

**Pakistan's PM to visit China for talks overshadowed by Iran war**

AFP | Beijing

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will head to China this weekend for talks with President Xi Jinping, Beijing said yesterday, without specifying whether the war in Iran would be discussed.

Islamabad and Beijing have both sought to mediate in the Middle East conflict, sparked by United States and Israeli strikes on Iran in late February.

A ceasefire agreement since April 8 has halted hostilities, but American President Donald Trump warned on Wednesday that the window for diplomacy was closing.

**Germany's Merz pitches making Ukraine EU 'associate member'**

AFP | Berlin

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has proposed making Ukraine an "associate member" of the EU without voting rights, while Kyiv goes through the lengthy process of joining fully, a letter said.

The plan — first floated by Merz with EU counterparts last month — would see Ukraine's leader attend the bloc's summit but not be able to cast a vote.

Kyiv would have a representative at the top table of the EU's executive, the European Commission, and non-voting members of the European parliament.

**Pakistan army chief due in Iran as Trump says talks on 'borderline'**

AFP | Beijing

Pakistan's army chief was due in Iran yesterday, Iranian media reported, with Islamabad mediating as the Islamic republic examines a new US proposal to end the Middle East war.

The expected visit by Field Marshal Asim Munir, a powerful figure with a growing role in Pakistan's foreign relations, comes a day after US President Donald Trump warned that negotiations to end the war were on the "borderline" between a deal and renewed strikes.

**Cuba outraged after US indicts Raul Castro**

AFP | Havana

Cubans expressed their shock and indignation after the United States indicted former president Raul Castro on murder charges, a stunning new step in President Donald Trump's pressure on the communist state.

The charges against the ex-leader -- who at 94 years old remains influential in Cuban politics -- have fuelled speculation that Trump will try to topple the crisis-hit island, culminating a US pressure campaign which has imposed months of crippling oil blockades.

Authorities in Cuba and



A woman wearing leggings bearing the flag of the United States, and a dog, walk past a house displaying a poster of the late Venezuela's leader Hugo Chavez, former Cuba's president Raul Castro and late revolutionary leader Argentine-born revolutionary leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara, in Havana

abroad slammed the indictment, the latest step-up in Trump's international interventions after the Iran war, the US toppling of Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro and threats against Greenland.

The charges against Raul Castro -- younger brother of Fidel Castro, the late iconic US nemesis who led Cuba's communist revolution that culminated in 1959 -- stem from the deadly downing of two civilian planes manned by anti-Castro pilots in 1996.

Cuban authorities called on citizens to protest the "despicable" indictment, with the official newspaper Granma urging

Cubans to gather outside the US embassy in Havana on Friday at 0730 (1230 GMT).

"This isn't really an accusation, something from more than 30 years ago, but rather a public attack on a public figure," Fabian Fernandez, a 30-year-old accountant, told AFP in Havana.

"It's a matter of politics and public image," he added.

In addition to murder, Castro has been charged with conspiracy to kill Americans and destruction of aircraft.

The Cuban government said in a statement that the 1996 shutdown was "legitimate self-defense" against an airspace violation.



Vessels are anchored off the coast of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates

**Rubio slams NATO refusal to help on Iran ahead of alliance talks**

Spain and Germany draw American ire for refusing to back military action in Middle East

● **Rubio criticises NATO allies**

● **Spain blocked US base access**

● **Germany remarks angered Washington**

● **Trump administration plans troop withdrawal**

AFP | Washington

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio yesterday renewed criticism of NATO for not supporting the US war on Iran, as he headed to alliance talks in

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MARCO RUBIO

Sweden.

"There are many countries in NATO that agree with us that Iran can't have a nuclear weapon, that Iran is a threat," Rubio told reporters in Miami before leaving for talks among NATO foreign ministers in Helsingborg, Sweden.

President Donald Trump "said,

fine, I'm going to do something about it," Rubio said.

"He's not asking them to commit troops. He's not asking them to send their fighter jets in. But they refuse to do anything," he said.

"We were very upset about that."

The United States and Israel jointly attacked Iranian targets on February 28. Trump did not consult NATO ahead of time, and several European allies questioned the necessity of military action, while differing assessments persisted over the immediacy of Iran's nuclear threat. Iran's response contributed to increased volatility in global oil markets.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez described the military

**5,000**  
US troops are being pulled from bases in Germany after Chancellor Merz said Iran was "humiliating" the United States in negotiations

action as illegal and said Spain would not allow US aircraft to use bases on its territory.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said Iran was "humiliating" the United States in negotiations, drawing criticism from the Trump administration, which later announced plans to withdraw 5,000 US troops from bases

in Germany.

"I've been a strong supporter of NATO my entire career," said Rubio, a former senator.

But he continued: "I know why NATO is good for Europe, but why is NATO good for America? Because it gives us bases in the region that allow us to project power during a contingency in the Middle East or somewhere else."

"So when that is the key rationale for why you're in NATO, and then you have countries like Spain denying us the use of these bases, well then, why are you in NATO? That's a very fair question," he said.

He added that other countries had been more supportive, previously singling out Portugal for praise