

Russia cautions regional allies against aligning with US



REUTERS

Russia on Friday cautioned allies across the former Soviet Union of the perils of aligning with the United States after what Moscow said was a Western-backed

coup attempt in Georgia similar to the Ukrainian "Maidan" revolution of 2014. In Tbilisi, thousands of Georgians took to the

streets over three consecutive nights to protest against what they said was a Russian-inspired "foreign agents" law that threatened to derail the country's bid

for closer ties with Europe, according to Reuters.

"It is very similar to the Kyiv Maidan," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told state television, referring to the 2014 Maidan revolution which toppled a pro-Russian president in Ukraine.

"It seems to me that all the countries located around the Russian Federation should draw their own conclusions about how dangerous it is to take a path towards engagement with the United States' zone of responsibility, its zone of interests."

Washington, Brussels and NATO say they are legitimately building ties with countries which became independent after the fall of the Soviet Union – and that many fear their much more powerful neighbour Russia.

For centuries, Russia has been the ultimate arbiter of affairs across the vast lands which for nearly three centuries made up the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union.

Washington and the broader West, Lavrov said, wanted to punish Russia because it was perceived as "too independent a player" which challenged the hegemony of the United States. Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister since 2004, said that events in Georgia were orchestrated from outside and motivated by a Western attempt to claw away Russia's traditional allies. He said Georgia's law on foreign agents, which parliament dropped on Friday, had been used as a pretext "to start what is, essentially, an attempt to force a change of power."

Italy's coast guard, navy, bring hundreds of migrants ashore



Police check a fishing boat with some 500 migrants in the southern Italian port of Crotona, on March 11, 2023. VALERIA FERRARO/AP

Italian coast guard and navy vessels on Saturday ferried hundreds of rescued migrants toward shore, while elsewhere in the Mediterranean Sea thousands of migrants overflowed from a shelter

on a tiny tourist island. The influx of sea arrivals came in the face of a crackdown by Italy's right-wing government on people smugglers announced only two days earlier, according to AP. The coast guard said in a statement that overcrowding on two vessels and adverse sea and weather conditions had complicated rescue operations that began on Friday in the Ionian Sea off Calabria.

A 94-meter (310-foot)-long coast guard vessel took 584 migrants aboard, while two smaller coast guard motorboats took on

379 and then transferred them to an Italian naval vessel, which was headed to Augusta, a port in eastern Sicily, as migrant shelters in Calabria quickly filled up.

Separately, a boat carrying 487 people, intercepted by Italian vessels some 60 nautical miles (112 kilometers) off Crotona in Calabria on Friday, was aided by two coast guard motorboats and a border police boat. The migrants disembarked in Crotona's port before dawn on Saturday.

A beach in Cutro, a town south of Crotona, is where survivors and bodies were

found on Feb. 26 after a wooden boat, crowded with migrants who had set out from Türkiye days earlier, broke apart on a sandbank.

The known death toll from the shipwreck climbed to 76 on Saturday after the bodies of two children and an adult were recovered, Italian news agency ANSA reported. Eighty passengers survived, but others were reported missing and are presumed dead.

Italian prosecutors are investigating whether authorities should have swiftly launched a rescue operation after a patrol plane operated by Fron-

tex, the European Union's border protection agency, spotted the wooden boat, hours before it broke apart dozens of meters (yards) from the beach.

Some 5,000 people, walking behind a bearer of a cross fashioned from the boat's wreckage, joined a procession to the beach in Cutro, demanding increased efforts to save migrants at sea.

The U.N. migration agency estimates some 300 people have died or are missing and presumed dead along the perilous central Mediterranean route this year.

Iran-Saudi Reconciliation: Why in China?

After the fifth round of Iraq talks in late April 2022, former Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi even stated that Iran and Saudi Arabia would be about to end the tense relationship between the two countries for years. Later, Oman also joined in the process of promoting the reconciliation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. So, in this China-Saudi-Iran joint statement, Iraq and Oman are especially thanked for hosting multiple rounds of the Riyadh-Tehran dialogue in 2021-2022. According to Iranian Journalist Abas Aslani, before the release of the joint statement by China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, the head of the Iranian delegation had a phone call with the Iraqi prime minister, thanking Iraq for hosting five rounds of

Iran-Saudi talks, saying that Baghdad's efforts invaluable in paving the way for an agreement.

So, why did Saudi Arabia and Iran sign the settlement agreement through the platform of Beijing in the end? I agree with some international observers that although Iraq and Oman played a very important role in this process, their international influence is not enough to support the final step of Saudi-Iran rapprochement. It is very possible that a settlement agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran requires a third party to provide some guarantee conditions and support. Obviously, such a function is only available to world powers. There are currently only two world powers that can assume such a role, the United States and China. But the bad relationship

between Washington and Tehran and the special relationship between the United States and Israel doom Washington to have no chance to play the role of mediator in Saudi-Iran relations. Beijing's advantage is that it can communicate smoothly with Saudi Arabia and Iran and both countries hope to strengthen cooperation with China. Also, China is currently willing to do such a thing.

Implementing agreements is more important

The Iran-Saudi deal to restore diplomatic relations is indeed cause for celebration. But the conclusion of the agreement is only a good start, and whether the normalization process of Saudi-Iranian relations can proceed smoothly is a more critical issue. This is not only

true for Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also for China. As some international observers have said, it is one thing for China to host the talks, but it is another for China to help implement the signed agreement on time. What kind of guarantees will China provide if one of the parties does not respect the agreement? Frankly speaking, although Saudi Arabia and Iran have reached an agreement to normalize relations, the contradictions between the two countries are still clearly visible.

Israel, which regards Iran as its number one enemy and is hoping to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, is obviously not happy to see a reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett said the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi

Arabia and Iran would be a serious and dangerous development for Israel, a political victory for Iran and a fatal blow to efforts to build a regional alliance against Iran. He sees the Saudi-Iran rapprochement as a complete failure for Israel's current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Institute for Arab [Persian] Gulf States, agrees that Iran and Saudi Arabia are trying to manage their rivalry, but it remains to be seen whether Tehran and Riyadh have the political will to resist Israel's sabotage attempts. But in any case, China's mediation of Saudi-Iranian relations this time is indeed a very positive and symbolic and diplomatic activity. It is indeed not easy to help Saudi Arabia and Iran, two countries with prominent contra-

dictions, to realize the normalization of relations. China's mediator role in this event is to be admired. Through the successful mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, to a certain extent, the outside world can change the inherent impression that China only or mainly focuses on economic issues in the Middle East and despises issues such as security. It also allows the world to see the successful practice of the "Global Security Initiative" proposed by President Xi Jinping. If the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran make progress as scheduled, the Middle East and the world will place more expectations on China, and the possibility of China's efforts to solve world problems will further increase. This is of course good news for a world struggling right now.

NEWS IN BRIEF

China names Li Qiang premier



REUTERS

AP – China on Saturday named Li Qiang, a close confidant of top leader Xi Jinping, as the country's next premier nominally in charge of the world's second-largest economy.

Li was nominated by Xi and appointed to the position at Saturday morning's session of the National People's Congress, China's ceremonial parliament. That came a day after Xi, 69, secured a norms-breaking third five-year term as state leader, setting him up to possibly rule for life.

Pope: Ukraine war fuelled not just by 'Russian empire'



REUTERS – The war in Ukraine is driven by the interests of several "empires" and not just of Russia's, Pope Francis said in an interview published on Friday.

Francis said the conflict was fuelled by "imperial interests, not just of the Russian empire, but of empires from elsewhere", according to Reuters.

He expressed a readiness to talk to Russian President Vladimir Putin to call for peace.

Chile's president shakes up cabinet



AP – President Gabriel Boric shook up his cabinet on Friday, replacing five of his 24 ministers on the eve of beginning his second year in power, announcing the change two days after Chile's lawmakers rejected a proposed tax overhaul for financing most of his government program.

It was the second time Boric has carried out a major cabinet reshuffle. The previous overhaul came in September when 62% of voters rejected a new constitution that had been championed by the president.