

WORLD

Confrontation still shadows potential talks

Washington's threats against Tehran add uncertainty to volatile situation

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Recent military threats against Iran by the United States are making an already volatile situation more uncertain. While Iran faces challenges at home, intervention from abroad risks further escalation and pushes the region toward a far more dangerous confrontation, experts said.

US President Donald Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, and Iranian Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Araghchi are planning to meet in Istanbul on Friday to discuss a possible nuclear deal and other issues, according to news website Axios, quoting anonymous sources including a US official.

Iranian media later challenged the report. Tasnim News Agency, citing Iranian officials, said details have not been finalized and described the talks as still in the preliminary stage, with the overall framework and structure yet to take shape.

Trump on Sunday hinted at a possible attack if Iran does not reach a deal over its nuclear program. Araghchi told CNN the same day that a "just, fair, and equitable" agreement remains possible if the US abandons coercive policies.

Tensions remain high amid increased US military activity in the region. The Pentagon deployed an aircraft carrier strike group and multiple warships to the Middle East in late January, with Washington continuing to send warnings to Tehran.

Also on Monday, Israel announced it conducted a joint naval exercise in the Red Sea alongside the US a day earlier.

Sun Degang, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, said that the US is now fully prepared for potential military action against Iran, significantly heightening the risk of armed conflict.

"If the US were to initiate military action against Iran, it might first carry out precision strikes on a limited number of high-value targets," he said.

Sun elaborated that the US could then degrade Iran's missile and drone production facilities and storage sites, followed by efforts to neutralize missile launchers, thus weakening its arsenal of more than 2,000 ballistic missiles.

In addition, Iran's air defense systems could be taken out to secure Washington's air superiority. Alternatively, the US might opt for a coordinated, simultaneous strike on these four categories of targets to maximize shock and deterrence, he said.

Sun added that as a major military power in the Middle East, Iran retains multiple options to respond to the US.

"First, Iran could target US naval assets, including aircraft carriers and other vessels in the Gulf and nearby waters. Second, it might launch strikes against US military bases across the Gulf region. Third, Tehran could seek to disrupt maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, potentially

interfering with the transit of oil tankers and global energy supply chains," he said.

The current US administration appears to embrace a "might is right" approach, Sun said. From last year's 12-day Iran-Israel conflict to its ongoing pressure campaign against Tehran, Washington has sought to project strength and deter forces in the Middle East it views as hostile, he said.

"By escalating military threats against Iran, the US is also signaling its strategic dominance and showcasing its advanced weapons systems, which may not only serve geopolitical objectives but also help bolster its arms exports," Sun said.

Ding Long, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, said that the US has pursued a strategy of "maximum pressure" and brinkmanship toward Iran, seeking to compel Tehran to accept its terms through escalating deterrence. The underlying objective is to leverage sustained pressure as a means of forcing Iran back to the negotiating table.

"Human rights concerns are in fact used as a pretext for US hegemony. The real objective of the US is regime change in Iran, rather than any genuine concern for the country's human rights. The worsening living conditions in Iran are largely a result of long-standing US sanctions, for which Washington bears primary responsibility," Ding said.

Disrupting oil supply

If Iran were to control the Strait of Hormuz in the event of a military conflict, global crude oil supplies could be severely disrupted, energy markets destabilized, and the fragile momentum of the global economic recovery significantly weakened, he added.

Sun said that the current US administration's hegemonic approach will inflict serious damage to regional security and undermine the stability of the international system as a whole.

US threats of military action against Iran risk undermining regional integration and multilateral dialogue mechanisms, thereby obstructing the Middle East's pursuit of lasting peace and stability. Should Washington proceed with military action, it could trigger a broader regional crisis, endangering the security of US military bases and personnel while exposing its allies to significant spillover consequences, he said.

Moreover, US military strikes against sovereign states would represent a serious breach of the post-World War II global governance framework centered on the United Nations, he added.

Such actions risk eroding the authority of international law and multilateral institutions, pushing the international system toward a more power-driven order in which might prevails over rules and the security of sovereign nations becomes increasingly precarious, Sun said.

Xinhua contributed to this story.



A man walks past a mural, depicting the Statue of Liberty with the torch-bearing arm broken, on the outer walls of the former US embassy in Tehran, on Sunday. ATTA KENARE / AFP

Long-awaited reunion



A Palestinian woman embraces one of her grandsons after they arrive with their mother as part of a group allowed into Gaza following the long-awaited reopening of the Rafah border crossing, at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, on Tuesday. ABDEL KAREEM HANA / AP

US exit risks Africa's health cooperation

By SHARON NAKOLA in Nairobi
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Africa's health systems could face heightened strain following the United States' full withdrawal from the World Health Organization on Jan 22, with African experts and policymakers warning that the move could weaken disease surveillance, disrupt frontline care in conflict-affected regions, and deepen inequalities in access to essential medicines across the continent.

The US exit is expected to leave a significant funding and coordination gap at a time when many African countries remain vulnerable to infectious disease outbreaks, humanitarian emergencies, and under-resourced primary healthcare systems. Many African countries rely heavily on international organizations such as the WHO for disease prevention and control.

The WHO has expressed its regret over the US announcement, highlighting the organization's crucial role in protecting the health of the world's people, with WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stating that the withdrawal is a loss for the US and the world.

Melha Rout Biel, executive director of the Institute for Strategic and Policy Studies in South Sudan, described the withdrawal as a retreat from the internationally agreed multilateral order, with potentially fatal consequences for vulnerable populations.

"The US withdrawal is indeed a very unfortunate action geared toward leaving internationally agreed systems and order," Biel said.

"Many people in Africa and elsewhere who are badly in need of medicine, including for HIV and other infectious diseases, will face death. Medical staff will lose jobs and will not be able to support their families."

Biel said African institutions now face a "wake-up call" to shoulder greater responsibility, urging Africa and the broader Global South to mobilize resources to sustain the WHO's work.

While the funding gap left by Washington is substantial, he added that coordinated support from developing countries could help mitigate the risks. "The world still needs the WHO," Biel said. "Standing by it is for a good cause."

Carlos Lopes, a professor at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town, said the US withdrawal would be far more than a budgetary shock, describing it instead as confirmation of a deeper retreat from multilateralism with destabilizing consequences for Africa.

"In low-income and conflict-affected settings, WHO coordination underpins disease surveillance, outbreak response, vaccination campaigns, and health workforce support," Lopes said. "The sudden loss of US funding and political backing would weaken early-warning systems, slow emergency responses, and exacerbate existing inequalities in access to care."

Lopes cautioned that partners from the Global South cannot simply replace the US role overnight.

"This transition requires predictable long-term funding, stronger governance arrangements, and genuine respect for multilateral rather

than purely transactional cooperation," he said, warning that the withdrawal of a major power risks turning global public goods into arenas of geopolitical competition.

Acute impact

In Nigeria, the impact is expected to be particularly acute. Olusoji Ajao, founder of Afrocentric Masterclass, a cultural company that focuses on African voices, said WHO support has been critical in sustaining healthcare delivery in conflict-affected regions where state capacity is limited.

"The WHO was central to sustaining frontline health responders and humanitarian healthcare delivery in some areas of Nigeria where local authorities could not cope. When that support is withdrawn, it is not bureaucracy that collapses — it is care on the frontline," Ajao said.

Ajao said Nigeria's conflict-affected regions are likely to feel the humanitarian consequences first, arguing that global health leadership should be measured by responsibility to the most vulnerable rather than political decisions taken far from crisis zones.

Experts agreed that the US exit may accelerate Africa's push toward greater health sovereignty, including local vaccine manufacturing, regional stockpiles, and improved emergency preparedness.

"Partnerships should teach and equip, not just give," he said.

Ajao said sustainable cooperation should focus on capacity-building, shared responsibility, and local ownership, particularly in resource-rich but institutionally fragile countries.

Gap in raw materials supply to hit EU goals

By EARLE GALE in London
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The European Union's transition to clean energy could be slowed by its lack of success in finding new sources of critical raw materials, according to a report from the European Court of Auditors, or ECA.

The analysis found the EU's inability to diversify supply means it must continue to rely on imported critical raw materials from a small number of countries.

The report, which was published on Monday, said the EU had worked hard to find new suppliers and had signed 14 major new trade deals in a bid to diversify supply, but that the 27-nation bloc was "unlikely to succeed in time" and that its efforts to find additional sources by the end of the decade were "yet to produce tangible results".

The drive to diversify the supply of 34 critical raw materials and to increase their recycling and reuse was demanded by 2024's Critical Raw Materials Act. It calls for new reliable sources of the materials, which are crucial for clean technologies, including electric vehicle batteries, wind turbines, and solar panels. The materials are also needed by the defence sector.

Euronews quoted Keit Pentus-Rosimannus, a member of the ECA, as saying: "Without critical raw materials, there will be no energy transition, no competitiveness, and no strategic autonomy."

She said the EU is dependent on a handful of countries outside the bloc for the supply of these materials.

China supplies 97 percent of the EU's magnesium, which is used in hydrogen-generating electrolyzers. Other critical raw materials imported in large quantities include arsenic, barite, gallium, germanium, graphite, and tungsten, the ECA report added.

Other countries, including Chile and Türkiye, also have significant quantities of some critical raw materials, including boron and lithium, but the report noted that China produces most of the materials, thanks to its efficacy in extraction and refining.

The ECA said the recently signed EU-Mercosur trade deal with countries including Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay should open up new sources in the long term.

To maximize its purchasing power and efficiency in locating supplies, the EU is setting up a centralized raw materials department to coordinate acquisitions, in the face of competition from other nations, including the United States, which has reportedly been stockpiling imports in recent years.

FRIENDS AFAR

Editor's note: China Daily presents the series Friends Afar to tell the stories of people-to-people exchanges between China and other countries. Through the vivid narration of the people in the stories, readers can get a better understanding of a country that is boosting openness.

Thai youth recalls how China became his 'second home'

By YANG WANLI in Bangkok
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In September 2019, about four months before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thai college student Pitipat Thongkaew visited China for the first time. Little did then the 26-year-old know he would find a safe shelter in the country for the next three years during the pandemic. Moreover, the journey had given him another family.

"My grandfather is a Chinese who traveled from southern Guangdong province to Thailand at the age of around 20. Our family has kept lots of Chinese traditions, but family members at my age had never been to China, so I decided to study in China, where I have some blood ties," he said.

Pitipat began studying at Southwest China's Chongqing Technology and Business University. In a few months, he gained some basic knowledge of Mandarin, but then the global health crisis swept across the world.

"Almost all the foreign students in the university went back home after the pandemic outbreak. But I noticed the school and local govern-

ment took rapid response, and the medical system's reaction also made me feel confident, so I decided to stay," Pitipat said.

Soon, he became the only foreign student in the dormitory building. During the most severe period, he remained indoors with free meals provided by the school.

"Any daily supply requirement was responded to quickly by teachers. And what moved me most was my Mandarin teacher, Yuan Yue, who kept talking to me every day to prevent me from suffering from depression," he recalled. "It was a unique experience, and I stayed safe in China both physically and mentally during the pandemic."

New family

He also said the pandemic gave him an opportunity to develop a "family" in China. In 2020, Pitipat met 7-year-old Youyou and her grandmother at a flea market.

"The family is so nice and kind. They invited me home and we gradually became close friends. Youyou wrote Chinese words on cards with assistance from her grandmother and practiced spoken language with me almost every day," he said.



Pitipat Thongkaew (left) gifts a birthday card to Youyou (right) during the girl's birthday party in Chongqing in 2021. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

During his stay in Chongqing, the family invited him every year for dinner on Chinese New Year's Eve — the most important family gathering in Chinese tradition.

"The family is the epitome of hospitality and generosity," he said. "I call the grandmother *ganma*, a godmother or an adoptive mother in Chinese, which represents affectionate family ties."

Pitipat said he also made friends with a lot of Chinese people, which led him to appreciate the diversity of Chinese culture, the cutting-edge technologies, and to explore

the wonders created by its people. After completing his studies in China, Pitipat returned to Bangkok in 2022, where he works for a leading Chinese plastics company.

He said his goal is to serve as a bridge between Thailand and China with his experiences, contributing to his country's development with Chinese advanced technologies, and helping people from the two nations know each other better.

"Although many Thai people have Chinese blood, the younger generations in Thailand can hardly imagine how dramatically China has changed over the past decades," he said.

China is not just a country known through books or movies, but it's a great power, he said, referring to the high-speed rail networks and strides made in AI technology.

There are many Thai people who have never been to China and have misunderstandings about the country, he said.

Despite gaps in understanding, many Thai people, however, "believe that Asia, China in particular, will be the future of the world. And Thailand should take a ride on China's 'express' and seek a greater future" for Thai people, he said.