

# Race for 'hypersonic' weapons heats up as France joins fray

PARIS: World powers are vying to develop so-called "hypersonic" weapons that travel several times the speed of sound, with France the latest to join a field led so far by Russia and China. Hypersonics are like missiles that travel at over five times the speed of sound (Mach 5) but are able to maneuver in mid-flight, making them much harder to track and intercept than traditional projectiles. France is the fourth of the five permanent UN Security Council members to join the so-called "stealth by speed" contest, after China, Russia and the United States.

"We have decided to issue a contract for a hypersonic glider" that can travel at over 6,000 km/hour, Defence Minister Florence Parly said last week, promising a test flight by the end of 2021. "Many countries are acquiring them (hypersonic weapons) and we have the know-how to develop them. We could no longer afford to wait," Parly said, unveiling project V-MaX (Experimental Manoeuvring Vehicle).

In March last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin stunned Western military analysts - and many in Russia - by unveiling plans for a new arsenal of

hypersonic weapons which he said would render missile defense systems obsolete. Putin insisted the weapons would only ever be used in self-defense, but his presentation featured video montages of missiles crossing the Atlantic, sparking jitters among NATO members. A few months later US President Donald Trump threatened to walk away from a key arms control treaty with Moscow.

## 'Avanguard'

France has already carried out studies on propulsion systems for hypersonic flights as part of a €37 billion (\$42 billion) revamp of its nuclear arsenal. Under the V-MaX project, being led by ArianeGroup - a joint venture between Airbus and France's Safran - the air-to-surface ASN4G missile, which will replace the medium-range ASMP, could possibly be configured to travel at hypersonic speeds.

"These (hypersonic) weapons could constitute an instantaneous threat of a conventional or even nuclear strike," France's inter-ministerial Secretariat for National Defense and Security (SGDSN) wrote in a

2017 report on next-generation technologies. Hypersonic gliders would be carried to the end of the earth's atmosphere by a launch vehicle and would then "glide" back to a target on the ground.

"The goal is high-speed manoeuvrability. That's how it differs from a ballistic trajectory," the French government's defence procurement and technology agency (DGA) said. "Once the initial speed is reached, we can play with speed and altitude to move up and down, to the left and to the right, creating a trajectory that is more difficult to intercept. And, the agency added: "If we are targeted by a defense system, we can operate evasive maneuvers."

In December, the Kremlin touted the capabilities of its new hypersonic glider, aptly named "Avanguard". The Kremlin said that in tests the intercontinental projectile reached 27 times the speed of sound - 33,000 km per hour or Mach 27. "At this speed not a single interceptor missile can shoot it down," Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov boasted. China has also reportedly carried out several successful tests since 2014 of a glider that can reach

speeds of between Mach 5 and Mach 10.

## Falling behind

Harry Harris, former US military commander for the Pacific region, admitted last year: "China's hypersonic weapons development outpaces ours... we're falling behind". The United States, which is developing several hypersonic programs, is also studying the feasibility of creating a space-based interceptor system, in which an orbiting craft of some sort would be equipped with missiles that could destroy an incoming warhead while it is in space. "The US will now adjust its posture to defend against any missile strikes including cruise and hypersonic missiles," President Donald Trump said in January, releasing a review of the US missile defense network.

For France, developing and deploying a device that can withstand hypersonic speeds poses an enormous challenge. The DGA, the French defense agency, admitted that it had "relatively little experience" in the area. "The first use will probably not be for several years, and will be limited in terms of payload, flight time and precision," the SGDSN cautioned. — AFP

## India politician jailed over Modi Facebook post

NEW DELHI: An Indian politician who posted a picture of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a begging bowl on Facebook has been arrested, police said yesterday, in the latest example of what critics say is a clampdown on free speech. It follows more than a dozen similar arrests last year in a clampdown on those attacking the Hindu nationalist premier's policies or ideology. Sathiyaraj Balu, a member of a local pro-Tamil party, was arrested on Saturday after he posted a morphed picture of Modi with a begging bowl a day ahead of the PM's visit to the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

He has been charged with intent to disrupt the peace and to create ill-will between classes, after an official complaint was made by local members of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "We received a complaint against him (Balu) and took action as per the law," a senior police officer in the district told

AFP on condition of anonymity. Balu is being remanded in custody pending a police investigation.

A television reporter is in jail in the northeastern state of Manipur for alleged posts that also criticized Modi and the state's chief minister Biren Singh. Kishorechandra Wangkhem was arrested in December under a Draconian law that allows authorities to detain anyone for up to a year without trial. He had accused Singh of promoting right-wing Hindu ideology in the region and called him a "puppet" of Modi and of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a hardline Hindu group.

Police in September charged the main opposition Congress party's social media chief Divya Spandana with sedition, after she tweeted a meme that showed an altered image of Modi's statue with a placard emblazoned with "thief". Critics say such arrests are alarming in the world's largest democracy. "There has been a worrying crackdown on free speech and dissent in India, whether slogans, social media commentary against ruling leaders, or arrests of journalists and activists who criticise the government," Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, told AFP. "People are being accused under range of laws including sedition and threats to national security." — AFP

## Amid cool response, US says conference not aimed at Iran

WASHINGTON: A US-Polish conference next month on the Middle East is not aimed at Iran, a US official said yesterday, after key players balked at attending. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo plans to head to Warsaw for the Feb 13-14 "Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East," which he earlier said would look at "making sure Iran is not a destabilizing influence". But the conference has drawn few concrete RSVPs amid unease over the hard US line on Iran, with EU diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini saying she had previous commitments even though the event is taking place in the European Union.

A senior US official, previewing the conference to reporters, said that Iran would not be a specific agenda item. "It's important to underscore that this is not an anti-Iran meeting or coalition-building exercise," the

official said on condition of anonymity. "From the start, this ministerial has been focused on exploring a range of issues important to the region's security and prosperity," he said. He said Pompeo "will certainly discuss concerns regarding Iran's destructive policies in the region," but said this was because "it's difficult to talk about the region's challenges without referencing Iran."

The official said that the conference would discuss the crises in Syria and Yemen as well as missile proliferation, cyber issues, human rights and refugees, with working groups then tasked with following up. The conference, which Pompeo said will draw ministers from around the world, comes almost exactly as Iran marks 40 years since its Islamic revolution and after the United States re-imposed sweeping sanctions on the country.

Iran summoned a Polish diplomat to protest the conference, which it called a hostile act. A Polish official said that, despite serving as co-host, that Poland still supports an international agreement on Iran's nuclear program from which President Donald Trump withdrew. Russia has also said it will not attend the conference because of its "one-country" focus and failure to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. — AFP

## US citizen leaks data on HIV positive people in Singapore

SINGAPORE: An HIV-positive American has leaked online the names of 14,200 Singaporeans and foreigners also diagnosed in the city-state with the human immunodeficiency virus, the health ministry said yesterday. US citizen Mikhy Farrera Brochez lived in Singapore from 2008 and was convicted in 2017 on numerous drug-related and fraud offences, including lying to the ministry of manpower about his own HIV status, the Health Ministry said. He was deported after serving his jail term and was now overseas, according to the statement, which did not say where.

Brochez was HIV-positive and used his Singaporean doctor partner's blood sample to pass blood tests so he could work in Singapore, the ministry said. His partner, Ler Teck Siang, previously had access to the HIV reg-

istry for his work, the ministry said. He was convicted in September of abetting Brochez in criminal activity, and sentenced to 24 months' imprisonment. He is appealing. Brochez was in possession of information that appeared to be from the HIV registry, the ministry said. The statement did not say how Brochez obtained the data or suggest a motive for leaking it online but only that the partner was believed to have "mishandled" the information.

The leaked records relate to 5,400 Singaporeans diagnosed with HIV up to Jan 2013, and 8,800 foreigners diagnosed up to Dec 2011. Brochez is currently under police investigation, and the authorities are seeking assistance from their foreign counterparts, according to the ministry statement, which did not specify any country. Reuters could not immediately reach Brochez for comment.

The ministry said it had worked with the "relevant parties" to disable access to the information. It did not say where it was leaked online. The leak comes just months after Singapore revealed the worst cyber attack in its history after hackers infiltrated the government health database. The HIV information leak was not related to the cyber breach. — Agencies

## Macron presses Sisi on respect...

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a crackdown on opposition that has extended from Islamists to liberal activists. Sisi and his supporters say the measures are needed to stabilize Egypt after the turmoil that followed the country's 2011 uprising. In an interview this month Sisi denied Egypt was holding political prisoners, though one rights group estimates the number at 60,000.

French officials say Egypt is a key strategic partner for promoting stability and security in the region, including in Libya, which Macron has put at the top of his foreign policy agenda. Eight human rights groups had urged Macron to deliver a strong message on rights during his trip, free "unjustly detained" prisoners

and suspend arms sales that could be used in rights violations.

The France director for Human Rights Watch, one of the groups, cautiously welcomed Macron's comments yesterday. "It's an important recognition by Macron of the centrality of human rights in the struggle against terrorism," said Benedicte Jeannerod. "The question now is to know if these words will translate into concrete changes to France's unconditional support for Sisi's abusive anti-terrorism policy."

Macron dismissed suggestions that French weapons in Egypt were being used against civilians, saying they had only been used for military purposes. He also said no potential new military contracts were talked about during the meeting with Sisi beyond a possible deal for 12 fighter jets. During Macron's trip officials signed 40 trade deals and development agreements worth an estimated total of 1.6 billion euros, covering sectors including transport, energy, health and telecoms, Egypt's investment ministry said in a statement. — Agencies

## 'Loneliest duck' Trevor dies on...

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He became so famous locally that when the New Zealand Herald's deputy political editor Claire Trevett visited the island nation, she found he had been incor-

porated into street directions. "Someone said, 'Turn right past the duck' and then the whole story came out, the only duck on Niue," she told the ABC. He was later dubbed the "world's loneliest duck" for his solitary existence. Trevor Mallard, the speaker of New Zealand's House of Representatives after whom the late duck was named, offered his condolences. "Deepest sympathy to the people of Niue from the Parliament of New Zealand," Mallard wrote on the duck's Facebook death notice. — AFP

## Qatar blockade hits Asian Cup...

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lost to Japan yesterday, had also reached the final. Seeing Iran or Qatar celebrating under their national flag in Abu Dhabi would be hard to stomach for the hosts, and would raise the thorny question of whether to let senior officials from the two countries attend.

The regional rivalry has permeated the tournament, which is only available to watch in UAE via Qatar's subscription-only beIN Sports, which isn't available even in official, tournament-approved hotels. Qatari fans will, of course, be watching from afar. Qataris need prior permission to visit UAE, and with transport links cut they

also need to travel via another country, complicating the journey.

"It's not only me who wants to travel to the match, thousands of Qatari people want to watch the team," Qatar fan Abdulrahman, a 25-year-old IT engineer, told AFP in Doha. "Of course, I won't go. If I go I will have too many problems, it's far too much trouble for us." He added: "If we win we are going to cry. We want to show the UAE that you blockaded us, you gave us too many problems, but you will never stop us."

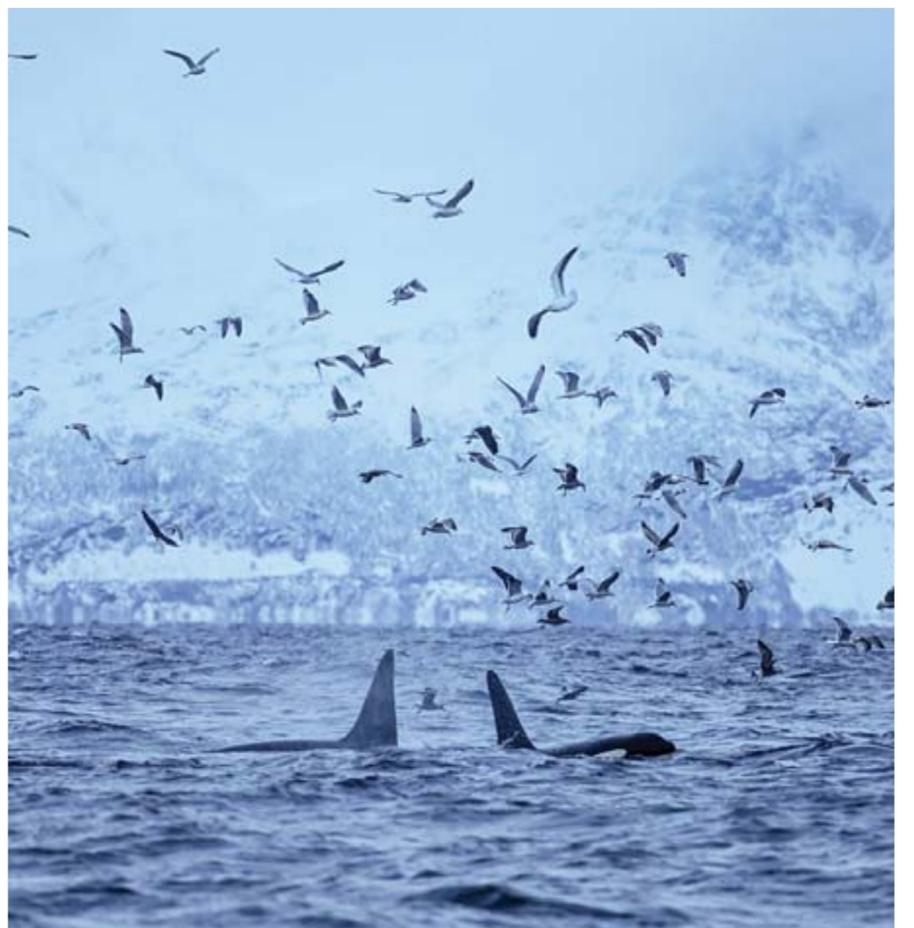
It's not all enmity, however. On social media, many fans from both sides were sharing clips and interviews from before the crisis blew up in mid-2017, when people spoke of a united Gulf. "If Qatar wins we will be happy, and if the UAE wins we will also be happy," wrote Ahmed, who had a Saudi flag next to his Twitter handle. "The most important thing is that the cup will be won by a team from the Gulf. We are one Gulf, one nation." — AFP

## MP sentenced to 7 years for...

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"My client received justice after she was taken advantage of and tricked into something that crimi-

nizes her under sharia (Islamic) law," he told AFP. The lawyer said his client had found out her husband divorced her in 2017 - a year later - after she sued him for failing to provide for her and their child. "Evidence was brought forward that they continued a marital relationship during the time they were divorced, including an exchange of intimate pictures via WhatsApp," he said. Tabtabaei is currently outside of Kuwait amid government discussions on whether or not to unseat him from parliament. — AFP



Orcas chase herrings on Jan 17, 2019 in the Reisafjorden fjord region near the Norwegian northern city of Tromsø on the Arctic Circle. — AFP