

International

Australia, China defence ministers meet for first time in three years

Meeting was 'an important first step' and 'very significant'

SINGAPORE: Australia and China's defence ministers met for the first time in three years on Sunday, with the talks described as "an important first step" following a period of strained ties. Richard Marles, whose centre-left government came to power in May, held talks for over an hour with China's Wei Fenghe on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit in Singapore.

Marles described the meeting as "an important first step" and "very significant". "It was an opportunity to have a very frank and full exchange in which I raised a number of issues of concern to Australia," said Marles, who is also Australia's deputy prime minister.

The Chinese government did not offer any immediate comment following the meeting. Relations between Beijing and Canberra have grown frosty in recent years after the latter called for an independent probe into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic and banned telecom giant Huawei from building Australia's 5G network.

China-Australia's biggest trading partner responded by imposing tariffs and disrupting more than a dozen key industries, including wine, barley and coal. Marles said the recent interception of an Australian patrol plane in international airspace by a Chinese warplane as well as Australia's "abiding

interest in the Pacific" were among topics discussed. This included Australia's focus on ensuring "that the countries of the Pacific are not put in a position of increased militarisation", he said.

'Change of tone'

The patrol plane incident, described by Canberra as "very dangerous", happened on May 26, when a Chinese aircraft intercepted the Australian jet and released a cloud of small aluminium strips, known as chaff. Australia is battling for influence with China among Pacific island states, with the new government playing catch-up after years of relations being soured by the previous Australian leadership's foot-dragging on climate change.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has recently been visiting the region and, while he failed to secure support for a regional security pact, he still inked a series of deals. Australia's new foreign minister, Penny Wong, has paid visits to the Pacific islands since taking office.

Marles underscored the importance of "open lines of dialogue" with China. "Australia and China's relationship is complex. And it's precisely because of this complexity that it is really important that we are engaging in dialogue right now."

Asked about next steps, he said Australia wanted



SINGAPORE: Handout photo released on June 12, 2022 from the Australian Department of Defence shows Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles (3rd L) meeting with China's Defence Minister Wei Fenghe (3rd R) on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore. —AFP

to move in a "very sober and very deliberate manner. We don't underestimate the difficulties that we've had in our bilateral relationship". He stressed

that "while there is a change of tone, there is absolutely no change in the substance of Australia's national interests". —AFP

Pope says hopes to reschedule Africa trip soon

VATICAN CITY, Holy See: Pope Francis said Sunday he hoped to visit the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan as soon as possible, after cancelling an upcoming visit due to a knee problem. "Dear friends, with great regret, due to problems with my leg, I have had to postpone my visit to your countries," the 85-year-old said after delivering his weekly Angelus prayer in St Peter's Square.

"I truly feel great sorrow for having had to postpone this trip, which means so much to me. I apologise for this. Let us pray together that, with the help of God and medical attention, I will be able to be with you as soon as possible. Let us be hopeful!"

The Vatican on Friday announced that the trip planned for July 2 to 7 would be rescheduled, although no new date was set. "At the request of his doctors, and in order not to jeopardise the results of the therapy that he is undergoing for his knee, the Holy Father has been forced to postpone," spokesman Matteo Brunni said.

Francis has been suffering from pain in his right knee in recent weeks and last month relied on a wheelchair for the first time at a public event. He has cancelled numerous engagements—a scheduled trip to Lebanon in June was postponed—and has sometimes been seen struggling to walk.

The Vatican has not said officially what the problem is, although sources have told AFP he has chronic arthritis. The pope himself has also spoken of an injured ligament in his knee.

Also on Sunday, the pope urged the world not to forget about the war in Ukraine, triggered by Russia's invasion in late February. "The thought of the people of Ukraine, afflicted by war, remains vivid in my heart," he said.

"Let the passage of time not temper our grief



VATICAN CITY: Faithful listen as Pope Francis leads the Angelus prayer from the window of the Apostolic Palace overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, on June 12, 2022. —AFP

and concern for that suffering population. "Please, let us not grow accustomed to this tragic situation! Let us always keep it in our hearts. Let us pray and strive for peace." —AFP

Volcano ash blankets Philippines

JUBAN, Philippines: A volcano in the Philippines spewed a huge column of ash into the sky on Sunday, blanketing a region still recovering from last week's eruption. The blast from Bulusan volcano lasted 18 minutes, the Philippine seismological agency said, impairing road visibility and forcing airlines to cancel flights.

On June 5, Mount Bulusan sent a grey plume shooting up at least one kilometre (0.6 miles) and covered 10 villages with ash. Residents of Juban town in Sorsogon province, still reeling from last week's eruption, were woken up Sunday by the volcano's thundering.

"I thought it was just raining, but when I looked outside there was ash everywhere," resident Antonio Habitan told AFP. "Our river was once clear but now it is ash-coloured." No casualties were reported, but the seismological agency raised the alert level to one on the five-level system, indicating "low-level unrest".

"We still can't say that it is over. It's still possible that this eruption could be followed by another one,

that's why we need to be careful with the Bulusan volcano," agency head Renato Solidum told local radio station DZBB.

Emergency workers were deployed to clean ash-laden roads and guide drivers struggling to see oncoming vehicles. Five flights in the area were cancelled. Juban's local disaster office said 366 people were in emergency shelters, with most evacuated days before the eruption due to a series of volcanic earthquakes.

Bulusan volcano has been active in recent years, with a dozen similar eruptions recorded in 2016 and 2017. The Philippines is located in the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" and has over 20 active volcanoes. —AFP

'Like it or not', Britannia still rules part of Cyprus

DHEKELIA, United Kingdom: Next to a palm tree, the Union Jack hangs limply on a pole outside a simple courthouse built decades ago on this eastern Mediterranean island. "Morning your honour," the clerk said in English to the British judge, beginning another day at Her Majesty's Court in Waterloo Road, Dhekelia.

In this part of Cyprus, a former British colony, Britain is still in charge and Cypriots appear before the court. Some on the island liken the arrangement to continued colonisation. Scholars called it "undeniably anachronistic" and "highly unusual".

"It is different," said Major General Rob Thomson, the top official in the sovereign areas, "but it's different because it serves a different purpose." Cyprus became independent from Britain in 1960 after a bloody guerrilla campaign.

Under that treaty, which Greece and Turkey also signed, Britain retained control over two military zones in the east and south of the island, Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) where thousands of Cypriots live — outnumbering British troops. They comprise the only British overseas territory effectively run through the defence ministry, Thomson, 55, told AFP, a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II hanging in his office. His three "guiding principles" are to operate the bases, cooperate with Cyprus and to "look after the interests of the people who live there".

Thomson oversees SBA police, courts, customs and immigration, and a prison — all run separately from the Republic of Cyprus — though laws in the base areas reflect Cypriot regulations. SBA officers, most of whom are Cypriots, have jurisdiction over 12,000 compatriots living on base land along with 5,662 British troops and their families.

Since no physical borders separate SBA land from

the Republic of Cyprus, it's difficult to tell where their jurisdiction begins — except for the tell-tale cricket pitch lying in a spectacular valley. Beaches, ancient ruins and bird-rich wetlands are attractions for tourists, who are also subject to SBA law.

Nicos Costa, one person before the court, was charged with driving while disqualified. It "is a serious offence", the judge said, as Costa faced a possible two-year jail term.

Colonial 'remnants'

"It's a bit strange. Don't you think?" said Costas Evripidou, a community councillor in Akrotiri, a hilltop village on SBA land on Cyprus's southern tip. For Evripidou, the court symbolises an odd arrangement which limits his rights and is seen by many as "remnants of the colonies".

Akrotiri lies just outside the fences of a Royal Air Force base, from where warplanes thunder off as part of the international coalition against the Islamic State group. The base has supported operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and helped reinforce NATO's eastern flank after Russia invaded Ukraine.

British administration of Cypriots is "not logical anymore", argued George Perdakis, who protested at the base during two decades as a Green party lawmaker. Officials from Cyprus and Britain conceded there had been unequal treatment of Cypriot SBA residents due to restrictions on developing their property, which have now changed under new rules adopted last month.

Andreas Theophanous, head of the University of Nicosia's politics department, said allowing non-military development on base land is "a positive step" but "it's not enough". The island has been divided since 1974 when Turkey invaded following a Greek-sponsored coup. The Republic of Cyprus, a European Union member with an overwhelmingly Greek-Cypriot majority, controls the southern two-thirds of the island. Only Ankara recognises the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Theophanous and other Cypriots see Britain's role as intertwined with what they call the "Cyprus problem". "Britain has benefited from the bases," he said,



AKROTIRI, United Kingdom: File photo shows members of the RAF Akrotiri multi-role 84 Squadron march during a parade marking the centenary of the 84 Squadron at the Sovereign Base Area (SBA) of Akrotiri, a British overseas territory located ten kilometres west of the Cypriot port city of Limassol. —AFP

but did not in turn fulfil its treaty obligations "to protect the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Cyprus".

Anti-British anger resurfaced when Cypriot groups withdrew from an SBA charity concert marking the queen's Platinum Jubilee. Critics have linked her to Britain's hanging of nine Cypriots during the 1955-59 armed struggle by Greek nationalists to unite Cyprus with Greece.

Apart from warplanes and what Thomson called a "significant" intelligence capability, the bases host two infantry battalions, one on standby for rapid deployment. They help make Britain, its NATO allies, and the region safer, he said.

"It gives us global presence," he said, offering "strategic advantage" to the West, with no disadvantages for Cypriots. Ypsonas Mayor Pantelis Georgiou can see things from both sides. About 25 percent of his community, and roughly 1,000 residents, live inside the base. Despite questions about the arrangement "whether we like it or not it's within" the 1960 agreement, Georgiou said. —AFP

China vows 'fight to the end' to stop Taiwan independence

SINGAPORE: China will "fight to the very end" to stop Taiwanese independence, the country's defence minister vowed Sunday, stoking already soaring tensions with the United States over the island. The superpowers are locked in a growing war of words over the self-ruled, democratic island, which Beijing views as part of its territory awaiting reunification.

Frequent Chinese aircraft incursions near Taiwan have raised the diplomatic temperature, and on Saturday US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin accused Beijing of "destabilising" military activity, in a speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit.

Defence Minister Wei Fenghe hit back in a fiery address at the same event, saying Beijing had "no choice" but to fight if attempts are made to separate Taiwan from China. "We will fight at all cost, and we will fight to the very end," he told the summit, which brings together defence ministers from Asia and around the world.

"No one should ever underestimate the resolve and ability of the Chinese armed forces to safeguard its territorial integrity." "Those who pursue Taiwanese independence in an attempt to split China will definitely come to no good end," he added.

Wei urged Washington to "stop smearing and containing China... stop interfering in China's internal affairs and stop harming China's interests". But he also struck a more conciliatory tone at points, calling for a "stable" China-US relationship, which he said was "vital for global peace".

During his address, Austin stressed the importance of "fully open lines of communication with China's defence leaders" in avoiding miscalculations. The pair held their first face-to-face talks on the sidelines of the summit in Singapore on Friday, during which they also clashed over Taiwan.

Tensions over Taiwan have escalated in particular due to increasing Chinese military aircraft incursions into the island's air defence identification zone (ADIZ). President Joe Biden, during a visit to Japan last month, appeared to break decades of US policy when, in response to a question, he said Washington would defend Taiwan militarily if it was attacked by China. The White House has since insisted its policy of "strategic ambiguity" over whether or not it would intervene had not changed.

Disputed sea 'rampage'

Despite the heightened tensions, analysts said the fact Austin and Wei were willing to meet in person offered a small sign of hope. "Talking is better than not talking," Ian Chong, associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore, who is attending the summit, told AFP.

"But I think at this point, we won't be seeing any breakthroughs. Maybe it'll lead to something in future." The dispute is just the latest between Washington and Beijing, who have clashed over everything from the South China Sea to human rights and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

China's expansive claims to the sea, through which trillions of dollars in shipping trade passes annually, have stoked tensions with rival claimants Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. China, whose historical claims were rejected in a landmark 2016 Hague ruling, has been accused of flying its planes and sailing its boats close to the coastlines of rival claimants, and of intercepting patrol planes in international airspace in a dangerous fashion. —AFP