

G7 SEEKS COMMON FRONT ON CHINA

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The Group of Seven wealthy democracies on Tuesday discussed how to form a common front towards an increasingly assertive China in the Foreign Ministers' first in-person talks in two years.

Backing U.S. President Joe Biden's calls for a deeper alliance of democracies, host Britain invited guests, including India, South Korea and Australia, for talks in central London stretched out over three days.

After a welcome dinner on Monday focused on the nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea, the Foreign Ministers opened formal talks at Lancaster House, a West End mansion, welcoming one another with COVID-friendly elbow-bumps and minimal staff.

The G7 devoted its first session on Tuesday to China, whose growing military and economic clout and willingness to exert its influence at home and abroad have increasingly unnerved Western democracies.

"It is not our purpose to try to contain China or to hold China down," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters on Monday. "What we are trying to do is to uphold the international rules-based order that our countries have invested so much in over so many decades to the benefit, I would argue, not just of our own citizens, but of people around the world — including, by the way, China."

Mr. Blinken pledged "robust cooperation" with Britain in pressuring China over the Xinjiang region, where Beijing's incarceration of one million Uighurs and other Muslims has been labelled genocide by Washington, and over a clampdown against civil rights in Hong Kong.

'Respect commitments'

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab called for "holding Beijing to the commitments that they've made", including on Hong Kong, which was promised a separate system before London handed over the colony in 1997.

But in line with the Biden administration, which has shifted the tone if not substance of former President Donald Trump's hawkish stance on China, Mr. Raab also called for "finding constructive ways to work with China in a sensible and positive manner where that's possible" — including on climate change. "We want to see China stepping up to the plate and playing its full role," Mr. Raab said.

The nations of the G7 — which also include Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan — mostly share concerns about China but some have different approaches. Japan has historic tensions with China but has held off on joining Western nations with sanctions, wary of inflaming relations with its trading partner.

Italy has been seen as one of the most Beijing-friendly nations in the West, in 2019 signing up for the Belt and Road Initiative. But Rome joined EU peers in March in summoning the Chinese Ambassador in a row triggered by concerns over treatment of the Uighurs.

The Ministers later held a session on the spiralling crisis in Myanmar and were also due to discuss Russia, Libya, Syria, and climate change among other topics.

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