

Blinken warns Central Asia for Ukraine conflict danger

AP ANKARA

The Biden administration on Tuesday pledged to support the independence of the five Central Asian nations in a not-so-subtle warning to the former Soviet states that Russia's value as a partner has been badly compromised by its year-old war against Ukraine.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, shakes hands with Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Astana on Tuesday.

In Kazakhstan for a series of meetings with top Central Asian diplomats, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said no country, particularly those that have traditionally been in Moscow's orbit, can afford to ignore the threats posed by Russian aggression to not only their territory but to the international rules-based order and the global economy.

In all his discussions, Blinken stressed the importance of respect for "sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence."

The Central Asian states were headed to a studied position of neutrality on Ukraine, neither supporting Russia's invasion nor U.S. and Western condemnations of the war.

"Ever since being the first nation to recognise Kazakhstan in December of 1991, the United States has been firmly committed to the sovereignty,

territorial integrity and independence of Kazakhstan and other nations across the region," Blinken said after meeting in Astana with the foreign ministers of the so-called C5+1 group, made up of the U.S. and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

"In our discussions today, I reaffirmed the United States' unwavering support for Kazakhstan, like all nations, to freely determine its future, especially as we mark one year since Russia lost its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in a failed attempt to deny its people what they freely determined," Blinken told reporters at a news conference with Kazakh Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi.

Tleuberdi, as Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said earlier, thanked Blinken for the US commitment to Kazakhstan's freedom, but signalled that his country was unlikely to adopt either a pro-Russian or pro-Western position. Tleuberdi said Kazakhstan would continue to act in its own national interest given "the complex international situation."

Our country continues a balanced, multilateral foreign policy," he said. Tleuberdi said that while

Kazakhstan has very close and historic ties with both Russia and Ukraine, it would not allow its territory to be used for any Russian aggression or sanctions evasion.

He also said that even though Kazakhstan shares the world's longest land border with Russia, it did not see a threat from Moscow.

Blinken's visit to Astana on Tuesday, and Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan on Wednesday, mark his first trip to Central Asia as secretary of state and come just days after the one-year anniversary of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, which has rattled the region.

None of the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia, traditionally viewed as part of the Kremlin's sphere of influence, publicly backed the attack. Kazakhstan welcomed tens of thousands of Russians fleeing from the military call-up last fall.

Tokayev has spoken by phone with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy three times since Russian troops rolled into Ukraine last February, calling for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict in accordance with the U.N. charter and international law.

Jaishankar calls for decisive action against terrorists

PTI NEW DELHI

India on Tuesday urged the international community to resolutely display "zero tolerance" towards terrorism, saying the scourge is the most "indefensible violation of human rights" and those perpetrating it should always be held accountable, in a veiled reference to Pakistan.

In a video message at the High-Level Segment of the 52nd session of the UN Human Rights Council, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said India has been at the forefront of collective efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals have been seriously set back," Jaishankar said.

India believes that the world must resolutely display zero tolerance. After all, terrorism is the most indefensible violation of human rights and has no justification in any circumstances. Its perpetrators must, therefore, always be held accountable," he said without naming any country.

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No clear conclusion on Covid-19 origin theory: China

PTI WASHINGTON

There is no definitive conclusion that the COVID-19 pandemic, originated from a lab in China, the White House has said.

The US government is still looking at the pandemic's origin, which has been the subject of vigorous debate among academics, intelligence experts and lawmakers.

National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby's remarks came following a report that the US Energy Department has concluded the virus most likely leaked from a lab in China.

The Wall Street Journal on Sunday, citing a classified intelligence report recently provided to the White House and key members of Congress, said the virus that drove the COVID-19 pandemic, killing close to 7 million people globally, most likely emerged from a laboratory in China.

Responding to questions about the report, Kirby said: "The intelligence community and the rest of the government are still looking at this. There's not been a definitive conclusion, so it's difficult for me to say, but I should I feel like I should have to defend press reporting about a possible preliminary indication here."

"What the President (Joe Biden) wants is facts. He wants to see the science and the government designed to go get those facts, and that's what we're doing. And we're just not there yet," Kirby told reporters at a daily White House news conference on Monday.

The Huanan market in central China's Wuhan city was the epicentre of the pandemic. From its origin there, the SARS-CoV-2 virus rapidly spread to other locations in Wuhan in late 2019 and then to the rest of the world.

According to the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times, the department's conclusion was made with "low confidence," meaning there was a level of certainty that was not high.

"And when we're there yet and it is ready to be briefed to the American people and the Congress, then we're going to do that," he said.

Putin orders tightening of Ukraine border as drones hit Russia

AP KYIV

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday ordered officials to tighten controls at the border with Ukraine after a spate of drone attacks that Russian authorities blamed on Kyiv delivered a new challenge to Moscow more than a year after its full-scale invasion of its neighbour.

One drone crashed just 100 kilometres (60 miles) away from Moscow in an alarming development for Russian defences.

While Putin didn't refer to any specific attacks in a speech in the Russian capital, his comments came hours after drone attacks targeted several areas in southern and western Russia and authorities closed the airspace over St. Petersburg in response to what some reports said was a drone.

Also Tuesday, several Russian television stations aired a missile attack warning that officials blamed on a hacking attack. The drone attacks caused no casualties but provoked a security stir as the war with Kyiv stretched into its second year last week.

Ukrainian officials didn't immediately claim responsibility for the attacks, but they similarly avoided directly acknowledging responsibility for previous strikes and sabo-

Pilot injured in copter crash

Moscow (AP) - A helicopter crashed near Russia's Arctic port of Murmansk, leaving a pilot with "serious" injuries and three other people only slightly hurt, the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry said on Tuesday.

According to a ministry statement, nine people were travelling in the Mi-8 aircraft from Krasnoshele to Lovozero, two remote outposts in Russia's Kola Peninsula east of Murmansk.

The statement said the crash may have been caused by the pilots likely losing control of the aircraft after drifting into a snowy gust. It added that emergency crews were dispatched to the crash site.

While emphasising Ukraine's right to hit any target in Russia following the full-scale invasion that began last year.

A flurry of drone attacks on Monday night and Tuesday morning targeted regions inside Russia along the border with Ukraine and deeper into the country, according to local

Russian authorities. A drone fell near the village of Gabustovo, 100 kilometres (60 miles) from Moscow, and another fell near the region surrounding the Russian capital, said in an online statement.

The drone didn't inflict any damage, Yeliseyev said. He didn't specifically describe the drone as Ukrainian, but said that it likely targeted "a civilian infrastructure object."

Pictures of the drone showed it was a Ukrainian-made type. It reportedly had a range of up to 800 kilometres (nearly 500 miles), but isn't capable of carrying a large load of explosives, Russian forces early Tuesday shot down a Ukrainian drone over the Bryansk region, local Gov. Aleksandr Bogomaz said in a Telegram post. He said there were no casualties.

Three drones also targeted Russia's Belgorod region on Monday night, with one flying through an apartment window in its namesake capital, local authorities reported.

Regional Gov Vyacheslav Gladkov said the drones caused minor damage to buildings and cars but large loads of explosives. The Russian Defence Ministry said that Ukraine used drones to attack facilities in the Kursk region and neighbouring Adygea.

Migrants paid 8,000 euros for deadly voyage to Italy

AP CROTONE

Rescue teams pulled another body from the sea on Tuesday, bringing the death toll to 64, as prosecutors identified suspected smugglers who allegedly charged 8,000 euros (nearly USD 8,500) each for the "voyage of death" from Turkey to Italy.

Premier Giorgia Meloni sent a letter to European leaders demanding quick action to the migration crisis, insisting that only way to deal with it seriously and humanely is to stop migrants from risking their lives on dangerous sea crossings.

"The point is, the more people who set off, the more people risk dying," she told RAI state television late on Monday. At least 61 people, including eight children, died when their overcrowded wooden boat slammed into the shoals just a few hundred metres off Italy's Calabria coast and broke apart early Sunday in rough seas.

Eighty people survived, but dozens more are feared dead since survivors indicated the boat had carried about 170 people when it set off last week from Izmir, Turkey.

Aid groups at the scene have said many of the survivors bled from Afghanistan, including entire families, as

well as from Pakistan, Syria and Iraq. Rescue teams pulled one body from the sea on Tuesday morning, bringing the death toll to 64, said Andrea Moratto, one of the firefighter divers unit.

Crotone prosecutor Giuseppe Capocchia confirmed investigators had identified three suspected smugglers, a Turk and two Pakistani nationals.

A second Turk is believed to have escaped or died in the wreck. A friend told local media he had been driving Israel for a wedding and visiting on a highway near the Dead Sea when it was shot. The attackers remained at large on Tuesday.

Ganeles was the sole fatality of what the army said was a multi-site shooting spree a day earlier. The army said the attackers opened fire at an Israeli car near the Palestinian city of Jericho, hitting Ganeles.

The EU border agency Frontex has said its aircraft spotted the boat off Crotone late Saturday and alerted Italian authorities. Italy sent out two patrol vessels, but they had to turn back because of the poor weather. The rescue operation went out early Sunday after the boat had splintered.

"There was no delay," Placido said. "Everything possible was done in absolute prohibitive sea conditions."

'Motorist killed in West Bank was US citizen'

AP JERUSALEM

Jerusalem: Israeli authorities said on Tuesday that a motorist shot to death by a suspected Palestinian gunman in the occupied West Bank held both American and Israeli citizenship. It was the latest in a bloody string of violent attacks rolling the region.

The government identified the slain man as Eran Ganeles, 27, of West Hartford, Conn. A friend told local media he had been driving Israel for a wedding and visiting on a highway near the Dead Sea when it was shot. The attackers remained at large on Tuesday.

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