

Abbott 'to ink strategic agreement with S'pore'

Reported deal set to have a strong focus on security, counter-terrorism

By JONATHAN PEARLMAN
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES
IN SYDNEY

AUSTRALIAN Prime Minister Tony Abbott is expected to conclude a wide-ranging strategic agreement with Singapore during a visit - due to start on Saturday - that is expected to have a strong focus on security and counter-terrorism.

Mr Abbott is apparently seeking to "conclude a historic comprehensive strategic partnership with the island-nation", according to a report in The Australian yesterday. But his office would not comment on the visit.

The agreement would reportedly cover trade and security, as well as research, education, culture and the arts.

Analysts, noting that there will be a strong focus on security and counter-terrorism, also said Mr Abbott will likely hold discussions on the rise of China in the Pacific region.

Dr Stephen Dobbs, an expert on Singaporean history at the University of Western Australia, said Mr Abbott is likely to use his visit to fit in with his recent domestic focus on combating terrorism and recruits of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria militant group.

He is currently pushing controversial measures to strip citizenship from dual nationals involved in terrorism.

"Mr Abbott is beating the drum here very loudly on security," Dr Dobbs told The Straits Times. "I have no doubt that it will be very high on the agenda."

Mr Abbott is scheduled to deliver the 35th Singapore Lecture next Monday. His title for the talk, which is part of an annual series run by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, will reportedly be "Our Common Challenges: Strengthening Security in the Region".

The visit will mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the countries. It will be Mr Abbott's second visit since he was elected in September 2013. He visited in March for the funeral of former Singapore prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Singapore is Australia's fifth-largest trade partner, with exports and imports last year worth about A\$27 billion (S\$28 billion). Singapore's investment in Australian

property and companies was worth about A\$60.5 billion - the fourth-largest source of foreign investment.

Though the two nations have a longstanding free trade agreement dating back to 2003 and close defence ties including an annual ministerial dialogue, analysts believe Mr Abbott will want to focus heavily on forging even closer security ties.

University of Sydney foreign affairs analyst Jonathan Bogais said Mr Abbott wanted Australia to expand its strategic role in the region and bolster - or even act as a "substitute" for - the role that the United States has played in anchoring regional security.

"This appears to be consistent with the Australian government's - and especially Tony Abbott's vision - of seeing Australia as a key security player in the Indo-Pacific region. In some ways he sees Australia as being a substitute for the US," he told The Straits Times.

Dr Dobbs said Mr Abbott will also seek Singaporean perspectives on a range of regional issues, including China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

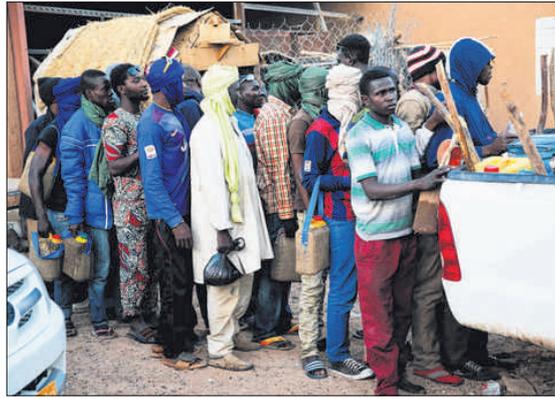
A veteran former Australian diplomat, Mr Richard Woolcott, who served in Malaysia and Singapore in the early 1960s in the lead-up to Singaporean independence, said that over the past half-century Singapore has ended up as a more "independent" country, whereas Australia has remained closely aligned in its outlook with the US.

"Singapore is a part of Southeast Asia and is very conscious of that. With Australia - while we keep saying we want to play an active part in what has been called the Asian century - our links are still largely with the US and Great Britain."

Analysts, noting that the issue of China is likely on Mr Abbott's agenda, said Canberra tends to take a more hesitant approach to Beijing than Singapore.

"Singapore welcomes the US role in the region but does not fear China," said Professor Bogais.

"For whatever reason, we have a government that does (fear China). There is still a phobia in some ways of Asia, even as Australia grows its trade with Asia." jonathanpearlman@gmail.com



Migrants waiting to board a truck in the desert town of Agadez, Niger, last month. A record 100,000 migrants are expected to cross Niger this year into Libya, from where they hope to make the dangerous sea crossing to Europe. Hundreds of migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean. PHOTO: REUTERS

EU to launch operation against migrant smugglers

LUXEMBOURG - European Union foreign ministers yesterday agreed to launch a naval operation against gangs smuggling migrants to Europe from Libya, although the mission will be limited to intelligence-gathering for now due to lack of a United Nations resolution.

The operation is part of a stepped-up response to a surge of migrants from Africa and the Middle East making the dangerous sea crossing from Libya to Europe. Hundreds have drowned in the Mediterranean.

"Let me be very clear: The targets are not the migrants, the targets are those that are making money on their lives and too often on their deaths. It is part of our effort to save lives," EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said.

The operation, as initially envisaged by EU officials, was in-

tended to disrupt the migrant traffickers' business and to capture and destroy their ships, possibly even in Libyan waters.

But the EU would require a UN Security Council resolution and consent from the Libyan authorities to operate in Libyan waters and coastal areas.

Lacking both pre-conditions, the EU will limit its operations for now to sending ships and aircraft to patrol in international waters of the Mediterranean to gather information on the smugglers' activities.

The mission will start "in the coming days", Ms Mogherini said.

The mission, dubbed "EU Navfor Med", will initially deploy five warships, two submarines, three maritime patrol aircraft with drones and helicopters in addition, officials said.

A senior EU official said com-

manders were aware of the dangers in the operation, noting the presence of the radical Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in Libya and recent attacks on merchant shipping by the rival factions.

EU officials still hope for Libyan consent and a UN resolution later that would let them tackle the traffickers.

Britain, France, Lithuania and Spain, which all belong to the 15-member Security Council, had been drafting a resolution to approve the EU operation under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, which allows the use of force.

But diplomats said the work was put on hold earlier this month pending Libyan consent to the operation, a major obstacle because two rival governments and parliaments are fighting for control there.

REUTERS, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

WORLD BRIEFS

Syrian army advances

DAMASCUS - Syria's army has advanced west of the ancient city of Palmyra, reopening a key supply route for oil and gas to the capital.

Reports yesterday said the army had "intensified" its operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria group in Palmyra and the surrounding area.

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'No war crimes' by Israel

Jerusalem - Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday insisted that Israel did "not commit war crimes" in last year's Gaza war.

His comment came as a response to a United Nations report alleging both Israel and Palestinian militants may have committed war crimes last year that caused "unprecedented" devastation and human suffering.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Berlin releases Al-Jazeera man

DOHA - Germany yesterday released Al-Jazeera correspondent Ahmed Mansour, who was arrested during the weekend at the request of his native Egypt, the Doha-based channel said.

Al-Jazeera welcomed the German decision, spokesman Hareth Adlouni said, adding that the prosecutor had dropped all charges against Mr Mansour, 52.

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EU extends Russia sanctions

LUXEMBOURG - European Union foreign ministers formally agreed yesterday to prolong to January next year damaging economic sanctions against Russia to ensure it fully implements Ukraine peace accords, officials said.

"EU has extended economic sanctions against Russia until Jan 31, 2016, with a view to complete implementation of (the) Minsk agreement," EU spokesman Maja Kocijancic said in a tweet.

The 28-nation bloc hit Russia's banking, oil and defence sectors with punitive measures after Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down in July last year over territory held by pro-Moscow rebels.

Up to that point, many EU

members had been reluctant to adopt full-scale economic sanctions, agreeing only to travel bans and asset freezes against Russian and Ukrainian figures.

Those reservations remain but as the crisis has deepened, the EU has stuck with the tougher sanctions. It has also warned, alongside the United States, that more could follow unless Moscow withdraws support for the rebels and uses its influence with them to implement a ceasefire accord signed in the Belarus capital Minsk in February.

In March, EU leaders agreed in principle to roll the sanctions over by linking them directly to the Minsk accord, which runs to December this year.

The ceasefire has largely held, but Kiev and the rebels swap charges daily over breaches, and observers reported a sharp rise in fighting earlier this month in a conflict which has claimed more than 6,500 lives and destroyed much of eastern Ukraine.

The foreign ministers of France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia are due to meet in Paris today to review the situation.

Nato head Jens Stoltenberg welcomed the EU decision, stressing how important it was that Russia face the consequences of its actions. "Sanctions are a strong signal and clear message that it has consequences when a country behaves like Russia has in Ukraine," Mr Stoltenberg said.

Russia meanwhile expressed disappointment, blaming partisan EU groups for the decision.

"We are deeply disappointed that the opinion of the Russophobic lobby, which pushed through the decision to prolong illegal restrictions, once again dominated in the EU," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement.

The decision was "guaranteed to cause hundreds of thousands of Europeans to lose their jobs," it said, focusing on a sore point in the bloc. It also described as "cynical" the fact that the decision was taken on June 22 - the same day that Nazi Germany launched its invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Hollande's charm campaign starts early

PARIS - His ratings are still in the doldrums and the economy is still stagnant, yet French President Francois Hollande looks ever more determined to run for re-election two years from now.

An appearance by his supposed lover, actress Julie Gayet, at a wartime memorial ceremony last week set tongues wagging that she was being gradually introduced as France's new first lady ahead of the 2017 presidential polls.

Mr Hollande has refused to be drawn on the nature of their relationship, which was dramatically revealed last year by a magazine. The report destroyed his relationship with journalist Valerie Trierweiler, who later published a damaging kiss-and-tell book about her time in the Elysee Palace.

Nor will Mr Hollande officially admit to being in campaign mode, saying: "I am not in a race which would not yet make any sense."

His schedule suggests otherwise; he is spending a busy few weeks criss-crossing the country



French President Francois Hollande has been criss-crossing the country and pressing the flesh, including at Le Mans this month where he posed for a selfie with a spectator (left). An appearance by supposed lover, actress Julie Gayet, at a wartime memorial last week (right) set tongues wagging that she was being gradually introduced as the new first lady ahead of the 2017 presidential polls. PHOTOS: REUTERS

and pressing the flesh.

"A handshake, a selfie, a kiss - that's three votes," said an adviser at one recent appearance.

Nor will Mr Hollande, 60, also look to be buttering up voters with policy promises.

Having campaigned strongly on an anti-banking, anti-austerity message in 2012, he confused many supporters by instantly re-

versing course once in office, raising taxes on the middle classes and reining in public deficits.

He is now trying to spin those efforts as the first step towards reducing taxes in the future. "The French have perfectly well understood that today's deficits can be tomorrow's taxes," he has said.

He is hoping that meagre signs of growth in the economy - pre-

dicted at 1 to 1.2 per cent this year - will afford him a few new noses to pensioners and state employees, as well as a drop in taxes for "nine million households".

"We get the impression the President is playing Father Christmas," scoffed Mr Laurent Wauquiez, from the right-wing opposition.

The path looks daunting for the

man with the worst popularity ratings in modern French history.

The latest poll shows only 22 per cent of voters are satisfied with his performance and only 2 per cent very satisfied.

Jobless rates remain the biggest obstacle - stubbornly stuck at 10 per cent overall and a devastating 24 per cent for young people.

His primary opponent on the

right is Mr Nicolas Sarkozy, who returned to frontline politics last year for the first time since losing to Mr Hollande in 2012.

Mr Sarkozy regularly derides the President's "mediocrity", but looks equally embattled himself after a barrage of corruption scandals and a multitude of challengers within his own camp.

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