

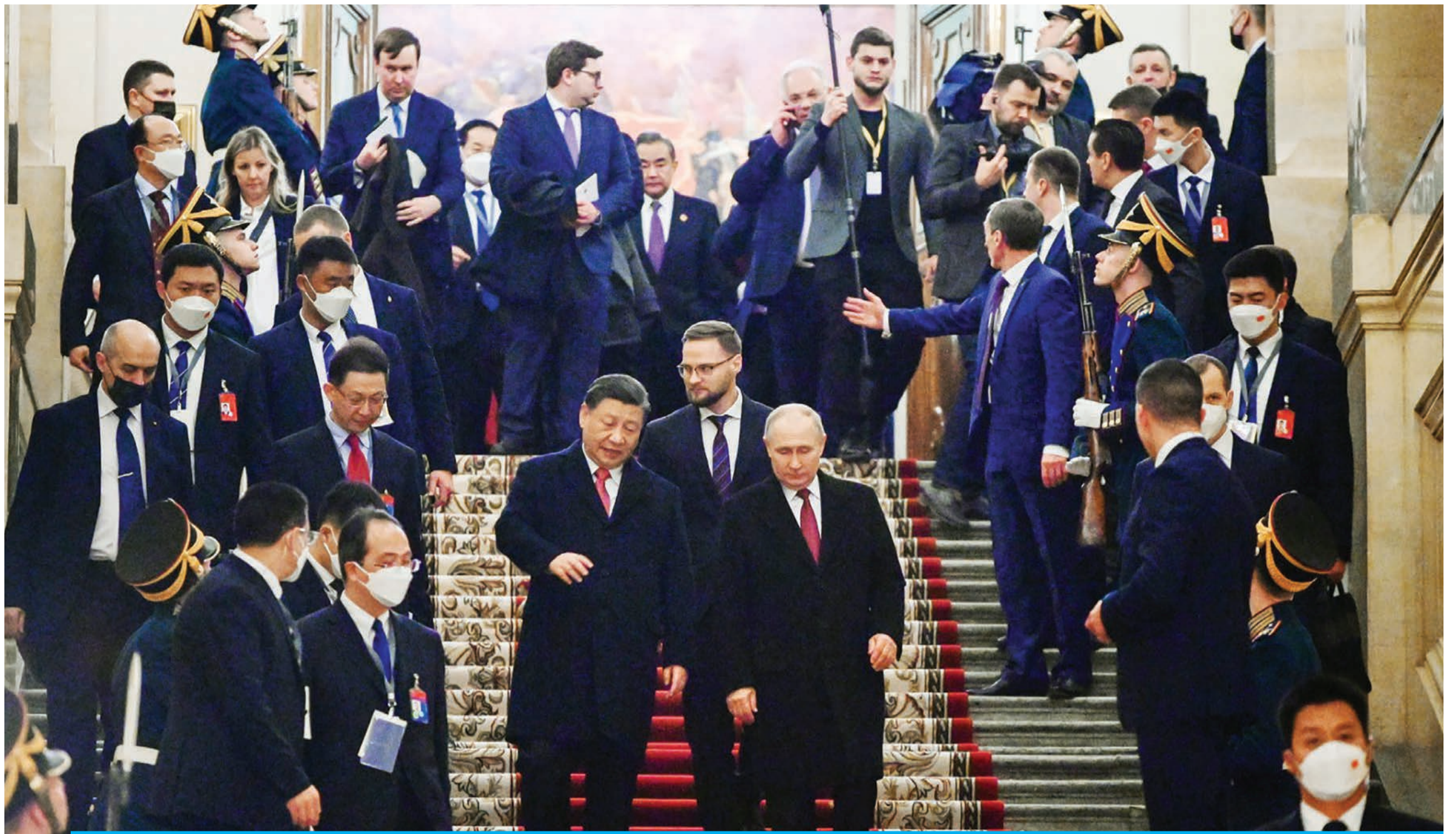


Rohingya sceptical of Myanmar refugee return offer

## Gaza fisherman tests waters in legal fight over blockade

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MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin and China's President Xi Jinping leave after a reception following their talks at the Kremlin in Moscow. — AFP

# Four dead as Russia strikes Ukraine school

## Xi departs Moscow, hails a 'new era' in their nations' ties

**KYIV:** A Russian drone attack on a school near Kyiv killed at least four people before Chinese leader Xi Jinping left Moscow on Wednesday at the close of a summit with President Vladimir Putin. Xi called each other "dear friend" and hailed a "new era" in their nations' ties following two days of talks marked by pomp and a display of unity against the West.

But there was no apparent breakthrough on the war in Ukraine, despite Beijing touting a "visit for peace", and few concrete economic proposals were signed. Both eager to curb Western dominance, Putin and Xi expressed concern about NATO expansion in Asia and agreed to deepen a partnership which has grown closer since Putin invaded Ukraine a year ago.

Xi's plane left Moscow's Vnukovo airport on Wednesday after being seen off by an honour guard, capping a visit that was seen as a boost for the internationally-isolated Russian leader. But in Ukraine, at least four people were killed and others wounded in a drone attack that hit a school in the Kyiv region late Tuesday, officials said Wednesday.

Ukraine's air force said Russia attacked Ukraine with 21 "Iranian-made" drones overnight, and 16 were shot down. During the Moscow summit Putin said he was open to talks on Ukraine and praised

Beijing's 12-point position paper on the conflict, which includes a call for dialogue and respect for all countries' territorial sovereignty.

After talks with Xi, Putin said that "many of the provisions" of China's initiative can form the basis of a peace settlement for Ukraine when Kyiv and the West are ready for it. "However, so far we have not seen such readiness on their part," he added. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Kyiv had invited China to talks, and was waiting for an answer from Beijing. The United States, however, said it does not see China as capable of being an impartial mediator—Washington's most direct criticism yet of Beijing's aim to be a middleman in efforts to end the conflict. On Wednesday, the Kremlin said it was not surprised by the West's "hostile" reaction to the summit.

### 'Unlimited possibilities'

Moscow and Beijing have over the past years ramped up cooperation, both driven by a desire to counterbalance US-dominated international order. The Chinese leader's Moscow visit has been viewed as a coup for Putin, who is subject to an International Criminal Court warrant over accusations of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children.

"I am sure that Russian-Chinese cooperation has truly unlimited possibilities and prospects," Putin said at a state dinner following the talks, where he toasted the "prosperity" of Russian and Chinese people. He also gushed over the "special nature" of the relationship between the two countries.

On the second day of his visit to Moscow, Xi said ties with Russia were "entering a new era." Putin called the talks "meaningful and frank" and said that Russia, which has been largely cut out of European markets because of sanctions, would be able to meet China's "growing demand" for energy.

Putin said the two countries had reached an agreement on the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline, which will send Russian natural gas to China via Mongolia. Despite Russia's keen interest, analysts have warned that there will be limits to the relationship.

### US 'undermining' global security

In a joint statement, the two leaders took aim at the West, accusing the United States of "undermining" global security, and expressed "great concern" over NATO's growing presence in Asia. China and Russia have often worked in lockstep at the UN Security Council, using their veto power as permanent

council members to counter the West.

Russia's assault on Ukraine has also deepened fears among Western powers that China could one day try to take control of the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which Beijing sees as part of its territory. China has sought to portray itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict, but Washington has said Beijing's moves could be a "stalling tactic" to help Moscow. The United States has also accused Beijing of mulling arms exports to Moscow, claims China has denied.

Xi's trip coincided with a surprise visit to Kyiv by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who on Tuesday also visited Bucha, a town where Russian forces were accused of committing atrocities last year. "Our talks with Mr Kishida were quite productive," said Zelensky. "I also heard a very concrete willingness of Japan to work together with us to even more actively mobilise the world for international order, to protect against aggression, to protect against Russian terror."

Kishida, the last Group of Seven leader to visit the country, had come under increasing pressure to make the trip, as Japan hosts the group's summit this May. Zelensky confirmed on Tuesday he would participate in the G7 summit via video link. — AFP

## Greek trains back on track after worst rail disaster

**ATHENS:** Intercity rail travel resumed in Greece on Wednesday for the first time since a head-on collision killed 57 people in the nation's worst rail disaster more than three weeks ago, operator Hellenic Train said. Trains from the Piraeus seaport to the capital's international airport, as well as links between Athens and Chalcis on the island of Evia and two other local services in the Peloponnese region have started running again, the company said.

But the line where the crash happened on February 28 -- the country's busiest, spanning 600 kilometres (370 miles) from Athens to the second-largest city of Thessaloniki in the north—will not reopen until April 1, acting Transport Minister Georgios Gerapetritis said.

The disaster sparked weeks of angry and occasionally violent protests, piling pressure on the conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis ahead of elections due in May. Most of the victims were university students returning from a long holiday weekend. Greece's transport minister resigned after the disaster.

The stationmaster on duty during the accident and three other railway officials have been charged and face possible life sentences. Greece's rail watchdog found serious safety problems across the network, including inadequate basic training of critical staff.

Panagiotis Terezakis, the new director general of the state-owned Hellenic Railways Organisation (OSE) that owns the network, said Wednesday the company "would do everything humanly possible to win back our passengers' confidence".



ATHENS: Protesters, including some holding placards with officials' portraits marked with a red cross such as Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (C), take part in a demonstration against the government and to voice outrage at the February 28, 2023, train disaster during a 24-hour strike, in Athens. — AFP

"We have to move forward after the tragic event that has shaken us all," he told journalists. On Tuesday, train drivers called for safety assurances including better monitoring of rail crossings, improved tunnel lighting, bridge inspection data and the removal of debris and overgrown vegetation from tracks.

Railway unions had long warned the network was underfunded, understaffed and accident-prone after a decade of spending cuts. The drivers' union said Tuesday that repeated warnings were "downplayed or not taken seriously."

At the peak of the demonstrations, more than 65,000 people took to the streets nationwide demanding accountability and calling for Mitsotakis's resignation, with some accusing the government of being "murderers". Many Greeks have been alarmed at the decay of public services amid large-scale privatisation, including passenger and freight trains, to pay off debts stemming from the country's 2009-2018 debt crisis. — AFP

## Defiant Johnson faces parliament grilling over 'Partygate'

**LONDON:** Britain's former prime minister Boris Johnson re-enters the bear pit of parliamentary inquisition on Wednesday for a grilling about "Partygate" that could decide his political future. In July, the end of Johnson's three years in 10 Downing Street played out in another parliamentary committee hearing, while outside the room his government was collapsing in a wave of ministerial resignations.

Voters' anger at the scandal about serial partying at Downing Street, in breach of COVID lockdown laws, was one backdrop to the resignations. But Johnson's supporters insist he was betrayed by Conservative colleagues, and are campaigning for his return ahead of a general election likely next year.

Opinion polls suggest that Johnson remains toxic for a large swathe of the electorate, and Wednesday's hearing by the cross-party privileges committee will reopen old wounds just as his successor, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, mounts a turnaround bid.

If the committee decides that Johnson lied to parliament about the parties, it could recommend his suspension from the House of Commons. If the full House agrees to a suspension of more than 10 sitting days, that could trigger a special election for his northwest London seat, if enough voters demand one.

This month, the committee found in an interim report that Johnson should have known the rules were being flouted. It released previously unseen photographs and also published WhatsApp messages showing senior aides struggling to come up with a public justification for the parties.

Hours before Wednesday's televised hearing, it published a larger 110-page bundle of evidence. It

includes a Downing Street official stating that Johnson "often saw and joined" gatherings in the complex during lockdowns and that "he had the opportunity to shut them down". "He could see what was happening and allowed the culture to continue," the official added. Johnson's former senior adviser Martin Reynolds also states that ahead of "Prime Minister's Questions" in early December 2021, he questioned him "whether it was realistic to argue that all guidance had been followed at all times".

Meanwhile, the evidence shows Cabinet Secretary Simon Case, Britain's most senior civil servant, denying he ever assured Johnson that Covid rules were followed at all times. On Tuesday, Johnson released his own 52-page dossier detailing his belief that he was truthful when he repeatedly told parliament that all regulations were respected. In hindsight, he recognised that he did "mislead" MPs, but only inadvertently and based on assurances given by top aides that the rules had been followed. "I did not intentionally or recklessly mislead the House" on any date, he wrote. "I would never have dreamed of doing so."

Johnson was fined by police for one gathering, along with Sunak, his finance minister at the time, while dozens of other staff received fines. The former Conservative leader apologised and corrected the parliamentary record last May after previously insisting to MPs that the gatherings were above board.

Johnson said that correction came at the earliest opportunity—after London police and senior civil servant Sue Gray had concluded their own investigations. Johnson, 58, nearly died himself of COVID, but relatives of patients who died said his claims were a brazen attempt to evade responsibility.

"Johnson's defence continues to highlight his lack of shame and humility," said Kathryn de Prudhoe, a psychotherapist whose father died early in the pandemic. "The victims in all of this are families like mine who lost loved ones... people who lost their jobs, livelihoods and homes or their mental health because they followed the rules that he made, but couldn't stick to," she said. — AFP