

## China urges US, Russia to reduce stockpiles after nuclear statement



GREG BAKER/AFP

Chinese military vehicles carrying ballistic missiles are seen in a parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of Communist Party in Beijing, China, in October 2019.

China said on Tuesday it will continue to “modernise” its nuclear arsenal and called on the United States and Russia to reduce their own stockpiles a day after global powers pledged to prevent such weapons from spreading.

In a rare joint statement setting aside rising West-East tensions, the United States, China, Russia, Britain and France reaffirmed their goal of creating a world free of atomic weapons and avoiding a nuclear conflict, AFP reported.

The five nuclear powers also committed to full future disarmament from atomic weapons, which have only been used in conflict in the US bombings of Japan at the end of World War II.

But squaring that rhetoric with reality will not be easy at a time of spiralling tensions between those same global powers not seen since the Cold War.

There are growing global concerns about China’s rapid military modernisation especially after its armed forces last year announced they had developed a hypersonic missile that can fly at five times the speed of sound.

The United States has also said

China is expanding its nuclear arsenal with as many as 700 warheads by 2027 and possibly 1,000 by 2030.

On Tuesday, China defended its nuclear weapons policy and said Russia and the United States – by far the world’s largest nuclear powers – should make the first move on disarmament.

“The US and Russia still possess 90 percent of the nuclear warheads on Earth,” Fu Cong, director-general of the Department of Arms Control at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, told reporters.

“They must reduce their nuclear arsenal in an irreversible and legally binding manner.”

Fu dismissed US claims that China was vastly increasing its nuclear capabilities.

“China has always adopted the no first use policy and we maintain our nuclear capabilities at the minimal level required for our national security,” he said.

But he said Beijing would “continue to modernise its nuclear arsenal for reliability and safety issues”.

Ties between Beijing and Washington have been strained over a series of issues including China’s intentions to

take Taiwan, which it claims as part of its territory, by force if necessary.

Beijing’s sabre-rattling towards Taiwan has reached new heights under President Xi Jinping.

Fu dismissed speculation over the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons near the Taiwan Strait.

“Nuclear weapons are the ultimate deterrent, they are not for war or fighting,” he said.

Monday’s joint statement on nuclear weapons was a rare moment of consensus between the UN’s five permanent Security Council members.

“A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” the statement said, adding that “further spread of such weapons must be prevented”.

The statement was issued after the latest review of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – which first came into force in 1970 – was postponed from its scheduled date of January 4 to later in the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The statement also pledged to abide by a key article in the NPT under which states committed to full future disarmament from nuclear weapons.

Palestinian prisoners held without trial or charge have launched a boycott of Israel’s military courts in the occupied West Bank, as prisoner groups warn that one detainee on hunger strike faces “imminent danger of death”.

In an escalatory step agreed by Palestinian political parties, the 500 so-called administrative detainees began New Year by refusing to show up for their court sessions. The boycott includes the initial hearings to uphold the administrative detention order, as well as appeal hearings and later sessions at the supreme court, Al Jazeera reported.

Under the banner, “Our decision is freedom ... no to administrative detention,” administrative detainees said in a statement their move comes as a continuation of longstanding Palestinian efforts “to put an end to the unjust administrative detention practiced against our people by the occupation forces”.

They also noted that Israel’s use of the policy has expanded in recent years to include women, children and elderly people.

“Israeli military courts are an important aspect for the occupation in its system of oppression,” the detainees said, describing the courts



ABED AL HASHLAMON/EPA-EFE  
Palestinians hold the pictures of Hisham Abu Hawash, a Palestinian in Israeli administrative detention, during a protest in Dura village, near the West Bank city of Al-Khalil, on January 3, 2021.

## Palestinian prisoners launch boycott of Israeli military courts

as a “barbaric, racist tool that has consumed hundreds of years from the lives of our people under the banner of administrative detention, through nominal and fictitious courts – the results of which are predetermined by the military commander of the region”.

The boycott comes as the health of Hisham Abu Hawash – on his 141th day on hunger strike on Tuesday in protest against his adminis-

trative detention since October 2020 – continues to severely deteriorate.

The 40-year-old is the latest in a string of prisoners who in recent months have refused food and water to demand their freedom. Many of them reached a critical stage and were hospitalised for long periods until Israeli authorities agreed to release them on a fixed date.

“What led the prisoners to take this step [boycott] are

the developments in terms of individual hunger strikes – particularly Abu Hawash and the stubbornness of the [Israeli] intelligence,” Sahar Francis, the head of the Ramallah-based Addameer prisoners’ rights group, told Al Jazeera.

“The man is going to die and all they did was freeze the administrative detention order without any guarantee of when it will end,” she continued.

## U.S. sets global daily record of over 1m COVID cases



VALERIE MACON/AFP

People register for a free COVID-19 test in Los Angeles, CA, on January 3, 2022.

More than one million people in the U.S. were diagnosed with COVID-19 on Monday as a tsunami of Omicron swamps every aspect of daily American life.

The highly mutated variant drove U.S. cases to a record, the most – by a large margin – that any country has ever reported. Monday’s number is almost double the previous record of about 590,000 set just four days ago in the U.S., which itself was a doubling from the prior week, Bloomberg reported.

It is also more than twice the case count seen anywhere else at any time since the pandemic began more than two years ago. The highest number outside the U.S. came during India’s Delta surge, when more than 414,000 people were diagnosed on May 7, 2021.

The stratospheric numbers being posted in the U.S. come even as many Americans are relying on tests they take at home, with results that aren’t reported to official government authorities. That means the record

is surely a significant under-estimate.

While surging cases haven’t yet translated into severe infections and skyrocketing deaths, their impact has been felt across the country as the newly-infected isolate at home. The results are canceled flights, closed schools and offices, overwhelmed hospitals and strangled supply chains.

The data from Johns Hopkins University is complete as of midnight Eastern Time in Baltimore, and delays in reporting over the holidays may have played a role in the rising rates.

The surge is leading authorities to mull a revision of some measures put in place to help guide the nation through the latest phase of the outbreak. While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shortened the isolation period to five days for asymptomatic people who test positive for COVID-19, the agency may add that they should get a negative test result before venturing out again, officials said.

The outbreak is also causing companies to halt their return-to-office steps.

The silver lining is that deaths from COVID haven’t similarly soared. Early studies show the Omicron variant spreads faster than earlier strains but causes milder symptoms.

## NATO schedules special meeting with Russia amid Ukraine crisis

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has scheduled a special meeting of allied ambassadors and top Russian officials for next week as both sides seek dialogue to prevent open conflict over Ukraine, a NATO official said on Tuesday.

Worried about Russia’s military build-up along Ukraine’s border, the Western military alliance has been seeking a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council for months but the forum seemed in jeopardy after an espionage dispute in October, Reuters reported.

The meeting of the council, a format used for dialogue since 2002, will take place in Brussels on Jan. 12 after U.S. and Russian officials hold security talks on Jan. 10 in Geneva.

The European Union’s top diplomat, Josep Borrell, flew to Ukraine on Tuesday for a two-day trip to show support for Kiev, which aspires to join the bloc and NATO.

Moscow wants guarantees that NATO will halt its eastward expansion and end military cooperation



PASCAL ROSSIGNOL/REUTERS

with Ukraine and Georgia, which have territorial disputes with Russia.

Moscow also denies U.S. assertions that it is planning an invasion of Ukraine and accuses Kiev of building up its own forces in the east of the country.

“Any dialogue with Russia would have to proceed on the basis of reciprocity, address NATO’s concerns about Russia’s actions... and take

place in consultation with NATO’s European partners,” the NATO official said.

Maria Zakharova, Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, confirmed that Russian officials will attend the NATO meeting in Brussels.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and other senior Russian officials are expected to attend the Brussels talks, after meet-

ing U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Geneva.

On Jan. 13, talks will continue in the broader format of the Vienna-based Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which includes the United States and its NATO allies, as well as Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet states.

The EU’s Borrell, who was central to the bloc’s strategy of increased sanctions on top Russian officials in 2021, believes “the EU cannot be a neutral spectator in the negotiations if Russia really wants to discuss Europe’s security architecture”, according to an EU spokesperson.

The European Union sees Ukraine as a “strategic partner”, the spokesperson said.

Borrell, accompanied by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, will visit Ukraine’s contact line with Russian-backed separatist rebels during his visit. EU foreign ministers are expected to discuss their next steps later in January.

A record number of more than 28,000 migrants crossed the Channel from France to the UK in small boats last year, the PA news agency reported Tuesday, based on its analysis of government data.

As people smugglers exploited demand, charging thousands of pounds for trips across the busy shipping lane in flimsy boats, at least 28,395 people reached the UK – more than triple the figure for 2020, AFP reported.

The peak came in November, during the course of which at least 6,869 people reached the UK, spurred by favourable weather conditions.

On November 11, a record-breaking 1,185 reached British shores in a single day.

The higher numbers were partly due to the use of bigger boats, carrying an average of about 28 people and sometimes as many as 50.

Such crossings ended tragically for many, with at least 27 migrants drowning off France on November 24 during an

attempted crossing in a boat likened by French officials to a children’s inflatable pool.

The 27 victims were mostly men but also included seven women, a 16-year-old and a seven-year-old child.

They were mostly Iraqi Kurds but also included Afghans, Ethiopians, a Somali and an Egyptian.

The flow of migrants has also soured Britain’s relations with France, prompting an unseemly blame game even as both sides try to disrupt the people trafficking networks.

The UK government’s Nationality and Borders Bill is currently before Parliament, promising tougher action against people smugglers

## Record number of migrants crossed Channel from France to UK in 2021: Report



GONZALO FUENTES/REUTERS

The high number of migrants crossing to Britain from mainland Europe has become a political headache for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Home Secretary Priti Patel.

and, controversially, migrants themselves.

If passed, the bill, opposed by rights groups, will allow the return of asylum seekers who have passed through so-called “safe third countries”.