

Asia

Drills near Taiwan

China cautions Japan against US 'team up'

BEIJING, April 6, (AP): China's foreign minister cautioned Japan against teaming up with the US to counter Beijing, as Japan speaks up more on human rights in China's Xinjiang region ahead of a US-Japan summit next week.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Japanese counterpart in a phone call Monday evening that their two countries should ensure that their relations "do not get involved in the so-called confrontation between major countries," a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement said.

It quoted Wang as saying that "China hopes that Japan, as an independent country, will look at China's development in an objective and rational way, instead of being misled by some countries holding biased view against China."

Japan, a close US ally that hosts major American naval and air force bases, shares US concerns about China's military buildup and claims to territory in the South and East China Seas. However, its major trade and investment interests in China have at times reined in its criticism of its larger neighbor.

Japanese Prime Minister **Yoshihide Suga** is to travel to Washington to meet President Joe Biden on April 16 in what will be the US leader's first in-person summit since taking office in January.

Biden, in contrast to his predecessor Donald Trump, has stressed rebuilding ties with European and Asian allies as the US prepares for competition with a rising China.

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi raised human rights in China's Xinjiang region and Hong Kong, both important issues for Biden. He also reiterated Japan's protest against China's presence in waters around a group of uninhabited, Japan-controlled islands that China claims in the East China Sea.

Motegi told reporters Tuesday that he expressed "grave concern and strongly requested China to take concrete actions" for improvement on those issues, including the human rights situation in the Xinjiang region.

Some members of a foreign policy team within Suga's conservative ruling party have called for his government to take a tougher stance against China over the Xinjiang situation. They say Japan should adopt a law to impose sanctions against a foreign country over human rights violations.

The United States, Canada, Britain and the European Union have adopted such a law, and they say Japan is the only Group of Seven country without it.

Japan has taken a softer approach by maintaining dialogue rather than imposing unilateral sanctions. But Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato on Tuesday said Japan is open to the possibility of having such a law.

"It is necessary to analyze and consider whether Japan should adopt a system that would unilaterally determine human rights violations and impose sanctions, taking into consideration various views including our ongoing human rights and foreign policies and trends in the international community," he said.

Kato said it is important for each country to do what it can to improve human rights conditions. "Japan will continue to cooperate with the United States and other related countries," he said.

Wang opposed Japanese interference in China's internal affairs in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, the Chinese statement said.

Taiwan is another potential flashpoint, with Suga saying earlier this week that Japan would cooperate with the US on the issue. China regards the self-governing island as a renegade province that should be under Chinese rule.

China, in a signal to the US and its allies, recently sent an aircraft carrier group to waters near Taiwan for training exercises.

Also:

BEIJING: China is holding naval drills involving an aircraft carrier battlegroup near Taiwan it says are aimed at safeguarding Chinese sovereignty, an apparent reference to Beijing's claim to the self-governed island.

The navy said the exercises involving the Liaoning, one of its two aircraft carriers, are routine and assigned under an annual schedule. China has been steadily increasing its threat to take control of the island militarily with exercises and incursions into the island's air defense identification zone by Chinese warplanes.

In a statement late Monday, the navy did not say when the exercises began or how long they would last, but said more such drills will be held in the future.

It said the exercises aim to "assist in improving the ability to safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests," terms often interpreted as being directed at Taiwan's democratically elected government, which has refused to give in to Beijing's demands that it recognize the island as part of Chinese territory.

China operates two aircraft carriers, of which the Liaoning, originally purchased as a hulk from Ukraine, is the first, having been operating in a combat role since at least 2019.

US military officials and observers have recently warned of increased Chinese threats toward Taiwan, which split from the mainland during a civil war in 1949. The US has recently agreed to sell upgraded warplanes, missiles and other defensive hardware to Taiwan and the island is also revitalizing its own defense industries, particularly by starting a submarine development program.

In a move certain to anger Beijing, the US Navy said the carrier Theodore Roosevelt and its strike group had re-entered the South China Sea on Saturday to "conduct routine operations." It is the second time the strike group has entered the waterway this year as part of its 2021 deployment to the US 7th Fleet area of operations.

While in the area, the strike group will "conduct fixed and rotary-wing flight operations, maritime strike exercises, anti-submarine operations, coordinated tactical training, and more," the 7th Fleet said in a statement.

China claims virtually all of the South China Sea and routinely objects to the presence of foreign militaries in the area, especially the US Navy. The US Navy says it has a right to operate in international waters, emphasizing the point by sending destroyers to sail close by Chinese-held features in the area in what it calls freedom of navigation operations. Beijing considers them highly provocative.

The US presence in the area also underscores its strong alliances and other partnerships with countries from Japan to Australia.

Japanese Prime Minister **Yoshihide Suga** on Sunday said Japan will cooperate with the **United States** to calm rising tensions between China and Taiwan, saying Taiwan's peace and stability are key to the region.

Suga is to meet with President **Joe Biden** in Washington in coming days in the US leader's first in-person summit since taking office in January.



Indonesian women walk past a house damaged by flood in Waiwerang, on Adonara Island, East Nusa Tenggara province, Indonesia on April 6. (AP)

Indonesian rescuers dig for people buried in landslides

Rescuers in remote eastern Indonesia were digging through the debris of a landslide Tuesday in search of as many as 21 people believed to be buried in one of several disasters brought on by severe weather in the Southeast Asian nation and neighboring East Timor.

More than a dozen villages were affected by Sunday's landslide on Lembata island, which was triggered when torrential rains caused solidified lava from an eruption in November to tumble down the slopes of Ili Lewotokolo volcano. At least 67 people have been confirmed dead, according to Indonesia's National Disaster Mitigation Agency.

Hundreds of police, soldiers and residents dug through the debris with their bare hands, shovels and hoes searching for those buried, efforts that were hindered by heavy rain. Relatives wailed as they watched rescuers pull out one mud-caked body, place it on a bamboo stretcher and take it away for burial.

Landslides and flooding from heavy rains from a tropical cyclone have killed at least 128 people across several islands in Indonesia and 27 people in East Timor. Thousands of homes have been damaged and thousands of people displaced in the disasters, which could continue to worsen as the storm is expected to continue affecting the region for several days as it moves south toward Australia.

In addition to the dead, Indonesian disaster officials said at least 72 people were missing.

Rescue efforts were being hampered by the weather and the remoteness of the areas affected. Roads and bridges were damaged in many areas.

Rescue personnel with eight excavators and tons of food and medicine were planned to be deployed from Makassar city on Sulawesi island, but were being hindered by a lack of sea transportation to the remote islands, said the National Disaster Mitigation Agency chief Doni Monardo. He called on the private sector to support relief efforts in these remote areas. (AP)

America

Fresh new path around GOP blockade

Biden boosted by Senate rules

WASHINGTON, April 6, (AP): With an appeal to think big, President Joe Biden is promoting his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan directly to Americans, summoning public support to push past the Republicans lining up against the massive effort they sum up as big taxes, big spending and big government.

Republicans in Congress are making the politically brazen bet that it's more advantageous to oppose the costly American Jobs Plan, saddling the Democrats with ownership of the sweeping proposal and the corporate tax hike Biden says is needed to pay for it. He wants the investments in roads, schools, broadband and clean energy approved by summer.

On Monday, Biden received a boost from an unexpected source. The Senate parliamentarian greenlighted a strategy that would allow Democrats in the evenly split 50-50 chamber to rely on a 51-vote threshold to advance some bills, rather than the typical 60 votes typically needed. The so-called budget reconciliation rules can now be used more often than expected — giving Democrats a fresh new path around the GOP blockade.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's spokesman welcomed the parliamentarian's opinion as "an important step forward." Spokesman Justin Goodman said no decisions have been made on the process ahead, but "this key pathway is available to Democrats if needed."

The prospects for a massive infrastructure investment, once a bipartisan source of unity on Capitol Hill, have cracked and groaned under the weight of political polarization. Where Biden sees an urgency in going big, Republicans want a narrow plan that focuses on roads and bridges, and warn that

any corporate tax increase would crush economic growth.

"They know we need it," Biden said of the Republicans as he returned to Washington on Monday. "Everybody around the world is investing billions and billions of dollars in infrastructure, and we're going to do it here."

The standoff almost ensures a months-long slog as Congress hunkers down to begin drafting legislation and the White House keeps the door open to working across the aisle with Republicans, hoping that continued public attention will drum up support.

Modest

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell declared plainly on Monday that Biden's plan is "something we're not going to do."

Speaking to reporters in Kentucky, McConnell said Republicans could support a "much more modest" approach, and one that doesn't rely on corporate tax hikes to pay for it.

A core dividing line is Biden's effort to pay for infrastructure by undoing Donald Trump's tax break for corporations, a signature achievement of the Trump White House and its partners in Congress.

The 2017 GOP tax bill, which all the Republicans voted for, slashed the corporate rate from 35% to 21%. It was supposed to usher in a new era of American investment and job creation, yet growth never came close to the promised levels and the economy fell into a recession because of the pandemic.

Biden proposes raising the rate to 28% and instituting a global minimum rate to dissuade companies from relocating in lower-tax havens. Democratic senators led by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., the chairman of the Senate Fi-

nance Committee, unveiled their own framework for an international taxation overhaul Monday that could provide an opening to Biden's approach.

"We desperately need reform," said Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., one of those involved in the effort.

Shepherding Biden's proposal through Congress remains a work in progress, particularly in the evenly-divided 50-50 Senate, where Democrats have the majority because the vice president from their party, Kamala Harris, can cast a tie-breaking vote.

But a single senator can break ranks to influence the size and shape of the package. On Monday, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., indicated he would prefer a corporate tax rate at 25%, lower than what Biden is proposing.

Seizing on Democratic divisions, Republicans have signaled zero interest in undoing the tax cuts they approved with Trump, and instead prefer a smaller infrastructure package paid for by user fees on drivers or other public-private partnerships that share the costs.

Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., a member of Senate GOP leadership, said Sunday a smaller infrastructure package of about \$615 billion, or 30% of what Biden is proposing, could draw bipartisan support.

Administration officials have encouraged Republicans to talk more fully about what they dislike and would do instead, under the opinion that a battle of ideas will only help Biden gain support with voters.

The president has already met twice with bipartisan groups of lawmakers in the Oval Office, and members of Biden's Cabinet leading the charge on infrastructure have also placed dozens of calls to lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.



In this photo released by the Taiwan Presidential Office, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen visits those injured in Friday's train derailment at a nearby hospital in Hualien, eastern Taiwan, on April 3. Prosecutors in Taiwan on Saturday sought an arrest warrant for the owner of an unmanned truck that rolled onto a train track and caused the country's worst rail disaster in decades, killing dozens and injuring more. (AP)



Macron



Kielsen

Europe

'Secret restaurants' probed: Champagne, lobster and no masks: That's what a French TV documentary says is on the menu at one of multiple high-end "clandestine restaurants" catering to the Paris elite, in violation of nationwide pandemic restrictions.

What's even more shocking to the newly confined French public — and exhausted medical staff — is that one organizer claimed government ministers are among those who attend.

French authorities are investigating the accusations, and government members scrambled to insist they're behaving properly.

Anti-capitalist activists and critics of President **Emmanuel Macron** aren't convinced, and plan a protest Tuesday — advertised on social networks under the banner "Let's Eat the Rich" — at one of the alleged secret venues.

The Paris prosecutor's office said Monday that an investigation was opened Sunday into possible charges of endangerment and undeclared labor, and to identify the organizers and participants of the alleged gatherings.

A documentary that aired on French network M6 over the weekend included a man saying that he had eaten in two or three clandestine restaurants "with a certain number of ministers."

The prosecutor's office said Monday that the investigation is continuing despite reports that the man featured in the documentary had retracted his claim.

Government members denied knowledge of any wrongdoing by their colleagues. Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin asked police to look into the claims.

M6 aired hidden camera footage that it said came from two different private venues in recent weeks, as a new virus surge swept over France and restrictions tightened.

At one venue, white-gloved waiters presented fixed-price menus running from 160 to 490 euros (around \$190 to \$575) per person whose offerings included Champagne, truffles with foie gras, and lobster in ginger sauce. One host said guests don't wear masks, despite France's indoor mask requirements, because "it's a private club. We want people to feel at home."

At another venue, reportedly offering a

220-euro (\$260) meal, visitors in elegant attire shared cheek kisses and strolled a red carpet. (AP)

Greenland election shows split: Greenland is holding an early parliamentary election Tuesday focused in part on whether the semi-autonomous Danish territory



Kosovo's newly-elected President Vjosa Osmani Sadriu, with her husband Prindon Sadriu and their twin daughters Dua and Anda (left-right, unknown), attend the presidential hand over ceremony in Pristina, Kosovo, on April 6. Osmani took over the presidency after being elected to the post during a two-day extraordinary session of parliament. (AP)

should allow international companies to mine the sparsely populated Arctic island's substantial deposits of rare-earth metals.

Lawmakers agreed on a snap election after the center-right Democrats pulled out of Greenland's three-party governing coalition in February, leaving the government led by the center-left Forward party with a minority in the national assembly, the 31-seat Inatsisartut.

One of the main reasons the Democrats withdrew was a deep political divide over a proposed mining project involving uranium and rare-earth metals in southern Greenland. Supporters see the in the Kvanefjeld mine project as a potential source of jobs and economic prosperity.

Former prime minister **Kim Kielsen** pushed to give the green light to mine owner Greenland Minerals, an Australia-based company with Chinese ownership, to start operation. Erik Jensen — Kielsen's recent successor as Forward party leader — is opposed to granting the company a mining license.

Recent election polls showed the left-leaning Community of the People party (Inuit Ataqatigiit), a staunch opponent of the mine project, in position to become the largest party in the Greenlandic Parliament.

The opposition party has stated that a majority of Greenland's 56,000 inhabitants, most of them indigenous Inuit people, are against the project, largely for environmental reasons.

The mining proposal is relevant beyond Greenland. The largely ice-covered island has the world's largest undeveloped deposits of rare-earth metals, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. (AP)