

India, Sri Lanka seek closer military ties to counter China



India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met Saturday with recently elected Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa

Colombo

Sri Lanka and India vowed to strengthen military ties and widen maritime links with neighbouring countries after security talks, the president's office said yesterday.

India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met Saturday with recently elected Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and discussed setting up a maritime coordination centre, Rajapaksa's office said in a statement.

It did not give details of the proposed centre, but said other nations in the region should be included as observers.

It said the two countries also discussed closer military and coastguard cooperation.

The meeting followed Rajapaksa's visit to New Delhi in late November for talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who offered \$450 million in aid to Sri Lanka after his landslide victory in the presidential election.

China's foreign minister Wang Yi also held talks with President Rajapaksa on Tuesday during a brief transit stop in Colombo.

"As Sri Lanka's strategic partner, China will continue to stand by Sri Lanka's interests," Rajapaksa's office quoted Wang as saying.

SpaceX successfully tests Crew Dragon abort system



This NASA TV video frame grab shows a SpaceX rocket as it launches to perform an in-flight abort test of its Crew Dragon spacecraft, which was unmanned for the apparently successful test

Washington

SpaceX successfully tested its emergency abort system on an unmanned spacecraft moments after launch Sunday, according to a live broadcast of the event, the last major test before it plans to send NASA astronauts to the International Space Station.

The test launch began at 10:30 am (15:30 GMT) at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida with the launch of a Falcon 9 rocket topped by SpaceX's new Crew Dragon spacecraft. The rocket was programmed to perform as if it were launching the capsule into orbit.

One minute and 24 seconds after launch, at an altitude of 19 kilometers (12 miles) over the Atlantic and as the rocket was traveling at a speed of more than 1,500 kilometers per hour, an emergency escape sequence was set in motion.

The spacecraft ignited its powerful SuperDraco thrusters, propelling it away from the rocket.

Shortly after the separation, the rocket disintegrated in a ball of fire, as planned.

An Atlantic splashdown

On a manned mission, the maneuver is designed to rescue the astronauts in the event the rocket has a problem on ascent or veers off course.

Crew Dragon continued its upward trajectory alone reaching an altitude of about 40 kilometers before beginning its natural descent toward the Atlantic.

Four large parachutes opened to brake its descent and splashdown in the Atlantic, where recovery teams were pre-positioned. Nine minutes after launch, Crew Dragon was in the water, apparently without suffering damage.

Analysis of the spacecraft and flight data will confirm whether the test came off without a hitch, and whether the spacecraft is ready for manned missions.

But NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine and SpaceX founder Elon Musk said in a press conference that the test appeared to be a complete success.

Manned flight ahead

The favorable outcome of the peril-filled test is good news for SpaceX and for NASA, which urgently needs to certify a vehicle to transport astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS) this year.

Since 2011, the United States has had to rely on Russia's Soyuz rockets, the only ones capable of carrying astronauts to the space station once the US retired its space shuttle fleet.

A royal goodbye

Britain's Prince Harry and Meghan to give up royal titles

AFP | London

Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan have agreed to give up their royal titles and public funding as part of a settlement with the Queen that lets them spend more private time in Canada.

The historic announcement from Buckingham Palace on Saturday follows more than a week of intense private talks aimed at managing the fallout of the globetrotting couple's shock resignation from front-line royal duties.

It means Queen Elizabeth II's grandson Harry and his American TV actress wife Meghan will stop using the titles "royal highness" -- the same fate that befell his late mother Princess Diana after her divorce from Prince Charles in 1996.

"Following many months of conversations and more recent discussions, I am pleased that together we have found a constructive and supportive way forward for my grandson and his family," the 93-year-old monarch said in a statement.

"I recognise the challenges they have experienced as a result of intense scrutiny over the last two years and support their wish for a more independent life."

'Hardest Megxit possible'

Her comments referred to battles with the media that prompted Harry and Meghan -- known until now as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex -- to sue several newspapers in October over intrusions into their private lives.

The Queen said she was "particularly proud of how Meghan has so quickly become one of the family" and wished the couple "a happy and peaceful new life".

A separate statement attributed to Buckingham Palace said "the Sussexes will not use their HRH titles as they are no longer working members of the Royal Family".

HRH stands for His or Her Royal Highness.

"As agreed in this new arrangement, they understand that they are required to step back from royal duties, including official military appointments. They will no longer receive public funds for royal duties," the statement said.

The settlement added that the



The royal crisis has been dubbed Megxit in honour of Britain's painful battle over Brexit



Britain's Prince Harry and his wife Meghan will give up their official titles

two will also repay £2.4 million (\$3.1 million) of taxpayer's money spent on renovating their Frogmore Cottage home near Windsor Castle.

Much of the British media interpreted the ruling as the Queen's punishment for Harry and Meghan's wayward ways.

The Queen "brought down the iron fist", Sky News' royal commentator Alastair Bruce



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said.

"Make no mistake, Saturday night's statement represents the hardest Megxit possible," The Daily Telegraph newspaper said,

'Progressive new role'

The Palace would not comment on who ends up paying for Harry and Meghan's security detail in Canada -- an issue of intense public debate.

It also failed to mention whether the couple would be allowed to benefit financially from future royalties and franchise fees.

The couple are seeking to register the "Sussex Royal" brand as a global trademark for their future enterprises.

They two are dedicated to environmental causes and are looking to develop their charitable foundation as part of a "progressive new role".

The queen's announcement is her second on the royal crisis since Harry and Meghan's effective resignation on March 8.

"We have chosen to make a transition this year in starting to carve out a progressive new role within this institution," the couple said at the time.

"We now plan to balance our time between the United Kingdom and North America."

Meghan then jetted back to Canada and is now their with their son Archie.

Their announcement caught the royal family by surprise and created a media sensation in both Britain and the wider

world.

Their treatment by London's hard-hitting tabloid press and their personal future -- as well as questions about longstanding royal traditions -- have turned into daily front-page news.

Media reports said Harry would probably join Meghan and Archie on the west coast of Canada this coming week.

'Abdication'

The Queen's final ruling on her grandson's future drew immediate comparisons to King Edward VIII's abdication in 1936.

Edward married the American socialite Wallis Simpson the following year and spent much his remaining life abroad.

"Harry is not King (he is sixth in line) but tonight this feels like his and Meghan's own abdication," ITV television's royal editor Chris Ship wrote on Twitter. "This isn't 1936. But it's still pretty big."

The BBC's royal correspondent Nicholas Witchell said Meghan must decide whether she intends to return and spend time in Britain in order to gain her UK citizenship.

The couple's future tax status also remains unclear.

"I think they are feeling their way into this as much as anyone else," Witchell said.

The couple will now formally be known as "Harry, The Duke of Sussex" and "Meghan, The Duchess of Sussex".

The Palace statement said the new arrangement "will take effect in the Spring of 2020".

China reports 17 new cases of mystery virus

Beijing

China reported 17 new cases of the mysterious SARS-like virus on Sunday, including three in a severe condition, heightening fears ahead of China's Lunar New Year holiday when hundreds of millions of people move around the country.

The virus -- a new strain of coronavirus that humans can contract -- has caused alarm because of its connection to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed nearly 650 people across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003.

Of the 17 new cases in the cen-



No human-to-human transmission has been confirmed so far, but Wuhan's health commission has previously said the possibility 'cannot be excluded'

tral city of Wuhan -- believed to be the epicentre of the outbreak -- three are described as "severe".

The virus has now infected 62 people in Wuhan, city authorities said, with eight in a severe condition, 19 cured and discharged from hospital, and the rest remaining in isolation receiving treatment.

Two people have died so far from the virus, including a 69-year-old man who died on Wednesday, with the disease causing pulmonary tuberculosis and damage to multiple organ functions.