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China warns 'NATO-like' alliances could lead to conflict in Asia-Pacific

Austin calls for top-level defence talks with Beijing



SINGAPORE: (L-R) John Chipman, CEO of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, and Germany's Defence Minister Boris Pistorius attend the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore on June 4, 2023. — AFP

SINGAPORE: China's defence minister warned Sunday against establishing NATO-like military alliances in the Asia-Pacific, saying they would plunge the region into a "whirlpool" of conflict. Li Shangfu's comments came a day after US and Chinese military vessels sailed close to each other in the flashpoint Taiwan Strait, an incident that provoked anger from both sides.

"Attempts to push for NATO-like (alliances) in the Asia-Pacific is a way of kidnapping regional countries and exaggerating conflicts and confrontations," Li told a security conference in Singapore also attended by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Li warned that these alliances would "plunge the Asia-Pacific into a whirlpool of disputes and conflicts". Li's comments echoed long-held Chinese criticism of the United States' efforts to shore up alliances in the region and counter China's rise.

The United States is a member of

AUKUS, which groups it with Australia and Britain. Washington is also a member of the QUAD group, which includes Australia, India and Japan. "Today's Asia-Pacific needs open and inclusive cooperation, not budding up into small cliques," Li said at the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit.

Li sought to paint the United States as the trigger of regional instability, and China as seeking to ease tensions. "It cannot be denied that if a fierce conflict or confrontation occurs between China and the United States, it would bring unbearable pain for the world," he said.

Miscalculations

On Saturday, Austin called for top-level defence talks with Beijing to prevent miscalculations. "The more that we talk, the more that we can avoid the misunderstandings and miscalculations that could lead to crisis or conflict," Austin said.

Also on Saturday, the United States deployed a destroyer from its 7th Fleet along with a Canadian naval vessel through the Taiwan Strait. China responded by sending one of its naval ships close to the US destroyer, the USS Chung-Hoon, according to the Pentagon.

The strait is one of the world's most tense potential military flashpoints. China claims Taiwan as its territory — vowing to take it one day, by force if necessary — and has in recent years ramped up military and political pressure on the island.

Austin on Sunday described the incident as "extremely dangerous", saying the Chinese vessel crossed "probably 150 feet (46 metres)" in front of the Chung-Hoon. "I call upon the (Chinese) leadership to really do the right things to rein in that kind of conduct, because I think accidents can happen that could cause things to spiral out of control," Austin told reporters in Singapore.

Saturday's Taiwan Strait encounter followed what the US military said was an "unnecessarily aggressive maneuver" by one of Beijing's fighter's near a US surveillance plane in the South China Sea last week.

Li told the Singapore audience on Sunday that the onus was on the United States to pull its military presence away from areas near China. "Our Chinese military aircraft and warships won't ever go near the airspace and territorial waters of other countries to engage in so-called navigational hegemony," Li said.

"The best thing would be if all countries, and especially their warplanes and warships, refrained from wandering through other country's territorial airspace and waters. What are you hanging around here for?"

Austin and Li shook hands and spoke briefly at the Singapore event's opening dinner on Friday, but there was no substantive exchange. The United States had invit-

ed Li to meet with Austin on the sidelines of the conference, but China declined.

A senior US defense official told journalists Sunday that the US had also offered lower level meetings but that China didn't respond. A member of China's delegation told AFP that the removal of US sanctions on Li was a precondition for talks.

However, there have been some signs of improved dialogue between the two nations. CIA Director William Burns made a secret trip to China last month, a US official announced on Friday. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink will also travel to China on Sunday for a rare visit.

In his speech in Singapore on Saturday, Lloyd outlined Washington's extensive partnerships in the region. "America's partnerships are bringing the region closer together to help keep it free, open, and secure," he said. — AFP

NATO chief urges Turkey not to veto Sweden's bid

ISTANBUL: NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg on Sunday called on Ankara to drop its opposition to Sweden's bid to join the US-led defence alliance, hoping Stockholm's accession would be finalised "as soon as possible".

Pressure is building on Erdogan to greenlight Sweden's NATO membership ahead of a summit planned for July in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. "Membership will make Sweden safer but also make NATO and Turkey stronger," Stoltenberg told journalists after meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and newly appointed foreign minister Hakan Fidan, who was head of the intelligence agency, in Istanbul.

"I look forward to finalising Sweden's accession as soon as possible," he said. On Saturday Stoltenberg attended the inauguration of Erdogan, who was re-elected to serve another five years, in a lavish ceremony joined by dozens of world leaders in the capital Ankara.

NATO member Turkey has dragged its feet over admitting Sweden to the military alliance. It and Hungary are the only two NATO countries yet to ratify the membership bid. Sweden and Finland dropped decades of military non-alignment and applied to join the alliance in response to Russia's



ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan meets NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Dolmabahce Palace on June 4, 2023. — AFP

invasion of Ukraine. Finland formally joined NATO in April.

Anti-Turkey protests

Erdogan has accused Sweden of being a haven for "terrorists", especially members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group blacklisted by Turkey and its Western allies. "Sweden has taken significant concrete steps to meet Turkey's concerns," Stoltenberg said.

"This includes amending the Swedish constitution, ending arms embargo, stepping up counter-terrorism operations including against the PKK," he said. "Sweden has fulfilled its obligations." Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom also said Stockholm had fulfilled "all the commit-

ments" to join NATO and urged Turkey and Hungary to allow his country into the alliance. Ankara is especially displeased with anti-Turkey and anti-Erdogan protests in Stockholm. Swedish authorities allowed a "No to NATO, No Erdogan Laws in Sweden" demonstration to go ahead in the city centre on Sunday.

"Freedom of assembly and expression are core values in democratic societies. But we should remember why these are taking place," Stoltenberg said. "Organisers of these demonstrations want to block Sweden's accession to NATO and undermine its collaboration with Turkey against terrorism and weaken NATO," he added. "We should not allow them to succeed." — AFP

Moscow strike kills toddler in Dnipro

KYIV: Ukrainian rescuers outside the city of Dnipro on Sunday recovered the body of a two-year-old girl from the rubble left by a Russian strike on a residential area. On the other side of the border, Russian authorities asked villagers living in a heavily shelled district on the Ukraine border to leave their homes after deadly strikes prompted thousands to flee.

The Russian attack that hit the Pidhorodnenska suburb of the central city of Dnipro on Saturday came as Moscow has this week intensified aerial assaults on Ukraine. "At night, a girl's body was retrieved from under the rubble of a house in the Pidhorodnenska community" outside Dnipro, Serhiy Lysak, governor of Dnipropetrovsk region, said on Sunday.

"She just turned two." Officials said the strike killed the toddler, born in 2021, and wounded at least 22 others. Five children were in hospital, including three boys who were in a critical condition, they added.

Kyiv also said a Russian strike had hit an airfield in central Ukraine overnight, which Moscow appeared to confirm on Sunday, saying it had struck military air bases with long-range weapons overnight. The attacks came at the end of a day that saw Russia launch a series of air assaults on Kyiv, including rare day-time strikes.

The conflict, which has dragged on for more than 15 months, has escalated this week with increased attacks on both sides of the border. Kyiv has for months said it is preparing for a major counterof-

fensive against Moscow's forces.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has said the country is "ready" but pleaded for more Western weapons to counter Russia's air superiority. In a video published Sunday, the Ukrainian army appeared to call on soldiers to stay silent and said there will be no announcement on the start of the long-awaited offensive.

"Plans love silence," Deputy Defence Minister Ganna Malyar said on Telegram. "The start will not be announced," she added, accompanying the video showing soldiers placing fingers on their mouths.

'Bombed and bombed'

Russian authorities asked residents of villages of a heavily shelled district in the Belgorod region that borders Ukraine to leave their homes. Intensified Ukrainian shelling of the Shebekino district this week has left several people dead and forced thousands to leave the area for Belgorod city.

Belgorod governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Sunday some 4,000 people left border villages and were placed in temporary housing. He urged residents of several villages on the border to leave their homes. "I ask that in the villages of, first of all, the Shebekino district that has been shelled, to listen to the position of authorities and leave — temporarily leave — their homes," Gladkov said on Telegram.

He said the goal was "to safeguard what is most important: your life and the lives of your close ones". He said it was another "not calm night" in the district with "a lot of damage". Tatiana Kozheleva, a 64-year-old pensioner who left Shebekino and was receiving humanitarian aid in Belgorod, told AFP there was almost "nothing left" of the small city. "Our city Shebekino was bombed and bombed," she said. — AFP