

WORLD
world**China says is no threat to EU, after army call**

Beijing, China

China said yesterday that it had never posed a threat to Europe as it responded to a proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron for a "European army" to defend the bloc against China, Russia, and even the US.

"We have never posed any threat to Europe," Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said, when asked about the issue at a daily press briefing in Beijing. Hua said that while "Europe has the right to decide its own foreign and defence policies", European leaders have in fact expressed a desire for closer cooperation with China.

Macron touched off a controversy last week with his proposal, which is a touchy issue among European countries keen to handle their own defence, and in light of US President Donald Trump's calls for Europe to foot more of the bill for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defence alliance.

Trump called Macron's idea "very insulting", tweeting that Europe should "first pay its fair share of NATO, which the US subsidises greatly".

Trump names new US envoy to Saudi Arabia

- Appoint made after two years of hiatus

- John Abizaid is a fluent Arabic speaker

- He wrote his master thesis at Harvard about Saudi

- Abizaid requires confirmation from the senate

AFP | Washington, United States

President Donald Trump on Tuesday tapped John Abizaid, a top US general from the Iraq war who has studied the Middle East for years, as ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

Abizaid is a fluent Arabic speaker of Lebanese Christian descent who headed US Central Command -- which covers the Middle East -- during the Iraq



The commander of US forces in the Middle East, General John Abizaid visits the Special Operation Forces Exhibition (SOFX) at King Abdullah Airbase Marka in Amman. (file)

war from shortly after the US invasion in 2003 through 2007.

The 67-year-old wrote his master's thesis at Harvard University about Saudi Arabia, studying how the kingdom makes its decisions on defence spending, in a paper that won acclaim in academic circles.

A California native, Abizaid graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point and later won a scholarship to study in Jordan, where he honed his Arabic, which he did not speak as a child.

Trump has been slow in filling key posts amid his promises to shake up Washington. Trump quickly forged a close relationship with Saudi Arabia upon taking office. But the absence of an ambassador in Riyadh, nearly two years into his presidency, has become more glaring amid rising tensions between the countries.

Abizaid requires confirmation from the Senate, which would appear likely as the retired four-star general has long enjoyed respect in Washington.

Shortly after taking over as CENTCOM commander, Abizaid told reporters that US forces were facing a "classical guerrilla-type campaign" from remnants of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party.

His choice of words contradicted his bosses, who initially tried to portray the Iraq invasion as a quick victory, but then defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld did not move to replace him amid admiration for Abizaid's skills.

And soon after retiring in 2007, Abizaid said that, while the United States should try to prevent Tehran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, "there are ways to live with a nuclear Iran," describing the clerical state's behaviour as rational and noting the United States also dealt with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union.

Trump, the real estate mogul turned president has shown a fondness for appointing retired generals, with Jim Mattis as defence secretary and John Kelly as his chief of staff.

Sri Lanka parliament votes out Rajapakse's government

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's parliament passed a motion of no-confidence in the controversially appointed government of Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday, a day after the Supreme Court overturned a presidential decree dissolving the legislature.

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya ruled that a majority of the 225-member assembly supported the motion against Rajapakse who was made prime minister on October 26 in place of Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The result does not auto-

matically mean that Wickremesinghe, who had refused to leave the prime minister's residence, has won the constitutional showdown. President Maithripala Sirisena, who had backed Rajapakse, retains the power to choose the next prime minister.

Amid chaotic scenes, Rajapakse, 72, and his legislator son Namal walked out of the red-carpeted chamber just before the speaker called for a vote. MPs loyal to Rajapakse attempted to grab the mace to disrupt the vote, but Jayasuriya went ahead.

'Robocop' on patrol at Singapore summit

Singapore, Singapore

Hi-tech Singapore has deployed an autonomous robot with a swivelling camera for a head and flashing lights to patrol a summit venue -- arresting the attention of amused passers-by who stopped to snap selfies.

The white, four-wheeled buggy, measuring about five-feet (1.5 metres), trundled around the perimeter of a convention centre in the city-state, providing additional security at a meeting of world leaders.

The so far unnamed robot, decked out with flashing blue and red lights, is a prototype reportedly developed by the police, which can transmit a 360-degree picture of the area it is patrolling.

It navigates independently on a pre-mapped route and can avoid obstacles, local media reported, citing police.

But rather than fearing the long robotic arm of the law, many passers-by were amused by the device, with some mistaking it for a gigantic toy.

A handful stopped to snap



The white, four-wheeled buggy, patrolling the convention centre

selfies, while one man marched next to it grinning broadly as it wheeled slowly around near the convention centre.

"It's so cute, it looks like a toy," said Chinese holidaymaker Ruan Min, taking a picture as her four-year-old daughter chased the robot down the street.

Singapore, known for its strict law and order, has rolled out a major security operation to secure this week's meetings, which are organised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and attended by 20 world leaders.

NASA wants people on Mars within 25 years

AFP | Washington, United States

Deadly radiation from the cosmos, potential vision loss, and atrophying bones are just some of the challenges scientists must overcome before any future astronaut can set foot on Mars, experts and top NASA officials said Tuesday.

The US space agency believes it can put humans on the Red Planet within 25 years, but the technological and medical hurdles are immense.

"The cost of solving those means that under current budgets, or slightly expanded budgets, it's going to take about 25 years to solve those," said former NASA astronaut Tom Jones, who



Former NASA Astronaut, Tom Jones, speaks during a news conference



Mars is the fourth planet from the Sun and is the second smallest planet in the solar system. Named after the Roman god of war, Mars is also often described as the "Red Planet" due to its reddish appearance

flew on four space shuttle missions before retiring in 2001.

"We need to get started now on certain key technologies," he told reporters in Washington.

At an average distance of about 140 million miles (225 million kilometers), Mars poses scientific problems an order of magnitude greater than anything encountered by the Apollo lunar missions.

With today's rocket technology, it would take an astronaut up to nine months to reach Mars -- the physical toll of floating that long in zero gravity would be huge.

For instance, scientists think prolonged weightlessness can cause irreversible changes to

blood vessels in the retina, leading to vision degradation.

And after a while in zero G, the skeleton starts to leach calcium and bone mass.

With gravity only one-third of Earth's, scientists don't yet know the effects of a presumed one-year mission to the surface of Mars. One way to reduce wear and tear on the human body is to dramatically cut down on travel time to Mars. Jones called for nuclear propulsion systems that would have the added benefit of producing electricity on flights.

"If we start now, in 25 years we might have these technologies available to help us and protect us from these long transit times," he said.