

Highlights: An interview with China's vice foreign minister

BEIJING — China's Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng spoke with The Associated Press on a **range of issues from U.S.-China relations to human rights**. Below are highlights from Friday's interview:

US-CHINA RELATIONS

Le took on President Joe Biden's strategy of working with others in Europe and Asia to confront China, a concern for Chinese policy makers. "The Biden administration is saying that **the U.S. has returned to multilateralism**," he said. "True multilateralism means inclusiveness and cooperation rather than teaming up against others. ... This world has over 190 countries. A group of four or seven or a dozen countries, that is not multilateralism." He called for "an atmosphere of global cooperation instead of small circles against one another."

The veteran Chinese diplomat acknowledged **competition might be inevitable** between the U.S. and China, but criticized the U.S. emphasis on confrontation over cooperation: "We feel that this is too negative and lacks a forward-looking spirit." He said it is regrettable that competing to be tougher on China seems to be the politically correct thing to do in America. "Some people in the U.S. refuse to accept that 1.4 billion Chinese people are entitled to a better life and don't recognize China has the right to choose its own path of development."

CLIMATE

There are calls for China to accelerate its carbon reduction targets, ahead of an April 22-23 climate summit called by Biden. "I'm afraid this is not very realistic," Le said. "When it comes to climate change response, China is at a different stage than the U.S., Western nations and other developed countries. China is still a primary school student while the developed countries are middle school students. Now if you ask primary school and middle school students to graduate at the same time, it is against the natural course of growth, so it's unrealistic."

Le welcomed America's return to the Paris accord under Biden and called on the U.S. "to redouble its efforts to make up for the losses caused by its withdrawal" under former President Donald Trump. Specifically, he said

that rather than blaming China, the U.S. should provide more technical and financial support to help poorer countries address climate change.

SOUTH CHINA SEA

Le blamed the U.S. for stirring up trouble in the South China Sea, where **China has stepped up enforcement of its claims to small islands** and reefs also claimed by several Southeast Asian states. The latter look to the U.S. for support against their much more powerful neighbor.

“First, I have to say that the United States is 7,000 miles away from the South China Sea, and the United States has traveled long distances to come with weaponry, military vessels and military aircraft,” Le said. “The South China Sea could have been more peaceful. The United States, however, has come to show off force continuously and stir up trouble. ... Just imagine if a person shows off weapons at your doorstep and even spies on you and stays long or visits frequently. That’s a kind of provocation, harassment and threat. You wouldn’t welcome them.”

HONG KONG

China’s crackdown in Hong Kong has raised fears that the territory will become more like mainland China. The U.K. and others have accused China of renegeing on pledges to give the former British colony semi-autonomy for 50 years under a “one country, two systems” framework.

“I don’t think there is anything strange if Hong Kong somehow becomes more like a Chinese city, because after all, Hong Kong is part of China and Hong Kong people are Chinese people,” Le said.

China’s ruling Communist Party, which has quashed dissent at home in the name of ensuring stability and prosperity, is extending a version of that strategy to Hong Kong after massive and often violent anti-government protests in 2019.

“The purpose is not to change ‘one country, two systems’ but to improve it and ensure its steady implementation in the long-run,” Le said. “So 20 years later, Hong Kong will see greater stability, become more prosperous and its people will enjoy a happier life.”

XINJIANG

The divide with the West on human rights in China’s Xinjiang region is stark. Chinese authorities flatly deny allegations of forced labor and other abuses.

They also block unfettered access, and a climate of fear prevents residents from speaking out.

“The United States ... alleges that there is genocide in Xinjiang without carrying out investigation or showing proof,” Le said. “They don’t believe the press conferences held by the government of Xinjiang. What they believe were fake reports by a handful of anti-China scholars, some stories made up by (separatist) elements and disinformation from some Western media.”

He said that China would welcome the U.N. human rights commissioner or Western diplomats to Xinjiang, “but they should come as visitors, not carrying out a so-called investigation. They are not qualified to do so. Guests are welcomed by their hosts, but the guests need to have some basic sense of courtesy. If they come into someone else’s house as if this is their own space and search up and down for so-called evidence of crime, then of course they won’t be welcomed.”