

► National security, people's livelihood in SARs in focus

Xi hears work reports from HK, Macao chief executives

By Yang Sheng and Chen Qingqing

President Xi Jinping met Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu in Beijing on Monday as Lee is paying a visit to the country's capital city.

Experts said on Monday that the central government has held high expectations for the HKSAR to further advance the governance by patriots, to continue the job of safeguarding national security, to promote economic recovery and people's livelihood, and to enhance governance efficiency following the recent district council elections.

Also on Monday, Xi met with Chief Executive of the Macao Special Administrative Region Ho Iat Seng, who is also on a duty visit to Beijing, and heard a report from Ho on Macao's current situation and the Macao SAR government's work, Xinhua News Agency reported.

During the meeting with Li, Xi heard

a report from Lee on Hong Kong's current situation and the HKSAR government's work, Xinhua reported.

Lauding Lee's work over the past year, Xi said Lee has led the HKSAR government in shouldering responsibilities and delivering good results.

The HKSAR government has maintained the region's distinctive status and advantages, bolstered the drivers for development and worked hard to solve the most pressing issues and difficulties of the people, Xi said, adding that all these have consolidated the HKSAR's turning for the better and facilitated its entry into a new stage in which it has restored order and is set to thrive.

Xi said the central authorities fully acknowledged the work of Lee and the HKSAR government, according to the Xinhua report.

During the meeting with Ho, Xi also recognized Ho's work over the past year, saying Ho has led the Macao SAR gov-

ernment in conscientiously performing its duties and achieving practical results.

The background of HKSAR Chief Executive's report this year is that Hong Kong has gone "from chaos to stability and to prosperity," former member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Tam Yiu-chung told the Global Times on Monday.

At this stage, Hong Kong must develop its economy and improve people's livelihoods, Tam noted.

In terms of economic development, Hong Kong has initially recovered its economy, the number of tourists is increasing, and all aspects are slowly recovering. But there are still challenges. For example, in terms of finance, the stock market remains relatively sluggish, housing problems persists, including falling property prices. In addition, the final district council elections to improve the electoral system have been successfully completed, Tam commented.

US expansion of Red Sea protection force 'may not effectively curb conflict spillover'

By GT staff reporters

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is reportedly set to announce an expanded maritime protection force involving Arab states in the Red Sea in response to the escalating attacks against Israel-bound cargo ships by Yemen's Houthis rebel group. Chinese analysts said by doing so, Washington aims to force its regional allies to become more involved in curbing the spillover of current Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but predicted that the move would play only limited role in pacifying the situation.

Washington should do more to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than to put in place superficial moves, Chinese experts said, noting that US hypocrisy of calling for cease-fire between Israel and Palestine but constant blocking of UN resolutions on demanding cease-fire in fact fueled Israel's determination of continued military actions.

Being the latest Biden administration official to visit Israel, Austin, who arrived in Israel on Monday, is to gain a clearer assessment from Israeli officials on their military operations, CNN reported.

Austin is also expected to announce an expanded maritime protection force, to be known as Operation Prosperity Guardian, involving Arab states combatting increasingly frequent Houthi attacks being mounted from Yemen's ports on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, the Guardian reported. Yet the report revealed no details over which Arab states are expected to join.

Protection of shipping routes in the Red Sea is probably the key agenda behind Austin's visit, as the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict has exerted a huge impact on global economy, said Liu Zhongmin, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University.

The US is hoping that regional allies become more involved in curbing the spillover effect of current conflict via the proposed protection force, which in reality will only have limited effect, Liu said.

Experts noted that the fundamental solution is to continue to call for cease-fire between the conflicting sides, whilst responding violence with violence will only fuel the current conflict.

► Victory for Vucic



Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic reacts during a press conference at the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) headquarters in Belgrade, Serbia, on local time December 17, 2023. Coalition around the ruling SNS won over 127 out of 250 seats at the snap parliamentary election, Vucic announced at the headquarters of SNS. Photo: VCG

Manila 'seriously misjudges situation' as Marcos hypes 'China's challenge'

By Wang Qi

The Philippines has seriously misjudged the situation, which will harm its own interests, future cooperation with China, as well as the common aspirations of regional countries for peace, stability and prosperity, analysts said on Monday, following Philippine President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr stating that the Philippines and China remain deadlocked over the joint oil exploration

and accused China of posing a "regional challenge."

In an interview with Japanese media NHK on Saturday, Marcos stressed that the Philippines will deepen trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US and seek to conduct more joint exercises.

Marcos said that tensions in the South China Sea have "increased" in recent months, warning that a "more assertive China" posed a "real challenge" to its Asian neighbors, accord-

ing to media reports.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said at a press briefing Monday that "the Philippines, bolstered by external support, has brushed aside China's goodwill and restraint and repeatedly challenged China's principles and red line. This is the major risk that could drive up tensions at sea."

Marcos also said his country is eyeing options to resolve exploration issues in the South

China Sea so it could start new energy exploration projects before the country's Malampaya gas field runs dry, according to media reports.

Li Haidong, a professor at the China Foreign Affairs University, said on Monday that Philippine policymakers have seriously misjudged the situation, shortsightedly believing that they can use external forces to put pressure on China and gain benefits beyond reasonable demands.

Manila's mind-set and practices have undoubtedly eliminated the possibility of complementary cooperation between China and the Philippines in the energy sector, Li noted.

The current policy choices of the Philippines harm not only the Philippines' own vital interests, but also its cooperation space with China, Li said.

