



This handout photograph obtained March 5, 2018 courtesy of Paul G. Allen shows wreckage from the USS Lexington, a US aircraft carrier which sank during World War II, that has been found in the Coral Sea, a search team led by Microsoft co-founder Paul G. Allen announced Monday. (AFP)

Diplomacy

US influence wanes

Russia embraces 'ex-foe' Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, March 6, (RTS): As US influence in Islamabad wanes, Pakistan's former adversary Russia is building military, diplomatic and economic ties that could upend historic alliances in the region and open up a fast-growing gas market for Moscow's energy companies.

Russia's embrace of Pakistan comes at a time when relations between the United States and its historical ally are unravelling over the war in Afghanistan, a remarkable turnaround from the 1980s, when Pakistan helped funnel weapons and US spies across the border to aid Afghan fighters battling Soviet troops.



Khan

Though the Moscow-Islamabad rapprochement is in its infancy, and it is neighbour China that is filling the growing void left by the United States in Pakistan, a slew of energy deals and growing military cooperation promise to spark life into the Russia-Pakistan relationship that was dead for many decades.

"It is an opening," Khuram Dastgir Khan, Pakistan's defence minister, told Reuters. "Both countries have to work through the past to open the door to the future." The cosier diplomatic ties have so far focused on Afghanistan, where Russia has cultivated ties to the Afghan Taliban militants who are fighting US troops and have historic links to Islamabad. Moscow says it is encouraging peace negotiations.

Presence

Both Russia and Pakistan are also alarmed by the presence of Islamic State (IS) inside Afghanistan, with Moscow concerned the group's fighters could spread towards central Asia and closer to home. In Pakistan, IS has already carried out major attacks.

"We have common ground on most issues at diplomatic levels," Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi told Reuters. "It's a relationship that will grow substantially in the future."

During a trip to Moscow last month by Pakistan's foreign minister, Khawaja Asif, the two countries announced plans to establish a commission on military cooperation to combat the threat of IS in the region.

They also agreed to continue annual military training exercises that began in 2016 and followed the sale of four Russian attack helicopters to Pakistan, as well as the purchase of Russian engines for the Pakistan Air Force's JF-17 fighter jets that Pakistan's military assembles on its own soil.

The detente has been watched with suspicion by Pakistan's neighbour and arch-foe India, which broadly stood in the Soviet camp during the Cold War era. In the last two decades, the close Russia-India relationship has been underpinned by huge arms sales by Moscow to a country it calls a "strategic partner".

Expert

"If the Russians start backing the Pakistanis in a big way at the political level, then it creates a problem for us," said Sushant Sareen, a leading expert on India's relations to Pakistan and Afghanistan with New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation.

India's foreign ministry did not respond to a request for comment on Russia's ties with Pakistan, but has previously said that its own relations with Moscow have stood the test of time, and that the two nations are building up defence and energy relations, including collaboration on nuclear reactors in India.

Russian overtures to Pakistan offer a badly needed diplomatic lifeline for the South Asian nation as it faces growing friction with Western powers over its alleged links to militants.

At US urging, and with backing from Britain, France and Germany, a global financial watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), last month decided to place Pakistan back on its watchlist of countries with inadequate terrorist-financing controls, potentially hurting Pakistan's fragile economy.

The US move, which Islamabad angrily dismissed as an effort to "embarrass" Pakistan, followed Washington's announcement in January to suspend \$2 billion in military assistance.

Asif, Pakistan's foreign minister, said his nation made a historical error by "tilting 100 percent" to the West and was now eager to build alliances closer to home with the likes of China, Russia and Turkey.

Wreckage found of WWII aircraft carrier USS Lexington

Wreckage from the USS Lexington, a US aircraft carrier which sank during World War II, has been discovered in the Coral Sea, a search team led by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen announced Monday.

The wreckage was found Sunday by the team's research vessel, the R/V Petrel, some 3,000 meters (two miles) below the surface more than 500 miles (800 kms) off the eastern coast of Australia.

The search team released pictures and video of the Lexington, one of the first ever US aircraft carriers, and some of the planes which went down with the ship.

Remarkably preserved aircraft could be seen on the seabed bearing the five-pointed star insignia of the US Army Air Forces on their wings and fuselage.

On one aircraft, an emblem of the cartoon character Felix the Cat can be seen

along with four miniature Japanese flags presumably depicting "kills."

The search team also released pictures and video of parts of the ship, including a name-plate, and anti-aircraft guns covered in decades of slime.

The USS Lexington and another US aircraft carrier, the USS Yorktown, fought against three Japanese aircraft carriers from May 4-8, 1942 in the Battle of the

Coral Sea, the first ever between carriers.

The badly damaged Lexington, nicknamed "Lady Lex," was deliberately sunk by another US warship at the conclusion of the battle.

More than 200 members of the crew died in the battle but most were rescued by other US vessels before the Lexington sank. (AFP)

China

'Budget lacks transparency'

Beijing to 'harden' HK, Taiwan stance

BEIJING, March 6, (Agencies): China signalled Monday it was hardening its stance on dissent in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where it faces growing frustration with the increasingly authoritarian government of President Xi Jinping.

In a report to the opening session of the annual National People's Congress in Beijing, Premier Li Keqiang warned China "will never tolerate any separatist schemes" in Taiwan, amid increasing tensions between the mainland and the self-ruled island.

The warning to the almost 3,000 members of the mostly ceremonial legislature followed the omission of language supporting the political autonomy of Hong Kong and Macau that had featured prominently in previous years.

The report said Beijing would continue to uphold its "one China" principle and promote "peaceful growth" relations with Taiwan under the 1992 consensus, which agrees that there is only one China without specifying whether Beijing or Taipei is its rightful representative.

Beijing will also "advance China's peaceful reunification", Li said.

But, he added, it "will never tolerate any separatist schemes or activities for 'Taiwan independence'."

China still sees Taiwan as part of its territory awaiting reunification. It has cut off official communications with Taipei because President Tsai Ing-wen refuses to acknowledge the democratic island as part of "one China".

Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, which handles relations with China, said in response the island wants to "maintain the peaceful and stable status quo in the Taiwan Strait".

"We urge China to adopt forward-looking and innovative positive thinking regarding the development of cross-strait relations," it said in a statement.

China voiced anger last week after the US Senate passed a bill to encourage visits between Washington and Taipei "at all levels".

Washington cut formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1979 in favour of Beijing. But it maintains trade relations with the island and sells it weapons, angering China.

The report also hinted at a hardening stance towards dissent in the semi-autonomous cities of Hong Kong and Macau, which Beijing rules under the principle of "One country, two systems".

Meanwhile, the commander of the US Navy's Pacific Fleet said on Tuesday that China's military budget had a troubling lack of transparency, a day after Beijing announced the biggest hike in military spending in three years.

China on Monday unveiled an 8.1 percent rise in defence spending for 2018, fuelling an ambitious military modernisation programme and making its neighbours, particularly Japan and self-ruled Taiwan, nervous.

"These investments and commitment need to be taken with full transparency," Admiral Scott Swift said during a press roundtable in Tokyo.

China's "intent is not clearly understood", he said. China insists its military spending is transparent and that it does not pose a threat, but is needed to update old equipment and defend its legitimate interests.

China's state media on Monday said the 2018 defence budget was proportionate and low. Chinese defence spending is only officially about one-quarter of the military spending of the United States.

But many foreign analysts and diplomats say China under-reports the figure.



South Korean National Security Director Chung Eui-yong (right), and National Intelligence Service Chief Suh Hoon (left), with other delegates arrive at a military airport in Seongnam, south of Seoul, South Korea, on March 6. (AP)



Lee



Azuma

Asia

Japan appoints female commander:

Japan's navy on Tuesday appointed the first woman to command a warship squadron, including the flagship Izumo helicopter carrier, as it tries to lure more females to make up for a dearth of male recruits in graying Japan.

Ryoko Azuma, will command four ships with a combined crew of 1,000, of which only 30 are women, that make up the Maritime Self Defense Force's (MSDF) First Escort Division.

"I don't think about being a woman. I will concentrate my energy on fulfilling my duties as commander," Azuma, 44, said at a change of command ceremony attended by 400 sailors aboard the Izumo, which was docked at a shipyard in Yokohama near Tokyo for repairs.

When she joined the MSDF in 1996 women were barred from serving on warships, a rule that the navy abolished ten years ago. Submarines, however, are still crewed only by men. (RTS)

Japan nulls compensation: Japanese lawmakers pledged Tuesday to study compensation measures for thousands of people, some as young as nine, who were forcibly sterilised under a new-defunct eugenics law.

Some 16,500 people were sterilised under the notorious law that remained in force until 1996, according to health ministry data. The forced sterilisation "may have been accepted in the context of the days right after the war" but is clearly not permissible today, said Takeo Kawamura from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Kawamura vowed to carry out "thorough investigations into the issue" as part of a cross-party parliamentary investigation. (AFP)

Lee faces questioning: South Korean prosecutors on Tuesday summoned conservative former president Lee Myung-bak for questioning as a criminal suspect in a bribery scandal, the country's latest former head of state to be investigated.

The move means that all living former South Korean presidents have now either been convicted, charged or embroiled in criminal inquiries.

"We need to investigate former president Lee to find the truth (in the scandal) in a transparent and effective manner," Yonhap news agency quoted an unidenti-

Koreas

2 Koreas to hold April summit

NKorea open for US talks

SEOUL, March 6, (AFP): The leaders of North and South Korea will hold a historic summit in the Demilitarized Zone next month after Pyongyang expressed willingness to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees, Seoul said Tuesday.

The North is open to "frank" talks with the United States on denuclearisation and would suspend missile and nuclear tests while dialogue was under way, the South's national security adviser Chung Eui-yong said after returning from a meeting in Pyongyang with leader Kim Jong Un.

North Korea is subject to multiple rounds of UN Security Council sanctions over its atomic and ballistic missile programmes, and has long insisted that its "treasured sword" is not up for negotiation.

But it is willing to abandon the programmes if its national security — and that of its leadership — is guaranteed, Chung said.

That remains a high threshold — Pyongyang has considered itself at risk of invasion by the United States since the Korean War ended in a ceasefire in 1953, leaving the two sides technically still at war.

But, Chung said, Kim is willing to discuss denuclearisation in talks with Washington — which could be the crucial concession needed to enable a dialogue to happen.

The US has long insisted that Pyongyang take concrete steps towards denuclearisation as a precondition.

Tuesday's developments are the latest steps in a rapid Olympics-driv-

en rapprochement on the peninsula. They follow a year of high tensions during which Pyongyang carried out its most powerful nuclear test to date, along with multiple missile launches, including rockets capable of reaching the US mainland.

Kim and US President Donald Trump traded personal insults and threats of war, sending fears of conflict spiralling.

But the Pyeongyang Winter Olympics in the South triggered an apparent transformation, with Kim sending his sister to the opening ceremony and sparking a flurry of cross-border trips as South Korean President Moon Jae-in tries to broker talks between Pyongyang and Washington. North and South agreed to hold a summit in late April in Panmunjom, the truce village in the DMZ, Chung said after leading the most senior delegation to travel North for more than a decade.

It will be the third meeting between the leaders of North and South, but the first to take place in the DMZ after summits in Pyongyang in 2000 and 2007.

The North "made clear that there is no reason to own nuclear (weapons) if military threats towards the North are cleared and the safety of its regime is guaranteed", Chung said.

Pyongyang "expressed willingness to have frank dialogue with the US to discuss the denuclearisation issue and to normalise North-US relations," he added, and said there would be no provocations such as nuclear or ballistic missile tests while dialogue was under way.

fied Seoul prosecutor as saying.

An official confirmed the move to AFP.

Allegations of corruption involving the 76-year-old's relatives and aides during his 2008-2013 presidential term have mounted in recent weeks as prosecutors investigate multiple cases of bribery amounting to



Supporter of Philippine Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno uses a mock hammer on a giant snake during a rally outside the House of Representatives in metropolitan Manila, Philippines, on March 6. A spokesman for the chief justice of the Philippine Supreme Court recently said she expects to be impeached by the House of Representatives in March, 2018 and will go on indefinite leave to prepare for the trial. Sereno is confident of being cleared of any wrongdoing during the impeachment trial. (AP)

millions of dollars. (AFP)

S. Korean Ahn quits:

A former South Korean presidential contender stepped down as a provincial governor and announced his retirement from politics Tuesday in a stunning political fall after a female aide accused him of multiple rapes.

Ahn Hee-jung — who came second to current President Moon Jae-in in the contest for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination last year — is the most prominent figure to face abuse allegations during a swirling #MeToo movement in what is still a male-dominated society.

Kim Ji-eun, who was Ahn's personal assistant before becoming an aide in civil affairs, told a television interviewer on Monday that Ahn had raped her four times since she was hired in June.

One of the violations took place in Geneva, Kim told JTBC, where Ahn was attending a UN Human Rights Council panel discussion in September. (AFP)

Australia, E. Timor to ink treaty:

Australia and East Timor will on Tuesday sign a treaty at the United Nations to end a dispute over their maritime border and potentially unlock billions of dollars in revenue from offshore oil and gas.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will preside over the signing ceremony to be attended by Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Deputy Prime Minister Agio Pereira of East Timor, Asia's youngest nation which joined the United Nations in 2002. The treaty could provide a major boost to East Timor's struggling economy with an agreement on sharing revenue from the Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields, worth between \$40 and \$50 billion. (AFP)