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CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA SUMMIT



President Xi Jinping (centre) and his guests head to a Tang dynasty-inspired welcome banquet in Xian. Photos: Xinhua, AFP

BEIJING SEEKING CLOSER TIES WITH CENTRAL ASIA

Xi calls for expanded trade and energy links with the region, offering a commitment that will be hard for Western nations to match, analyst says

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China has sought to forge closer economic and security ties with its Central Asian neighbours as the US and its allies met next door to build a common strategy to curb Beijing's challenge to the Washington-led world order.

President Xi Jinping rolled out the red carpet for his counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the northwestern city of Xian.

The two-day summit, which analysts said signalled a battle of influence between China and the US-led West, overlapped with the Group of Seven summit in the Japanese city of Hiroshima.

As part of his flurry of diplomacy this week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is expected to travel to Hiroshima this weekend to meet G7 leaders in person to discuss the war with Russia.

The choice of a country's own development path and mode of governance is its sovereign right

FROM THE JOINT STATEMENT

China has also been touted as a potential peacemaker in the Ukraine crisis, with special envoy Li Hui touring Europe and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin scheduled to meet Xi in Beijing next week.

Chinese state broadcaster CCTV hailed the Xian summit as a success, saying it ushered in "a bright future of China-Central Asia relations".

It showed Xi and the five other leaders capping the meeting by planting pomegranate trees, symbolising the long friendship and "close unity and cooperation" between Beijing and the region.

In his keynote address at the summit yesterday morning, Xi described ties between China and central Asian nations as having "profound historical origins [and] extensive practical needs".

"They are full of vigour and vitality in the new era," he said.

Xi also called for the expansion of economic and trade ties and energy cooperation, including speeding up the construction of the Line D China-Central Asia gas pipeline and strengthening oil and gas trade.

Beijing's relations with Washington and other Western powers have been strained over a wide range of issues.

But as Western economies have pulled away from China, central Asian leaders have come out in support of Beijing, with hopes of increased Chinese engagement in their region.

In a joint statement released after the summit, the six leaders presented a show of solidarity, reaffirming mutual support for each other's core interests and approach to development.

"The parties stress that democracy is a common pursuit and value of all mankind," the statement said. "The choice of a country's own development path and mode of governance is its sovereign right and is not subject to interference."

The document added that China and the five central Asian countries would work together to boost cooperation in renewable energy, while stressing the "importance of a stable energy supply to the development of economic, trade and investment cooperation".

It also stressed the importance of improving connectivity in the region, including better transport links between Central Asia, Southeast Asia and other countries on the continent.

Observers said the timing of the summit in relation to the G7 meeting could be significant.

It could also be driven by China's need to ensure a steady energy pipeline and the region's

importance in Beijing's flagship Belt and Road Initiative, they said.

Reuters reported last week that the G7 leaders would discuss plans to adopt a tougher stance on Beijing.

Li Lifan, a specialist in Russia and central Asia at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, said irrespective of whether the clash of the summit and G7 dates was intentional, "it's clearly a battle for influence between China and US-led West amid talks about a new cold war".

Yang Shu, former dean of central Asian studies at Lanzhou University, said the two meetings had different driving factors.

The G7 leaders felt the need to contain Beijing while China and central Asia wanted to "oppose the West's containment, especially in terms of security", he said.

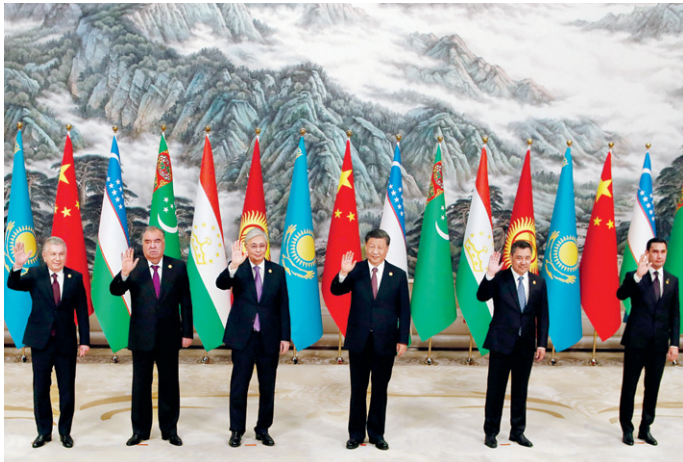
Yang said China had to work on "all fronts" to mitigate security threats and pressure from the United States and its allies.

"The deterioration of China's eastern environment is becoming more and more apparent, including in the South China Sea. It has deteriorated sharply after the Ukraine war so we need to increase investment in [China's] west to strengthen security and economic cooperation," he said.

To that end, Beijing was looking to strengthen ties with central Asia, a region where Western nations had less influence. "China has much more space to work with there," Yang said, adding that it was "very difficult for the West to intervene" in the region.

China is also looking to central Asia to secure energy supplies as the ripples of the Ukraine crisis and sanctions on Russia add uncertainties to the market.

"The Line D China-Central Asia natural gas pipeline could



President Xi Jinping (third from right) with his counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

significantly enhance China-Central Asia's energy cooperation," said Dong Jinyue, a senior China economist at Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria.

"It also could benefit central Asia's labour market and have a significant spillover effect on economic development in these countries."

Yesterday, Xi announced that China would provide 26 billion yuan (HK\$29 billion) in financial aid and support for development in the central Asian countries.

Li, from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, said Chinese economic aid and investment were "critical both politically and economically" because many central Asian nations had been under secondary Western sanctions over their ties with Russia.

It's clearly a battle for influence between China and US-led West amid talks about a new cold war

LI LIFAN, SHANGHAI ACADEMY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

"For China, central Asia's pivot towards China means a lot as the central Asian nations are a pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative," he said, adding that the ambitious infrastructure project had faced difficulties.

Earlier this month, Reuters reported that Italy was unlikely to renew its belt and road deal which was set to expire early next year, a decision that would be a major diplomatic setback for Beijing.

Li said that overall the summit in Xian had been "conducive to substantive cooperation" between Beijing and central Asian nations. In terms of the US-China rivalry, Beijing stood to gain much from the deepened ties with central Asia while the West would struggle to match China's commitment to work with developing countries, he said.

Li cautioned that the summit's significance should not be overstated, noting that countries in the region were still striking a balance in their ties with China, Russia, the US and other Western powers.

Additional reporting by Amber Wang, Shi Jiangtao and Kandy Wong

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NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

High Court upholds move to bar UK lawyer from Lai case

Tycoon launched a judicial review – which led to ruling – to keep King's Counsel on defence team

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The High Court has upheld a government decision to bar a British lawyer from representing jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai Chee-ying in a collusion trial, ruling that such judgments on national security matters were free from judicial intervention.

The court cited Beijing's interpretation of the national security law in finding the Committee for Safeguarding National Security, comprising Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu and other officials, had the final say on whether an overseas lawyer was fit to take up jobs pertaining to the country's safety.

The court held the committee's duty and functions were not confined to "high-level policy-making", as contended by Lai's legal team, but also covered determinations on individual cases.

Yesterday's verdict not only effectively denied King's Counsel Timothy Owen's involvement in the high-profile case, but also dealt a blow to the tycoon's prospect of securing a permanent stay of proceedings before the trial begins in September.

The founder of the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper is set to stand trial without a jury on charges of sedition and conspiracy to collude with foreign forces. He has initiated two legal challenges, including a judicial review which led to the ruling, to keep Owen on his defence team.

The court approved Owen's participation in Lai's case in

October last year, a ruling upheld by the Court of Appeal and the Court of Final Appeal.

Pro-Beijing politicians have heavily criticised the courts' decisions, with former Hong Kong leader Leung Chun-ying saying it was ridiculous to "look up to foreigners on national security affairs".

The National People's Congress Standing Committee, the nation's top legislative body, ruled in December that the decision to allow overseas lawyers to participate in national security cases should be left to Lee and the committee he chaired.

The committee decided on January 11 that Owen's representation of Lai was likely to undermine national security and that it would advise the Immigration Department to dismiss any potential application for a work visa lodged by the Briton.

In a 34-page judgment, Chief Judge of the High Court Jeremy Poon Shiu-chor yesterday dismissed the defence's argument that the decision fell outside the purview of the committee.

Poon noted the standing committee's interpretation had not only provided guidance on the general approach but also directed the city's government to "immediately step in to deal with the situation".

He said it was "only logical" for Beijing to enjoy exclusive supervisory power over the committee, as the local judiciary had "neither training nor expertise" to adjudicate matters relating to the committee's duties and functions.

He rejected the defence's

"fanciful and indeed alarmist" suggestions that local authorities could arbitrarily arrest and detain residents in the absence of any judicial safeguards.

"The [Hong Kong] courts, as courts of a local administrative region, are not vested with any role or power over such matters of the [central people's government] because they clearly fall outside the courts' constitutional competence assigned to them under the constitutional order," the judge said.

This notion was consistent with the stance taken by justice minister Paul Lam Ting-kwok, who has said the courts were "ill-equipped" to review matters relating to national security.

Poon also echoed remarks made by Chief Justice Andrew Cheung Kui-nung earlier this year, stressing that the local courts did not enjoy unlimited jurisdiction and could only act within the confines of constitutional documents.

Lai's separate legal challenge sought the court's declaration that Beijing's interpretation should not be applied retrospectively to his case.

But Poon said the standing committee was merely declaring "what the law has always been", adding the courts' previous determinations on Owen were superseded by the interpretation and the committee's decision.

The tycoon has also asked three criminal judges endorsed by Lee to drop the collusion case on the grounds it would be an unfair trial. His lawyers have highlighted what they see as a concerted effort to prevent Lai from being represented by a barrister of his choice.

The bench noted that contention could rise or fall subject to the legality of the committee's decision on Owen.

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