$500 million loan taken in 2013 from Russia for

the Rooppur project’s primary work following Western sanctions on Russian banks.

While a preliminary agreement was struck to service the stalled payments in Chinese currency, that modality is unlikely to progress after the latest round of US sanctions.

But the stuck payments pose another problem for Bangladesh: risks of being classed as a defaulter of foreign loan.

Subsequently, the Economic Relations Division, the government wing responsible for handling foreign loans, has decided to open an escrow account with the Bangladesh Bank.

Payments for Rooppur would be deposited in the escrow account, which is an account where funds are held in trust while two or more parties complete a transaction.

# HK police seize dismantled Tiananmen protest statue

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong national security police yesterday seized an “exhibit” that has been identified by local media as a dismantled statue commemorating the deadly Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989.

The eight-metre-high (26-feet) “Pillar of Shame” by Danish artist Jens Galschiot – featuring anguished faces in a twisted tower – sat on the University of Hong Kong’s (HKU) campus for more than two decades.

# Two tremors near Dhaka

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foreshocks occur. We are experiencing foreshocks on a regular basis. These are possible indications of a major earthquake,” he added.

As unplanned urbanisation takes place in Dhaka city and many buildings have been constructed here without following the national building code, the entire city is at risk of turning into rubble if a major earthquake hits, warn experts.

According to a survey conducted by Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), some 865,000 buildings may collapse in the capital if an earthquake of 6.9 magnitude originates at the Madhupur Fault in Tangail.

Some 210,000 people would die and another 229,000 would sustain injuries if the quake happens in

daytime.

The survey was conducted on a 1,528 sq km area of Dhaka city from 2018 to 2022 as part of the Urban Resilience Project.

Prof Humayun said the number of earthquakes happening around Dhaka has been on the rise over the last decade. Six quakes took place in Cumilla and Chandpur between 2008 and 2012, he added.

There is no alternative to creating awareness about earthquake preparedness, he observed.

He stressed the need for holding regular earthquake drills and developing mobile apps to make people aware.

Mehedi Ahmed said Dhaka’s buildings should be assessed by a “third party” to find out whether those are in good condition.