

International

No easy ride for EU-US with Biden's francophone team

Paris cheers president-elect's choice of French speakers

PARIS: US-president elect Joe Biden's appointment of French speakers to top positions has cheered Paris but France knows it will take more than mother tongue chats to overcome transatlantic strains, even after the departure of Donald Trump. As his future secretary of state, Biden has named former deputy national security advisor Anthony Blinken, who spent part of his childhood in France and is fluent in French. The special envoy for climate, former secretary of state John Kerry, spends his holidays in Brittany, while Michele Flournoy, in the running for defense secretary, studied in Belgium where she learned French.

The atmosphere of exchanges with this team is likely to be markedly more cheerful than contacts with the Trump administration that culminated in a frosty closed door visit to Paris this month by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. But an extra dose of bonhomie will not make strategic disagreements—that range from the future of NATO to policy towards China—go away.

Indeed, with conspicuous timing days after Biden's election victory was confirmed, a French journal published a mammoth interview with Macron where he outlined his vision for a Europe that acts independently of the United States. Europe should have "strategic autonomy", he told Le Grand Continent, adding that it should "not become the vassal of this or that power and no longer have a say".

'Synergy' with Berlin?

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said he was "particularly happy" about Blinken's

appointment as he had worked with him while serving as French defense minister. A French government source described Blinken as "francophone and francophile" and said he and Le Drian used the informal "tu" for "you" when speaking. "Can France take advantage of the Francophile leanings of several officials? Yes, but with conditions", said Jean-Claude Beaujour, vice-president of the France-Americas association.

It will be necessary that "Berlin and Paris have a very strong synergy vis-a-vis the United States" and that "the EU is not as divided as it tends to be".

He emphasized that US officials above all follow a Europe policy, without a specific approach to any single country such as France. But under Macron's rule there has not always been harmony between Paris and Berlin, and in Le Grand Continent interview he rather undiplomatically took aim at German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer who has been a prominent proponent of the United States retaining a key part of Europe's defense calculus.

"Illusions of European strategic autonomy must come to an end: Europeans will not be able to replace America's crucial role as a security provider," she wrote in an opinion piece in Politico this month. Macron said "I profoundly disagree" with her argument, which he described as a "historical misinterpretation", adding icily that "fortunately, if I understood things correctly, the Chancellor (Angela Merkel) does not share this point of view."

'Not fundamentally different'

Benjamin Haddad, Europe director of the Atlantic Council think tank, said the new Biden team will



WILMINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden speaks during a cabinet announcement event in Wilmington, Delaware. — AFP

want to work better with Europe. "But this will mean more pressure on the Europeans. We should not have any illusions. On questions like 5G and Chinese investment in infrastructure they will ask us to choose sides. But this will be done in concert."

The Trump administration had wanted Europe to match its confrontational approach on China and was unsettled by telecoms giant Huawei eyeing a role in the building of new 5G infrastructure and Europe taking a softer tack towards Beijing. "It will undoubtedly be less unpleasant, but not fundamentally different", said a French government source,

who asked not to be named.

"Europe will undoubtedly be better treated but the United States will not put us back in the center, their concerns will remain centered on Asia," the source said. In his interview, Macron also spoke about the need to "prevent the Chinese-American duopoly" and said that the world was at "breaking point in terms of the capitalist system". An American diplomatic source, who also asked not to be named, added: "I don't think everything reverts back to normal but we will have more normalcy in transatlantic relations." — AFP

Rare Cuba protest over freedom of expression

HAVANA: About 200 Cuban artists demonstrated outside the country's culture ministry on Friday in a rare protest over freedom of expression that received support from leading Cuban cinema figures.

The demonstration followed the expulsion by authorities on Thursday night of protesting members of an artists' collective from their premises in the historic center of Havana. Authorities said the eviction of the 14 members of the San Isidro Movement was necessary due to Covid-19 protocols since one had returned from Mexico via the United States and not properly quarantined.

They had been protesting for 10 days, with six of them on hunger strike, and their movement had gained significant attention. Demonstrators outside the culture ministry on Friday demanded "dialogue" and representatives were waiting to meet with vice minister Fernando Rojas after having gathered there for much of the day. The demonstration was rare in Cuba, where permission for such protests is not often given. Security personnel and uniformed police watched over the protest from a distance but without intervening.

"On the one hand, we do not have much confidence, but on the other we feel that it is an obliga-



HAVANA: A group of young intellectuals and artists demonstrate at the doors of the Ministry of Culture during a protest in Havana, early yesterday. About 200 Cuban artists demonstrated outside the country's culture ministry in a rare protest over freedom of expression that received support from leading Cuban cinema figures. — AFP

tion," said activist Michel Matos. "They are public officials of this country and this has become a political situation." The San Isidro Movement had been demanding the release of another member of the group, rapper Denis Solis, arrested on November 9 and sentenced to eight months in prison for contempt.

After the raid on their premises, the 14 members of the group were given Covid-19 tests and returned to their homes, with the collective's headquarters closed by the authorities, activists said on social media. Two of them refused to go home and

were arrested again: Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara, 32, a plastics artist, and Anamely Ramos, 35. Some activists said on social media that Ramos had been released. The list of demands from Friday's protesters included information on the whereabouts of Otero and Ramos, the release of Solis and an end to the "harassment" of artists.

"It is time for dialogue and I believe that you young people must be listened to," well-known actor and director Jorge Perugorria, 55, told the protesters. He was accompanied by prominent filmmaker Fernando Perez, 76. — AFP

Scotland leader 'never been more certain' of independence

GLASGOW: Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon yesterday said she had "never been more certain" of achieving independence, with Britain's final departure from EU trading arrangements set to precede key Scottish elections in the months ahead. The head of Scotland's devolved government and the leader of the pro-independence SNP told supporters at the party's virtual conference that the prospect of a break between Scotland and the rest of the UK has never been closer.

"Independence is in clear sight - and with unity of purpose, humility and hard work I have never been so certain that we will deliver it," she said. Sturgeon and the SNP have argued for a second referendum on Scottish independence since the party's overwhelming victory among Scottish seats in Britain's 2019 general election. Now she hopes that a further resounding win in May elections to the Edinburgh parliament will hand her party a mandate for a second bid to quit the UK.

Opinion polls in recent months have shown that a majority of public opinion in Scotland now supports independence. The country chose to remain part of the four-nation United Kingdom in a 2014 referendum on the issue.

But Scots later voted by a thumping majority in 2016 to remain in the European Union, a referendum the Leave side won by a narrow margin when taking the rest of Britain into account.

Since then, "we have won a landslide victory in a UK general election and support for independence has risen, it has become the sustained and majority view in public opinion this year," said Sturgeon.

"Who should be taking the decisions that shape our futures? We know that it is the people who live here, wherever they come from, who can best harness Scotland's immense human and natural resources. "Let us reach out to all Scotland like never before," she added. — AFP



KUNDLI: Farmers react as police block a street to impede them from marching to New Delhi to protest against the central government's recent agricultural reforms at the Delhi-Haryana border in Kundli on Friday. — AFP

Protesting Indian farmers in face-off with police in Delhi

NEW DELHI: India deployed hundreds of police and paramilitary forces at a New Delhi border yesterday as thousands of farmers from neighboring states blocked major roads into the capital, in protest against recent agricultural deregulation.

A day after clashes ended with an agreement that the farmers could demonstrate in the capital, tensions rose again in the protests over laws that farmers fear could rob them of minimum guaranteed prices for their produce. Farmers who arrived in trucks, buses and tractors at Delhi's Singhu border with Haryana state on Friday, blocked the main northern highway into the capital yesterday morning, chanting slogans against the government and waved the red, yellow and green flags of farmer's unions.

They appeared ready for a long sit-in and refused to relocate to a designated protest site, raising fears of fresh clashes between security forces and protesters.

On Friday, police fired tear gas and water cannons to disperse the protesters before letting them march into the capital and stage a protest at a designated site. Both security forces and farmers have installed barricades to prevent a repeat of Friday's clashes. Harbhajan Singh, 75, from Amritsar in the major northern farming state of Punjab, said he and others were carrying provisions and were prepared to camp out. "We have been harassed by the government. We want a special parliament session for withdrawal of the new farm laws," Singh said, adding he hopes farmers from other states will join the protests to pressure on the government.

Opposition Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi also slammed the government. "Our slogan was, 'Hail the Soldier, Hail the Farmer,' but today PM Modi's arrogance made the soldier stand against the farmer. This is very dangerous," Gandhi tweeted in reaction to a photo of a policeman attempting to hit a farmer with a baton.

Modi's laws, enacted in September, let farmers sell their produce anywhere, including to big corporate buyers like Walmart Inc, not just at government-regulated wholesale markets where growers are assured of a minimum procurement price. But many small growers worry they will be left vulnerable to big business and could eventually lose the price supports for key staples such as wheat and rice. — Reuters

News in brief

China reports six new COVID cases

SHANGHAI: China yesterday reported six new coronavirus cases in the mainland for Nov. 27, compared with five cases a day earlier, the health authority said. All of the new infections were imported cases, the National Health Commission said in a statement. There were no new deaths. China also reported four new asymptomatic patients, compared with eight a day earlier. As of Nov. 27, mainland China had a total of 86,501 confirmed coronavirus cases, it said. China's death toll from the coronavirus remained unchanged at 4,634. — Reuters

22 killed in Chad ethnic violence

N'DJAMENA, Chad: At least 22 people have been killed in southern Chad in the latest instance of deadly ethnic violence between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers, the communications minister said Friday. A curfew was imposed in the Kabbia region where the fighting took place and 66 people were arrested following the incident on Monday and Tuesday, minister and government spokesman Cherif Mahamat Zene said. The trigger for the violence was cattle theft, sparked by the animals trampling farmers' fields, another official said. — AFP

Indian Kashmir goes to the polls

SRINAGAR: Voters in Indian-administered Kashmir went to the polls yesterday amid a heavy security presence in the first direct elections in the disputed region since the government stripped its semi-autonomy last year. Under high alert for attacks by separatist militants, dozens of police and paramilitaries carrying machine guns surrounded each voting station while the army kept up street patrols. Observers said only small numbers braved the security, coronavirus fears and snow-covered terrain to elect members of their local councils. Voting is to be held over eight days up to December 19 with the count to start three days later. — Reuters

Scotland begins student virus tests

ST ANDREWS, United Kingdom: As an unusual term comes to a close and Christmas holidays draw closer, students at the University of St Andrews in Scotland filed in and out of a sports hall that has been transformed into a mass coronavirus testing center. "It's a huge piece of mind just to be able to go home and be with my family, knowing that everything is safe," Fiona Waddell, a 19-year-old psychology student said before the center opens for testing yesterday. — AFP

Los Angeles to halt nearly all gatherings

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles county on Friday announced a temporary ban on gatherings of people from different households under a new "safer-at-home order" triggered by a spike in Covid-19 cases, with religious services and protests exempt. The order affecting the United States' second-largest city will take effect tomorrow and last at least three weeks, until December 20, the county's public health department said. "In the new Order that goes into effect on Monday, residents are advised to stay home as much as possible," said a statement. — AFP