

ADDRESS RUSSIA'S 'LEGITIMATE CONCERNS', CHINA TELLS U.S.

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China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Thursday told his U.S. counterpart Antony Blinken that Russia's "legitimate concerns" needed to be addressed amid rising tensions over Ukraine.

The U.S. Secretary of State, in the phone call, "underscored the global security and economic risks posed by further Russian aggression against Ukraine and conveyed that de-escalation and diplomacy are the responsible way forward", the U.S. State Department quoted him as saying.

The phone call on Thursday came as Mr. Blinken said the U.S. had given Moscow a document "setting out a serious diplomatic path forward" and highlighting U.S. concerns about Russian actions, including a build-up of troops.

Call for diplomacy

China, which maintains close relations with Russia, has been largely muted on the crisis except for calling for diplomacy.

Mr. Wang's comments in the call with Mr. Blinken are the strongest yet in support of Russia, whose President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to be in Beijing next week to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping and attend the opening of the Winter Olympics on February 4.

Mr. Wang said China "calls on all parties to remain calm and refrain from inflaming tensions or hyping up the crisis" and added that "the security of one country should not be at the expense of the security of others, and regional security should not be guaranteed by strengthening or even expanding military blocs", referring to NATO.

He said that "Russia's legitimate security concerns should be taken seriously and addressed."

On China-U.S. relations, he said "the top priority was for the U.S. side is to stop interfering in the Beijing Winter Olympics, stop playing with fire by playing the 'Taiwan card' and stop forming all kinds of small cliques aimed at working against and containing China". The U.S. has said its officials will boycott the Winter Olympics — although its athletes are participating — because of human rights violations in Xinjiang.

The U.S. State Department, in a brief readout of the call, said both had "exchanged views on how to advance work together following President Biden's virtual meeting with President Xi on November 15, 2021, including on managing strategic risk, health security, and climate change."

Relations between the two sides had plunged amid a trade war and differences over a range of issues from Taiwan to the South China Sea and investigations into the origins of COVID-19, with tensions spiralling under the previous Donald Trump administration.

Some Chinese experts had expected a change of course and greater stability with Mr. Biden taking office. The Biden administration has, however, made clear it would confront China and compete on issues where needed, and seek cooperation where it can.

Many of the previous administration's policies, particularly on trade, have so far remained in place.

Mr. Wang in the call said there "has been no substantive change in the tone of the U.S. policy towards China and Biden's pledges have not been fully delivered". "Pressure will only make the Chinese people more united," he said, "and confrontation will not stop China from becoming stronger."

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