

China, Ukraine leaders speak for first time since war began



AP

REUTERS

International Desk

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he and Chinese leader Xi Jinping had a “long and meaningful” phone conversation Wednesday, their first known contact since Russia launched its “military operation” in Ukraine more than a year ago.

The phone call, which officials said lasted nearly an hour, was seen as a significant development in efforts to resolve the war. It comes two months after Beijing, which has long been aligned with Russia, said it wanted to act as a mediator in the conflict and after Xi visited Moscow last month, AP reported.

It also comes as Ukraine is readying its forces for an expected spring counteroffensive.

“I believe that this call, as well as the appointment of Ukraine’s ambassador to China, will give

a powerful impetus to the development of our bilateral relations,” Zelenskyy said in a Facebook post without elaborating. His office said more details of what was said would be published later in the day.

In China, the phone call was reported by state media. China Central Television said Beijing intends to send an envoy to Kyiv to discuss “a political settlement” for the war.

The White House on Wednesday welcomed the phone call, saying it was too soon to tell whether it would lead to a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, Reuters reported.

“That’s a good thing,” White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said. “Now, whether that’s going to lead to some sort of meaningful peace movement, or plan, or proposal, I just don’t think we know that

right now.” Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova commended China’s approach but was scathing about Ukraine’s stance. She praised Beijing’s “readiness to strive to establish a (peace) negotiations process,” while slamming what she called Kyiv’s “rejection of any sound initiatives aimed at a settlement.”

Talks between the two leaders had been anticipated for weeks, after China produced a 12-point proposal to end the fighting. The phone call was for China another step toward deeper involvement in resolving the conflict.

The peace proposal came on the heels of China’s announcement that it was keen to act as mediator in the war that has reenergized Western alliances that are regarded by Beijing and Moscow as rivals.

French PM seeks to turn page after pensions fight

France’s Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne Wednesday pledged to cut unemployment and make industry greener as she sought to turn the page on months of unrest over a contentious pension reform.

“I only believe in results. We need to obtain some in all areas, and I hope for them to be concrete, tangible, visible for French people,” she told reporters as she announced her government’s next steps, AFP reported.

Borne has been the unpopular face of President Emmanuel Macron’s flagship pension reform to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64, which he signed into law earlier this month despite repeated mass protests.

She invoked a controversial executive power to push the bill through parliament without a vote last month, and is now under more pressure than ever to find a majority to back any future legislation in its hung lower house.

Borne on Wednesday laid out the details of a 100-day target to relaunch Macron’s second term in office after his re-election in April 2022.

Her government would aim to improve work conditions, reduce unemployment, and make French industry more environmentally friendly among other measures, she said.

But a new bill on immigration, expected to be the next hot topic after the pension debate, would not



be presented until the autumn for lack of consensus.

“There is no majority to vote through such a bill,” Borne said. And “it’s not the moment to launch a debate on a topic that could divide the country.”

She said some 150 extra policemen would however be deployed to the Italian border to battle illegal immigration.

The pension reform has sparked mass strikes and protests across the country, and eroded Macron’s popularity just a year into his second term.

After months of keeping a low profile, the president has, since signing the law, embarked on trips around the country to meet members of the public face-to-face.

But he has been greeted by pan-bashing protesters on most of these forays into provincial France.



Demonstrators take part in a pan-banging protest during French President Emmanuel Macron’s televised address to the nation, after signing into law a pensions reform, in Strasbourg on April 17.

FREDERICK FLORIN/AFP

Constitutional reform as a factor for further development of state, society

By Bakhodir Abdullaev

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At the present stage, Uzbekistan is steadily moving along the path of large-scale reforms aimed at further development of the country and improving the welfare of the people. One of the significant events in the history of the country will be the upcoming referendum on the Constitution on April 30. A package of amendments, which should change the Basic Law by more than half, will be put to vote.

The current version of the Constitution has existed since 1992. The number of articles in the Basic Law is to be increased from the current 128 to 155, and the number of norms from 275 to 434, which will respectively change the content by 65%. Thus, the number and content of these changes and additions demonstrate the need to adopt a new version of the Constitution.

The necessity of reforming the Constitution was pointed out by President Mirziyoyev in his inaugural speech in November 2021, specifying that such a proposal came from the people of the country. On

June 20, 2022, at a meeting with members of the Constitutional Commission, the President proposed adopting amendments to the Constitution through a referendum. In the preparation of the document, more than 220 thousand proposals were received from the citizens of the country, and every fourth proposal was taken into account in the draft of the new Constitution. The amendments to the Constitution are being made in the context of the advancement of large-scale reforms in the country. In February 2017, the President of Uzbekistan approved the “Strategy of Actions on Five Priority Areas of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan” in 2017–21, which was successfully implemented in five stages, each of which provided for the approval of a separate annual state program for its implementation.

The five-year period of implementation of the Strategy of Actions was marked by a new stage of development of our republic, conducting structural reforms in all spheres of the social and political life of the country, creating conditions for ensuring the comprehensive and

accelerated development of the state and society, implementation of the priority directions on modernization of the country and liberalization of all spheres of life.

Within the framework of the Strategy of Actions on Five Priority Directions of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017–21 for the past period, about 300 laws and more than 4,000 decisions of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan were adopted, aimed at radically reforming all spheres of life of the state and society. As a result of reforms in the country, the political-legal, socio-economic, and scientific-educational foundations necessary for the construction of New Uzbekistan were created.

In 2022, the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–26 was adopted to identify priority areas of reforms aimed at further improving the well-being of people, transforming economic sectors, accelerating the development of entrepreneurship, unconditionally ensuring human rights and interests, and forming an active civil society. The implementation of measures under this Strategy will contribute to the further

development of the state and society.

In this regard, the updated Constitution unifies the people of Uzbekistan around the idea of building a developed state — New Uzbekistan, which takes into account the interests of all segments of the population. The general public, political parties, public organizations, representatives of expert and scientific circles, and intellectuals took an active part in the drafting process.

The bases of these constitutional amendments are such values as preserving and further strengthening the independence of the country, continuing the implementation of reforms aimed at the growth of welfare and interests of the people, the rule of law and justice, attention, and care for people.

In this regard, we can highlight a number of important factors in the new edition of the Constitution, which contribute to the further development of the state and society and mark a historic stage in the development of New Uzbekistan.

First, as a solid legal basis and a reliable guarantee of the long-term development of the state and society, it is indicated that

Uzbekistan is a “sovereign, democratic, legal, and social state”, and these principles cannot be changed. The new version emphasizes that “the Republic of Uzbekistan pursues a peace-loving foreign policy aimed at the full development of bilateral and multilateral relations with states and international organizations,” which will further enhance Uzbekistan’s image in the international arena.

Secondly, the draft law includes issues of improving the system of state power and administration as well as the separation of representative and executive local authorities. The powers of the Legislative Chamber and the Senate are considerably expanded, duplication in the work of the two chambers is eliminated, and their area of responsibility is clearly defined. There are also plans to give mahallas (neighborhood self-governed institutions) independent decision-making powers to solve everyday problems of the population and to create the organizational and financial capabilities to do so. All this will serve to increase transparency and effectiveness of decision-making by the state power.

Third, strong social protec-

tion is envisaged. In particular, the state will assume a number of new obligations to reduce poverty, ensure employment, and protect against unemployment. Overall, the norms containing the state’s social obligations are tripled. Fourth, changes are associated with the consolidation at the constitutional level of such issues as the organization of high-quality and qualified medical care, the development of education, the guarantee of the inviolability of private property, and the status of civil society institutions. Comprehensive environmental protection measures are envisaged as a mandatory condition for improving the quality of life and health of the population. The document establishes guarantees of personal rights and freedoms in accordance with accepted international standards.

Fifth, regarding the competitiveness of the economy and private entrepreneurship, a norm is being established according to which the state guarantees the protection of property rights and related rights, and the restriction of property rights shall be carried out only on the basis of a court decision.

Free movement of goods, services, labor, and financial resources is guaranteed in Uzbekistan. This creates a solid legal guarantee of stable economic growth and the free activity of entrepreneurs.

Sixth, the freedom of the media and their right to seek, receive, use, and disseminate information is guaranteed. For the first time, the Basic Law includes a separate chapter on civil society institutions and guarantees of their activity, which will serve as a solid basis for strengthening the atmosphere of openness, transparency and legality in society, the dialogue between the state and society, and the establishment of a strong public control.

In general, all these constitutional norms correspond to the priorities of the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan. In this regard, the upcoming referendum on the amendments to the Constitution of Uzbekistan will contribute to the continuation of large-scale reforms in the country, which create a solid foundation for the development of the state and society for the benefit of the present and future generations of Uzbekistan citizens.