

## International

# US defence secretary and China defence chief meet in Cambodia

## Talks were productive without backing away from their core positions

**SIEM REAP, Cambodia:** US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe in Cambodia on Tuesday, with both sides describing the talks as productive without backing away from their core positions. The rival powers have clashed over a host of issues including Taiwan, security and human rights, but there have been attempts to lower the temperature since a rare summit between the leaders of both countries last week.

US President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping tried to cool the rhetoric but the differences were clear — and the exchange between their defence chiefs was similar. A senior US defence official said the talks between Austin and Wei on the sidelines of a conference of defence ministers in Siem Reap were “productive” and “professional”.

“Both sides agreed that it’s important that our countries work together to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict”, but “competition remains the defining feature of the relationship”, the official told journalists.

Austin sought the “reopening of a number of military-to-military dialogues and mechanisms to help manage that competition responsibly”, the official added.

That was a reference to procedures and exchanges that were scrapped after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August despite furious warnings and threats from Beijing. The US official said Austin and Wei had a “lengthy exchange” on Taiwan during the meeting, which lasted for an hour and a half.

A Chinese defence ministry spokesman described the meeting as “sincere, in-depth, practical and constructive”. “Both sides acknowledged that both militaries should earnestly implement the important consensus reached by both heads of state, maintain communication and contact, strengthen crisis management, and work hard to uphold regional peace and stability,” the spokesman said. “China attaches importance to developing bilateral military relations, but the US must respect China’s core interests.”



### Lengthy exchange on Taiwan

#### Red line

China claims Taiwan is a part of its territory to be taken one day, by force if necessary. Wei said in the meeting that Taiwan is a red line for China, the spokesman said. “Taiwan is China’s Taiwan, it is a matter to be resolved by the Chinese people alone, and no external forces have the right to interfere.”

Beijing lashes out at any diplomatic action that might lend Taiwan legitimacy and has responded with growing anger to visits by Western officials and politicians.

It reacted to Pelosi’s Taiwan visit with its largest and most aggressive exercises around the island since the 1990s. Austin told Wei that US policy towards Taiwan has not changed and that Washington still opposes unilateral changes to the status quo on the island.

#### Russia, North Korea

Austin and Wei also discussed other issues including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and North Korea, according to a readout by Pentagon Press Secretary Brigadier General Pat Ryder. “Secretary Austin discussed Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine and underscored how both the United States and (China) oppose the use of nuclear weapons or threats to use them,” Ryder said.

Austin also expressed concern about “increasingly dangerous” behaviour by Chinese warplanes in the Asia-Pacific region, the readout added.

Austin called on China — Pyongyang’s main diplomatic backer — to “fully enforce” UN Security Council resolutions against North Korea over its weapons programmes. The defence chiefs’ meeting followed a brief exchange between Xi and US Vice President Kamala Harris at an Asia-Pacific summit in Bangkok.

That was followed by a meeting between Xi and US Vice President Kamala Harris at an Asia-Pacific summit in Bangkok on Saturday. — AFP



**SIEM REAP, Cambodia:** China’s Defence Minister Wei Fenghe arrives for a meeting with his US counterpart Lloyd Austin in Siem Reap on November 22, 2022. — AFP



**KUALA LUMPUR:** Malaysia opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (C) waves as he leaves after meeting with Malaysia’s King at the National Palace in Kuala Lumpur on November 22, 2022. — AFP

## Anwar says ‘no decision yet’ on PM impasse

**KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia:** Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim said Tuesday there was “no decision yet” on the country’s next prime minister despite him and a rival being summoned to the king’s palace to break a post-election impasse. No clear winner emerged from Saturday’s election, leaving the nation of 33 million people in extended political limbo. Malaysia’s king, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah, had summoned Anwar and his rival Muhyiddin Yassin in a bid to break the deadlock, but the two left without any answers. “There is no decision yet,” Anwar told reporters after meeting the king, adding that “no timeline” was set. Muhyiddin, who is backed by an Islamist party, later told reporters that since no bloc had enough numbers, the king asked him and Anwar to form a “unity government”. He said he told the king his bloc could not work with Anwar’s group. Anwar’s Pakatan Harapan coalition won the most seats at 82 in the weekend’s vote, on an anti-graft message—but fell short of the required majority.

The reformist leader held talks with his old foes at the graft-tainted outgoing coalition Barisan Nasional (BN), to get their support. But BN’s vice-president and caretaker prime minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said they had decided not to support any bloc and preferred to become the opposition. A palace statement said the king will meet with BN members on Wednesday to get their views. “His Majesty called and advised all the people to be patient and calm until the process of forming a new government and the appointment of the 10th prime minister of Malaysia is completed,” the palace said.

#### ‘Negative signal’

BN, the once-mighty political juggernaut, is dominated by ex-leader Najib Razak’s scandal-hit party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Several UMNO leaders are also facing corruption charges. Najib is serving a 12-year jail term for money laundering and abuse of power for his role in the massive 1MDB financial scandal. UMNO suffered its biggest defeat since Malaysian independence in 1957 at the recent polls, but had been courted by Anwar for its 30 seats.

Malaysia, one of Southeast Asia’s biggest economies, has had three changes of government in as many years. Asrul Hadi Abdullah Sani, deputy managing director at BowerGroupAsia, said the continuing impasse will send a negative signal to foreign investors and local businesses. “The new prime minister will have the difficult task of building a new coalition or a unity government that is able to decide on difficult and necessary economic policies,” Asrul told AFP. “With the parties and MPs divided over their choice of prime minister, the question now is whether Anwar or Muhyiddin are able to maintain a stable government and remain prime minister for the entire term.” — AFP

## China coastguard take rocket debris from Filipino soldiers

**MANILA, Philippines:** Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos said Tuesday the country will ask Beijing to explain its “more benign” account of an incident involving Chinese coastguard taking rocket debris from Filipino soldiers in disputed waters.

A senior Filipino navy official on Monday accused the Chinese coastguard of “forcefully” seizing parts of a rocket fairing that landed in the waters of the Spratly Islands in the hotly contested South China Sea.

Beijing insisted the handover took place after “friendly consultation”. “The report of the Philippine navy and the report from China did not match,” Marcos told reporters. “I have complete trust in our navy and if this is what they say happened, I can only believe that that is what happened.” Marcos said Manila would send a diplomatic note to Beijing asking “why is it that their account is so different and it’s much more benign”. The South China Sea is a long-standing source of tensions between the two nations.

Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire sea and has ignored an international court ruling that its claims have no legal basis. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei have overlapping claims to parts

of it. Marcos’s remarks came as US Vice President Kamala Harris wrapped up a visit to a Philippine island near the disputed sea in a show of support for the longtime US ally.

Harris said the United States “stands with the Philippines in the face of intimidation and coercion in the South China Sea.” Marcos has insisted he will not let China trample on the Philippines’ maritime rights-in contrast to his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte who was reluctant to criticise the superpower.

In Sunday’s incident, a Chinese coastguard vessel “blocked” a Filipino rubber boat towing an “unidentified floating object”, Vice Admiral Alberto Carlos said Monday. The Chinese coastguard vessel then deployed an inflatable boat team which “forcefully retrieved said floating object by cutting the towing line attached to the (Filipino) rubber boat”, he said.

The object was then taken to the Chinese coastguard vessel as the Filipino troops returned to their station, Carlos said. Philippine National Security Adviser Clarita Carlos said Tuesday the Filipino sailors “heard shots” apparently fired from an unknown location as they towed the object to the Philippine-garrisoned Thitu island. “With the way that the region, our region the Asia Pacific, is heating up, there might be a small mistake, a misunderstanding that could blow up,” Marcos warned. He said his planned visit to China in January could be an opportunity to find a way to avoid further incidents. “We want to have a mechanism, we have to find a way to prevent this from happening again,” he said. — AFP



**LONDON:** South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa is greeted by Britain’s King Charles III and Britain’s Camilla, Queen Consort during a Ceremonial Welcome on Horse Guards Parade in London on November 22, 2022. — AFP

## Ramaphosa leads in race for ANC president

**JOHANNESBURG, South Africa:** South African President Cyril Ramaphosa is firmly ahead in the race for head of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), garnering more than twice as many party nominations as his sole challenger, according to a tally issued Tuesday. Ramaphosa, 70, has polled 2,037 nominations from party branches against 916 for his rival Zweli Mkhize, 66, an ex-health minister who resigned from government last year amid graft allegations, the party said.

“These are the two names nominated for position of (party) president,” Kgalema Motlanthe, former president of South Africa and head of the ANC’s electoral panel, told a news conference in Johannesburg.

The ANC, the party of Nelson Mandela, spearheaded the fight against apartheid and has governed South Africa since the advent of democracy in 1994. It is due to hold a conference between December 16 and 20 to elect the party’s top leadership. Whoever wins is likely to be the head of state after the 2024 national elections, if the ANC wins that vote. Although party branches vary in size and how many delegates vote in each, the nominations can be indicative of the outcome.

Votes will be cast in person by branch representatives on the first day of the conference. Ramaphosa is seeking a second term at the helm after succeeding his

scandal-tainted former boss, ex-president Jacob Zuma, in 2018. Ramaphosa’s bid comes despite facing the risk of possible impeachment for allegedly covering up a 2020 crime. Parliament will debate on December 6 whether he should answer allegations that he concealed a multi-million dollar cash theft at his farm.

Analysts have said Ramaphosa, who is currently in the United Kingdom for the first state visit hosted by King Charles III as monarch, stands a reasonable chance of staying on as ANC leader despite the controversy.

#### Dipping support

“Ramaphosa is still in a very strong position to be re-elected,” said Sithembile Mbete, lecturer in political sciences lecturer at the University of Pretoria. “It seems a majority of the branches want to vote for Ramaphosa,” she said.

Pearl Mncube, an independent political analyst, said “while he (Ramaphosa) has been facing a decline in popularity over the years, his campaign has been the strongest so far”. The once revered 110-year-old ANC has seen its popularity decline, with voters for the first time turning their backs on the party during last year’s local government elections.

It won only 46 percent of the ballots cast nationally — by far its worst showing since the end of white-minority rule. Its fortunes are unlikely to swing much in the next national elections in 2024. Polls suggest that support for the ANC will dip below 50 in the next national polls, said Mbete. But the “ANC will most probably remain the biggest single party and will probably be able to form a coalition government”, she said. — AFP

## Australian tells of Myanmar jail squalor, torture fear

**SYDNEY:** An Australian economist released after nearly two years in a Myanmar jail has told of interrogations in leg irons, squalor and the sounds of screams from tortured cellmates during his time behind bars.

Sean Turnell, who returned home to Sydney on Friday after being released as part of an amnesty of almost 6,000 prisoners, gave the first public details of his incarceration in an interview with The Australian newspaper. The former adviser to deposed Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi was detained by the military in February 2021 shortly after its forces seized control of the country. Turnell told the paper in an interview published Tuesday that he was initially kept at Yangon’s Insein prison in a six metre by 2.5 metre concrete cell in which an iron chair with leg irons had been bolted to the floor.

He then endured two months of interrogations, the paper said, sometimes being taken from his bed to be locked in the irons. Officials accused him of working for British intelligence and gun-running, and quizzed him about his work for Suu Kyi, the economist was quoted as saying. He told the paper on Monday that he had been infected with COVID-19 five times and kept in solitary confinement for months. In the early days of his confinement, Turnell said he could hear the sounds of people outside banging pots and pans at night in protest against the military coup.

“Then came the explosions and gunfire and people being tortured in rooms nearby. I thought, they’re not going to do that to me surely? Then after a while, I started thinking, maybe they will. I think they wanted me to hear it.”

#### ‘Ate out of a bucket’

Turnell said he had expected to be treated “with kid gloves”. “They didn’t stick electrodes to me, but I was thrown into filthy cells. The food they used to deliver to me (came) in a bucket. For 650 days, I ate out of a bucket.” In the Naypyidaw detention centre, to which he was later transferred, “it wasn’t even a new bucket, they were paint buckets”, he said. “They didn’t beat me, but they did push and shove me.” In Naypyidaw, prisoners were locked away for 20 hours a day, Turnell said.

“In the monsoon, the roof would leak and we would sit there all night sometimes with water just pouring down through the roof, clutching your clothes and blanket to try to keep them dry,” he said.

Turnell said his wife, Ha Vu, an economist at Australia’s Macquarie University, helped him survive with phone chats and by regularly sending books, cookies and cake through the Australian embassy. The economist was sentenced in September to three years’ imprisonment for breaching Myanmar’s Official Secrets Act—charges he denied-before being released in last week’s amnesty along with former British ambassador Vicky Bowman and Japanese journalist Toru Kubota. — AFP



**YANGON, Myanmar:** Australian economic adviser Sean Turnell (L) and Australian Charge d’Affaires to Myanmar Angela Corcoran, after Turnell’s release from Insein prison in Yangon. — AFP