

TRUMP BACKS 'ONE CHINA' POLICY IN FIRST CALL WITH XI

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump reaffirmed Washington's 'One China' policy on Thursday in his first conversation with Xi Jinping, an apparent effort to ease tensions after angering Beijing by questioning a major plank of Sino-US relations. During a phone call with China's leader, the US president agreed to "honor" a position that effectively acknowledges Taiwan is not separate from China. "President Trump agreed, at the request of President Xi, to honor our 'One China' policy," the White House said in a statement, adding that the two leaders had "extended invitations to meet in their respective countries."

The White House called the phone discussion—which came on the eve of Trump's slated meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe—"extremely cordial", saying the leaders "look forward to further talks with very successful outcomes". Xi, who took the helm of the Communist Party-ruled country in 2012, welcomed Trump's gesture. "Xi Jinping appreciates Trump's emphasis on the American government's commitment to the One China policy and pointed out that the One China principle is the political foundation of US-China relations," according to a Chinese foreign ministry statement.

Trump's insurgent campaign for the White House included frequently lashing out at China, which he accused of currency manipulation and stealing American jobs. He raised eyebrows in the wake of his election victory with a protocol-busting telephone conversation with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen. He later threw doubt on the "One China" policy, suggesting that it was up for negotiation and could form part of talks on trade, drawing rebukes from official Chinese media.

Backed Down

Ashley Townshend, an expert on US-China relations at the University of Sydney said Trump's apparent capitulation was an indication of the moderating influence of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defence Secretary James Mattis. "Everyone will be surprised at the speed with which Trump has backed down on this issue," he said. The change was unlikely to be conciliatory, he added, but could be read as a sign of pragmatism in the new administration's approach to its powerful adversary.

"There was a real risk prior to this clarification that the two sides would be unable to even find a way to speak," he said. "This removes an obstacle to relations, but it doesn't advance them in any meaningful way." —AFP

VENEZUELA HEADING FOR CUBA-STYLE VOTE

CARACAS: Venezuelan opposition leaders said Thursday the country is heading toward Cuban-style elections, with no real challengers to the ruling party, thanks to burdensome new rules governing how parties renew their registration. The accusation comes as the opposition stands to make major gains in upcoming regional elections, with Venezuela's economy imploding and President Nicolas Maduro's popularity plunging.

The new rules, announced this week, set up a challenging series of hoops for parties to jump through in order to participate in this year's vote, which has not yet been scheduled. Maduro's United Socialist Party is exempt, as is the main opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), since both won more than one percent of the vote in the past two elections. But the catch, for the MUD, is that it is not in fact a single party: It is a coalition of some 30 parties, each of which will have to go through the renewal process.

Under the new rules, that means gathering signatures from 0.5 percent of voters in at least half the country's 24 states, in just 14 hours—roughly half a million people, in a country with some 20 million registered voters. Signatories will have to prove their identity with fingerprint scans—with only 390 scanners set up for the process. That, say opposition leaders, is an all but impossible set of constraints.

A vote but no choice

"They're trying to fraudulently set up elections with no challengers," the MUD said. "They want to turn the Venezuelan electoral system into a copy of the Cuban or Nicaraguan electoral system... in which people can vote, but not choose." Even some parties allied with the Maduro camp protested. —AFP



BRUSSELS: This file photo shows Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani (Left) talking with Commander of Allied and Command John W. Nicholson and French Air Force Chief General Denis Mercier during a Foreign Affairs meeting at the NATO headquarters in Brussels.—AFP

US GENERAL SAYS NATO NEEDS MORE TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN

WASHINGTON: The US general commanding NATO forces in Afghanistan warned Thursday that he needs thousands more troops and accused Russia of seeking to prop up the Taliban. US-led forces have been fighting in Afghanistan for 16 years, making it already America's longest-ever war, but General John Nicholson told Congress: "I believe we're in a stalemate." The question of whether to double down in the seemingly endless conflict will now become one of the first major military strategy questions of President Donald Trump's term.

Trump has not laid out any detailed new strategy for Afghanistan in his first weeks in office, but during the campaign, he reluctantly accepted that US troops would remain. And last month, the Wall Street Journal reported that Trump had suggested in a call to Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani that he would consider sending more soldiers. The pair spoke again on Thursday. "The leaders discussed opportunities to strengthen the bilateral relationship in areas such as security, counterterrorism cooperation, and economic development," the White House said.

Trump's spokesman Sean Spicer told reporters that the president would seek the advice of Defense Secretary James Mattis before deciding on Nicholson's request for reinforcements. "I think the president will heed the advice of the generals and Secretary Mattis. That conversation has yet to happen," he said. Testifying before the US Senate Armed Services Committee, Nicholson said he

has a "shortfall of a few thousand" troops needed to train, advise and assist Afghan government forces. The NATO alliance has 13,300 troops in Afghanistan, about half of them American, assisting a much larger Afghan force in a war against the Taliban and other Islamist militants.

Afghan casualties

Afghan government police and armed forces now take the lead in the battle against the Taliban, which was forced from power in Kabul after the 2001 US-led invasion. US battlefield deaths are relatively rare since the transfer of primary responsibility to Afghan forces. But the Afghans are facing mounting casualties—their losses in 2016 were up by a third over 2015, with 6,785 killed in the first 10 months of the year and losing ground. Last year was also particularly deadly for Afghan civilians. A UN report found that 11,500 were killed or injured in 2016, the most since it began keeping records in 2009. Nicholson told the committee that having more US and allied troops would allow him to train and advise Afghan units down to a brigade level and in ministries in Kabul. The general said he was discussing the request for reinforcements with his own chain of command and that Mattis would talk to the NATO allies.

False narrative

The Senate panel, led by hawkish committee chairman John McCain, were also keen to hear more about the alleged malign influence of Russia and Iran in the Afghan conflict. Trump has

repeatedly said he hopes to mend ties with Russia's President Vladimir Putin so that Russia and the United States can work together against "radical Islamic terror." But according to Nicholson, Russia is instead giving the Taliban encouragement and diplomatic cover in order to undermine American influence and to defeat NATO.

The general told the senators that Russia was trying to "legitimize" the Taliban by promoting a "false narrative" that the rebels are fighting the Islamic State group. Reports say Russian officials held several meetings with Taliban representatives in Tajikistan and Moscow in recent months. Russia also hosted talks on Afghanistan with officials from Pakistan and China in Moscow without inviting Ghani's government, harming efforts to build an Afghan-led peace process. "When we look at Russia and Iranian actions in Afghanistan, I believe that in part they're to undermine the United States and NATO," Nicholson said.

Not the right time

In Moscow, the Kremlin's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said it was "not the right time to withdraw foreign soldiers from Afghanistan, including American soldiers." "The security situation in the country is worsening, and the Afghan forces are unable to resist the armed opposition by themselves," he told the state news agency TASS. Kabulov said there were around 15,000 "extremists" in northern Afghanistan, and warned they could "try to expand into territory in neighboring countries in Central Asia." —AFP