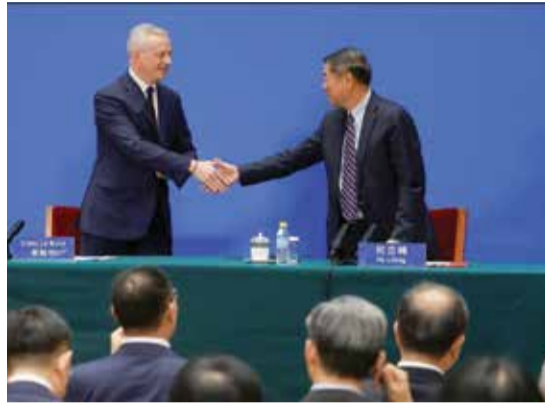


China hopes France can help take heat out of relations with EU



China's Vice Premier He Lifeng and French Economy and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire attend the China-France Economic and Financial Dialogue at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, China, on July 29, 2023.
● THOMAS PETER/REUTERS

China hopes France can "stabilise the tone" of EU-China relations, vice-premier He Lifeng told a senior French minister in Beijing on Saturday, as European leaders debate how to "de-risk" but also cooperate with the world's second-largest economy. He also told Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire that China is willing to deepen cooperation with France in traditional areas such as finance as well as in science and technological innovation,

in contrast with Beijing's more cautious though candid talks with visiting top US officials, Reuters reported. "It is hoped that France will stabilise the tone of friendly cooperation between China and the EU," He said.

While recent visits to China by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen hinged on talk of "decoupling", France's top trade official suggested a "deadline of the end of 2024 to reinforce our economic and financial operations", ahead of the two countries' ninth Economic and Financial Dialogue.

China is France's third largest trade partner behind the EU and the US, but French firms are becoming increasingly concerned they could get caught in the crossfire of rising rivalry between the world's two economic superpowers. EU governments last month also approved an 11th tranche of sanctions against Russia that could hit Chinese firms considered to be circumventing measures already in place. Le Maire said the three challenges the two countries should work together on are the green transition, reorganisation of value chains, and technological revolution, while also raising market access issues for French companies in the banking, nuclear, cosmetics and agricultural industries.

"It is essential to think about the expansion and deepening of economic and financial cooperation between France and China," La Maire said.

In a news conference after the discussions, Le Maire said important advances had been made in French-Chinese relations in the cosmetics, aerospace, food and beverages, and finance sectors, while He said the Chinese side appreciated France's decision to extend Huawei 5G licences in some cities. China's He told his guests the meeting was a "positive signal that China and France will work together to address challenges and inject stability into an uncertain world", which has "accelerated into a new situation of instability and uncertainty" not seen in 100 years.

More Wagner fighters move closer to Polish border: Poland PM

A group of a hundred soldiers from the Russian Wagner group have moved closer to the Belarusian city of Grodno near the Polish border, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Saturday.

Poland, a former Warsaw Pact member which has been a full member of the US-led NATO military alliance since 1999, has been concerned about the possible spillover of war on to its territory ever since the war began in Ukraine in February 2022, Reuters reported.

Earlier this month, Poland began moving more than 1,000 troops to the east of the country amid rising concerns that the presence of Wagner fighters in Belarus could lead to increased tension on its border.

"The situation is getting increasingly dangerous ... Most likely they (the Wagner personnel) will be disguised as the Belarusian border guard and help illegal migrants get to the Polish territory (and) destabilise Poland," Morawiecki said at a press conference in Gliwice, western Poland.

"They will most likely try to enter Poland pretending to be illegal migrants and this poses additional threats," Morawiecki said. However he did not give the source of his information on the Wagner movements, and Anton Motolko, founder of the Belarusian opposition Hajun project which monitors military activity in the country, told Reuters his group had not seen any evidence of the Wagner group moving closer to Grodno.

The city has a potentially significant position given it is near the Suwalki Gap, a strategic strip of land along the Polish-Lithuanian border, which divides Belarus, Russia's ally, from the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad.

Earlier in July, Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin was shown in a video welcoming his fighters to Belarus, telling them they would take no further part in the Ukraine war for now but ordering them to gather their strength for Africa - where they are involved in a number of conflicts - while they train the Belarusian army.

The following day, some Wagner fighters arrived at the training ground of the 38th airborne assault brigade outside the city of Brest, just a few miles from the Polish border.

Wagner's move to Belarus was part of a deal that ended the group's mutiny attempt in June, when they took control of a Russian military headquarters, marched on Moscow and threatened to tip Russia into civil war, President Vladimir Putin has said.



Poland has put up a fence along its border with Belarus.
● REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Spain's Socialists lose seat

REUTERS - Spain's Socialists have emerged with one seat fewer after counts of votes from abroad in last week's election, making it harder for them to be able to form a left-wing coalition as they would need the support of hardline Catalan separatists rather than just their abstention, analysts told Reuters on Saturday.

In Sunday's close-fought election, neither the left or right blocs won enough seats to form a majority and Catalan separatist parties Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Junts emerged as kingmakers, both controlling seven seats each. Esquerra is seen as likely to back Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez but if the fresh seat count is confirmed by the electoral commission it appears that Junts, the more hardline of the Catalan parties, would also have to actively support him for him to be able to form a government.

Kenyan opposition says reached deal with gov't



AFP - Kenya's opposition on Saturday announced it had reached an agreement with the government to form a joint committee "to resolve our differences amicably", following weeks of protests and political unrest.

"Determined to resolve our differences amicably for the benefit of all our people, we have therefore agreed with Kenya Kwanza to establish a committee," said the opposition statement, referring to the ruling party alliance. Since opposition leader Raila Odinga urged Kenyans to take to the streets in March, his Azimio alliance has staged nine days of sometimes violent protests against the government of President William Ruto.

Qur'an desecrators must be punished: Hezbollah leader

The leader of Hezbollah, one of Lebanon's Shia resistance movements, said Saturday that if governments of Muslim-majority nations do not act against the desecration of the Qur'an, Muslims should "punish" those who facilitate attacks on Islam's holy book. The comments by Hassan Nasrallah came in a

video address to tens of thousands gathered in Beirut's southern suburbs to mark Ashoura, a Shia holy day commemorating the seventh-century martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Imam Hussein (PBUH), AP wrote. Nasrallah slammed recent incidents in which the Qur'an was burned or oth-

erwise desecrated at authorized demonstrations in Sweden and Denmark. He said Muslims should watch for the outcome of an emergency meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, scheduled to take place in Baghdad on Monday to discuss the organization's response to the Qur'an burnings. The organization and its

member states should "send a firm, decisive and unequivocal message to these governments that any repeat of the attacks will be met with a boycott," Nasrallah said. If they do not, he said, Muslim youth should "punish the desecrators". He did not elaborate on what such a boycott and punishment should entail.



Iran-US talks course to remain unchanged



By Hassan Beheshtipour
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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Amidst recent developments concerning Robert Malley, the former US representative for Iran affairs, a question arises: Does his removal from office and exclusion from Iran-US talks jeopardize the course of talks between the two countries? Past experience indicates that in

the political structures of both Iran and the US, strategies remain largely unaffected by the dismissal or replacement of an individual. Strategies are fundamentally long-term and enduring. While tactics may shift with a new president taking office, strategies seldom undergo significant alterations.

Although Malley was a politician with a positive inclination toward engaging with Iran, it is crucial to remember that he was representing the US administration, and undoubtedly, he had America's interests at heart during the negotiations with Iran. One should

not interpret the situation in a way that suggests Malley was solely focused on securing Iran's interests, and his departure closes the chapter on talks. While his departure might slow down the pace of talks or make reaching an understanding more challenging, it cannot alter the trajectory of negotiations, as critical decisions in both Iran and the US are not solely made by a diplomat or even the secretary of state. Therefore, if there remains political will in Tehran and Washington to continue talks, recent events, such as Malley's dismissal and the release of an audio file

by an Iranian newspaper, will not have a destructive impact on the negotiations. Evidence also suggest that the governments of Iran and the US continue to emphasize diplomacy concerning the nuclear dossier, the lifting of sanctions, and preventing escalating tensions. Although the conditions of Iran-US talks may not be entirely transparent, making accurate analysis or predictions challenging, what is clear is that both sides are bargaining to gain more concessions and protect their red lines. An agreement is attained when both parties move toward

each other and are willing to compromise on certain demands to safeguard their core interests. Beyond media hypes and created distractions, the essential point is that Iran and the US require a deal even if it is short-term to prevent potential escalation of tensions, resolve the nuclear issue, and lift sanctions. Iran understands that without the lifting of sanctions, it cannot advance its development plans, and the US knows that tightening sanctions cannot prevent Iran from expanding its nuclear program. Therefore, dialogue remains the only viable path forward.

Iran Navy seeks ...

Admiral Irani further noted that he has traveled to St. Petersburg upon the official invitation of the Commander of the Russian Navy, adding that Iranian ships will also take part in the parade. Russia's naval event will be held today with the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and high-ranking defense officials from 21 countries. The Iranian Navy has deployed three vessels to Russia to take part in the parade north of the Caspian Sea.