

International

China, France leaders hold talks; France seeks EU unity on China

Series of cooperation deals to be signed

PARIS: Chinese President Xi Jinping and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron were to hold talks in Paris yesterday with the host leader seeking to forge a united European front in the face of Beijing's inroads on the continent. Xi's visit marks 55 years since French leader Charles de Gaulle established diplomatic relations with Beijing.

A series of cooperation deals on nuclear power, aerospace and clean energy initiatives, some involving lucrative contracts, are expected to be signed. Today, Macron and Xi will be joined by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and EU Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker to explore "points of convergence" ahead of an EU-China summit in Brussels next month.

In an interview with the Nice-Matin newspaper after hosting Xi at a dinner on the French Riviera, Macron said the joint talks "would allow us to establish a common definition for a new international order." Security was tight as Macron and his wife Brigitte hosted Xi and his singer wife Peng Liyuan for a private dinner at the resort village of Beaulieu-sur-Mer near Nice.

Macron offered Xi a French translation of Confucius dating from the 17th century, while Xi gave his host a precious vase depicting images of the two countries including a panda and a rooster. Before the dinner Xi travelled to the nearby principality of Monaco, where he was received by Prince Albert II. Xi had arrived from Italy, whose government became the first G7 state to sign up to his landmark new "Silk Road" infrastructure project, a massive undertaking to join Asia to Europe.

Italy's move came despite misgivings over the huge venture by other European nations wary of China's growing influence. Xi insisted it will be a two-way street of investment and trade. EU Budget Commissioner Günther Oettinger in a newspaper interview Sunday expressed "concern that in Italy and other European countries, infrastructure of strategic importance like power networks,

rapid rail lines or harbors are no longer in European but in Chinese hands."

Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas also voiced concern in an interview with the Welt am Sonntag newspaper. "In a world with giants like China, Russia or our partners in the United States, we can only survive if we are united as the EU," he said. "And if some countries believe that they can do clever business with the Chinese, then they will be surprised when they wake up and find themselves dependent."

Walking a tightrope

Macron will treat Xi to a military honor guard at the Arc de Triomphe war monument in Paris yesterday, before further talks at the Elysee Palace and a state dinner. Xi's visit poses a particular challenge for Macron, who wants to deepen EU ties with China while also pushing back against Beijing's growing global clout.

Europe's distrust of Chinese telecom giant Huawei, which is poised to become the dominant player in next-generation 5G mobile technology worldwide, is emblematic of the increasingly rocky relationship. Monaco, which is notably eyeing a share of Chinese luxury tourism and has its own foreign policy, last year signed an accord with Huawei to make the principality the first country entirely covered by the company's 5G mobile network by year end.

The US however is pressuring European allies not to use the Huawei technology, saying it creates a security risk by potentially letting Beijing snoop on sensitive communications. France has not ruled out using Huawei technology. Beijing has accused Washington of trying to escalate President Donald Trump's trade battle with China. As well as addressing commercial cooperation and strategic issues with Xi, Macron has also been urged to deal with the case of Meng Hongwei, Chinese former head of the France-based agency Interpol.

Meng's wife has had no news of her husband since his



PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron (2nd right) and Chinese President President Xi Jinping (2nd left) take part in a wreath laying ceremony on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris yesterday, as part of a state visit to France. — AFP

arrest in China nearly six months ago. It emerged Sunday she has written to Macron asking him to bring up his disappearance with Xi. Meng is believed to be facing corruption charges. Despite the many sources of friction, France wants to engage China as a closer partner as Washington

makes a pointed withdrawal from global affairs under Trump's "America First" policy. For example, Macron may seek more Chinese support for the French-backed G5 Sahel force fighting Islamist extremists in Western Africa, French presidential aides said. — AFP

News in brief

Iran floods leave 12 dead

TEHRAN: At least 12 people were killed and 68 injured in floods that have swept across most Iranian provinces, the country's emergency services said yesterday. National Emergency Service chief Pirhossein Koolivand told state television the initial casualty toll in the southern city of Shiraz was 11 dead and 68 wounded, while another person was killed in Sarpol-e Zahab in the western province of Kermanshah. Iran has been facing unprecedented floods in 25 of its 31 provinces, the country's Crisis Management Organization said. The latest floods have struck mostly west and southwest Iran and follow major flooding on March 19 in the northeast's Golestan and Mazandaran provinces, for which no official casualty toll has been issued. Emergency services have been hampered by Iranian New Year holidays, with many employees on vacation. — AFP

Sudanese journalists protest

KHARTOUM: Dozens of Sudanese journalists yesterday protested in downtown Khartoum demanding the release of a prominent editor detained for criticizing a state of emergency imposed by President Omar Al-Bashir, witnesses said. Osman Mirghani, editor-in-chief of independent daily Al-Tayar, was taken away by security agents from his office on the night of February 22 after making televised comments on Bashir's decision to impose a nationwide state of emergency. Bashir imposed the state of emergency after an initial crackdown failed to quell widespread protests against his administration that erupted in December. The journalists gathered in downtown Khartoum to express their solidarity with Mirghani and to fight for freedom of expression in the east African country. "We are the voice of our own people and not of the regime," they chanted and carried banners demanding Mirghani's release, witnesses said, before dispersing. — AFP

Shooter kills five in China

BEIJING: A person wielding a gun killed five people in northern China before being arrested by police, local authorities said yesterday. Police seized bullets from the suspect, who was wounded in the incident, said officials in Tongliao - a city in China's Inner Mongolia region - citing a police statement. The shooting took place around 3.30pm and the case is under investigation, according to a statement on the local government's official Twitter-like Weibo account. District police did not immediately respond to AFP's request for comment. Gun violence is rare in China, where the government tightly restricts ownership of firearms. There are no official statistics on gun-related deaths. In November 2017, three people were shot dead and six others wounded in southern Guangdong province. — AFP

9,000 foreign IS relatives

AIN ISSA: More than 9,000 foreigners, mostly children, linked to the Islamic State group are present in a camp for the displaced in northeast Syria, a Kurdish spokesman said yesterday. The total number of foreigners in Al-Hol camp includes more than 6,500 children, Luqman Ahmi, official spokesman for the Kurdish authorities said. The figure was from a week ago, he said, before the US-led Kurdish-backed Syrian Democratic Forces announced the end of the IS "caliphate" in the eastern village of Baghouz. Tens of thousands of people fled the shrinking jihadist bastion over the past months. Suspected jihadists have been weeded out and detained. Women and children have meanwhile been trucked up to Kurdish-held camps for the displaced further north including Al-Hol. — Reuters

Brexit fatigue grips UK; saga groans on

LONDON: Keep calm and carry on? Brexit fatigue is permeating Britain as the final moves in the long-running saga create confusion and unease about how it will all end up. EU leaders on Thursday agreed to extend the Brexit deadline triggered two years ago, leaving the final date of Britain's withdrawal in doubt. A British government source earlier this week said it was like witnessing "the last days of Rome" as Prime Minister Theresa May failed to secure Brexit by the original scheduled date of March 29.

The Conservative leader on Thursday persuaded EU leaders to delay Brexit until May 22 if next week — at the third time of asking - they can agree to the divorce deal struck between London and Brussels, and April 12 or a later date if they cannot. Even the normally reserved May snapped on Wednesday, voicing her frustration at MPs' inability to get it "over and done with".

European leaders and analysts believe she still faces a mountain to climb in order to get MPs to back the withdrawal agreement. "It's possible that she will convert enough of the dissenters to enable her vote to pass on the fourth or fifth attempt," Professor Iain Begg, from the European Institute at the London School of Economics

Chinese investment in Europe: A story of cash and concerns

PARIS: Chinese firms have plowed at least 145 billion euros (\$164 billion) into Europe since 2010, but investment has been slowing recently as several European governments tighten rules on acquisitions by foreign firms. As President Xi Jinping makes a crucial visit to Italy promoting China's new Silk Road project, the EU remains divided over the best approach towards Beijing.

Buying spree

Chinese direct investment into the European Union in 2010 totaled just 2.1 billion euros. That climbed rapidly to 20.7 billion in 2015 and then jumped to 37.2 billion in 2016, according to a study by Rhodium Group, as Chinese firms went on a buying spree. Sweden's Volvo Cars, Italian tyre-maker Pirelli, French holiday group Club Med and German machine tool firms Kuka and KraussMaffei have all passed into Chinese hands this decade.

But the volume of Chinese investments has fallen since 2016, declining to 29.1 billion in 2017 and 17.3 in 2018. The study's authors put the drop down to Beijing clamping down on investments made by overindebted firms as well as tightening regulations in Europe. Since 2000, 60 percent of Chinese investment in Europe has come from state-controlled groups.

Going south, and east

While concerns about Chinese investment have grown in France and Germany - countries in southern and eastern Europe still have the welcome mat out. Rome is ready to sign up to China's new Silk Road project, a \$1 tril-

lion infrastructure project, following fellow EU nations Greece, Hungary, Poland and Portugal. Athens ceded its key port of Piraeus to China's freight giant Cosco, which also controls container ports in Valencia and Bilbao in Spain.

Portugal strengthened its ties with China during the financial crisis, with Chinese investment rising to 6 billion euros, according to Rhodium, as Chinese firms made investments into its leading private bank, an insurance firm and the electricity network operator. Lisbon hasn't opposed China Three Gorges trying to take over the nation's leading electricity firm, Energias de Portugal (EDP). In the Czech Republic, a visit by Xi in 2016 sealed massive investments from energy firm CEFC in media firms, an airline and a football club. CEFC's owner Ye Jianming was named an economic adviser to Czech President Milos Zeman.

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US warns allies

The United States, which is locked in a trade war with China, has stepped up its warnings. Washington has put particular pressure on Germany, threatening to stop sharing intelligence if Berlin lets Chinese equipment into next-generation mobile phone networks. The United States also publicly voiced this month its opposition to China acquiring Energias de Portugal. A White House official, Garrett Marquis, earlier this month tweeted that there is "no need for Italian government to lend legitimacy to China's infrastructure vanity project". — AFP

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PARIS: A demonstrator wearing a costume of the Chinese President Xi Jinping stands beside people holding Tibetan flags as they take part in a demonstration over China's human rights record near the Eiffel Tower on the Trocadero esplanade yesterday. — AFP

over the coming days, while a petition calling for Britain to stay in the EU has topped more than three million signatures. Liberal newspaper The Guardian said Brexit had revealed a country that was "incoherent, entitled, incapable of compromise... wholly unrealistic and startlingly ignorant" about the European Union.

'I hate them all'

Journalists are not spared Brexit fatigue. "I sat on the train heading into Westminster one morning this week and felt I could cry," wrote Matt Chorley, editor of The Times newspaper's Red Box political website. "Let me tell you which people in politics I can't stand: everyone. 'Nobody has said anything new, interesting or remotely helpful in these debates for about two years. 'It's all so bloody depressing. I hate them all.' Even the government is not immune. 'This could be all over in two months, and we could see our families again,' one government source said Thursday.

The "constitutional crisis", as the government's chief legal advisor describes it, stems from May's lack of a parliamentary majority. She is therefore at the mercy of the various factions within her centre-right party, divided between eurosceptics and europhiles, and of the right-wing Northern Irish allies that the Conservatives rely upon for support. After a meeting of the party's 1922 Committee of backbenchers, one Conservative MP told AFP: "There's no confidence, no leadership - it's a mess". — AFP

Polish dailies print blank front page in EU copyright appeal

WARSAW: Major Polish newspapers printed blank front pages yesterday in an appeal to the European Parliament to adopt controversial copyright reforms that have pitted traditional media firms against internet giants. "Today, we appeal to Polish members of the European Parliament for solidarity in supporting a vote on the Copyright Directive in the digital single market," read a petition signed by editors-in-chief of 30 Polish national and regional dailies backing the reforms.

"Creators do not receive sufficient compensation for disseminating their works on the Internet. They often live in real poverty or leave the profession," said the statement published by the centrist Rzeczpospolita daily and other newspapers including the liberal Gazeta Wyborcza and the Fakt tabloid. The run-up to the European Parliament vote on Tuesday has seen furious lobbying and protests by both supporters and opponents of the law, which is designed to update European copyright legislation that pre-dates most online social media and is now nearly two decades old.

Under the changes, European law for the first time would hold platforms legally responsible for enforcing copyright, requiring them to check everything that their users post to prevent infringement. The reform, two years in the making, is loudly backed by media companies and artists who want to obtain a better return from web platforms - such as YouTube or Facebook - that use their content. The new directive "will support creators, but will not harm Internet users. It will not take away the rights to links, will not ban memes or bring new obligations for non-commercial portals," it argues.

But the directive is strongly opposed by internet giants such as YouTube-owner Google, which make huge profits from the advertising generated on content they host, and also by supporters of a free internet, who fear it will result in unprecedented restrictions to web freedom. Tens of thousands of protesters rallied in cities around Germany on Saturday under the slogan "Save the Internet". — AFP