Don’t interfere, China warns UK

China’s government and pro-Beijing activists in Hong Kong have condemned what they called foreign meddling in the territory’s affairs, as countries moved to offer Hong Kongers refuge and impose sanctions on China over a new security law. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said no amount of pressure from external forces could “shake China’s determination and will to safeguard national sovereignty and Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability.”

Israel acts to stop virus wave

Israel’s parliament has approved a law granting the country’s internal security agency limited authority to use phone surveillance to track coronavirus cases as the country struggles to contain a second outbreak. The Israeli government had authorized the Shin Bet to use the technology in March during the peak of the country’s coronavirus outbreak, despite public outcry over privacy concerns.

Lockdown leads to cleaner air

The first few weeks of the COVID19 lockdown cut levels of dangerous pollutants by as much as 40 per cent in towns and cities, according to new research. Data gathered on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) found dramatic drops in nitrogen oxides and nitrogen dioxide between the start of lockdown and April 30. Urban environments saw drops in the levels of nitrogen oxides of between 30% to 40% on average.

China ‘unsettling region’

The defence minister has accused China of deeply unsettling the Indo-Pacific as Australia shifts its full military focus to the region. Linda Reynolds says China’s expansion has put Australia in a precarious position. “They have not positively contributed to Australia’s - or the region’s – security and stability,” Senator Reynolds told a defence forum. “Australia has watched closely as China has actively sought greater influence in the Indo-Pacific.

BBC to axe hundreds of jobs

The BBC has announced plans to cut around 450 jobs across England. The broadcaster said that BBC England must save £25 million by the end of March 2022. BBC England is the home of the corporation’s local radio stations and regional TV news, and according to the BBC will “undergo a significant reinvention”. It comes after the BBC last month said it was axing more than 150 roles in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Peters brawls with China

New Zealand has joined countries that have expressed criticism of a Chinese law that attacks personal freedoms in Hong Kong. Risking a further rebuke from China, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters has defended Kiwis’ right to protest for Hong Kong independence. This week, New Zealand joined a chorus of criticism of the new “security law” enacted by China, which erodes the city-state’s autonomy.
Doubt cast on bounty threat

President Donald Trump and top officials have stepped up their defense of the administration’s response to intelligence assessments that Russia offered bounties for killing US troops in Afghanistan. Trump’s national security adviser said he had prepared a list of retaliatory options if the intelligence proved true. Trump, meanwhile, called the assessments a “hoax” and insisted anew he hadn’t been briefed on them because the intelligence didn’t rise to his level.

Vote gives Putin extended reign

Most voters in Russia have approved amendments to the country’s constitution that will allow President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036, Russian election officials said after all the votes were counted. Kremlin critics said the vote was rigged. In the week-long balloting that concluded on Wednesday, 77.9% voted for the changes, and 21.3% voted against, with 100% of the precincts counted by Thursday morning, Russia’s Central Election Commission said.

Eurozone jobless rise contained

The unemployment rate in the 19 countries that use the euro currency inched higher to 7.4% in May from 7.3% in April as governments used active labor market support programs to cushion the impact of the virus outbreak on workers. The figures released by statistics agency Eurostat show how European governments have held down the rise in unemployment through programs that pay part of workers’ salaries in return for companies not laying them off.

Trade surplus rises, imports fall

Australia’s trade surplus rose 2.0 per cent to $8.03 billion in May, as imports fell faster than exports. Exports dropped 4.0 per cent to $35.7 billion, while imports dropped 6.0 per cent to $27.7 billion, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed on Thursday. “While disappointing expectations for a $9.0 billion surplus, the overall trade balance was largely unchanged from last month’s now downwardly revised $7.8 billion,” NAB economist Kaixin Owong said.

infections soar across India

India’s coronavirus tally stands at more than 604,000 infections, with 100,000 of those cases reported in the past four days. Health authorities have reported 19,148 new cases in the past 24 hours. India’s Health Ministry said the death toll from the virus is now 17,834 people. The worst-hit three states, including those home to the cities of Mumbai and New Delhi, account for more than 60 per cent of the country’s cases.

Exemptions for foreign teachers

Principals want foreign teachers exempted from the border ban so they can plug staffing gaps caused by the teacher shortage. Foreign-trained teachers have been a key part of official efforts to relieve the shortage and last year nearly 1000 overseas teachers gained visas to work in New Zealand. Secondary Principals Association president Deidre Shea said schools would normally be starting to look overseas now to fill next year’s vacancies.
Israel acts to stop new virus wave

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The Israeli government had authorized the Shin Bet to use the technology in March during the peak of the country's coronavirus outbreak, despite public outcry over privacy concerns. But the country's Supreme Court ordered the surveillance halted until the security agency's permission was granted by law.

The Knesset, Israel's parliament, voted 51-38 in favor of granting the Shin Bet power to use phone surveillance to retrace the steps of people infected with COVID-19 and identify others who came in contact with them in the previous two weeks. Those determined to have been in close proximity with an infected person will be ordered to self-quarantine for two weeks from the date of contact.

The law grants the Shin Bet permission to track cell phones for a three-week period on a case-by-case basis and only in instances in which other epidemiological tracking methods are insufficient in determining contact between a patient and other potentially infected persons. But the law does grant the prime minister authority to give the Shin Bet additional powers if circumstances require. A ministerial team will evaluate the need of the surveillance, while taking into consideration the impact on individuals' right to privacy.

Israel has seen a spike in confirmed coronavirus cases in recent weeks since the government began easing restrictions on movement in May. New daily cases of the novel coronavirus have exceeded 600 in the past week, with the total number of confirmed cases exceeding 26,000. At least 321 Israelis have died of the disease since the beginning of the pandemic in March, according to the Israeli Health Ministry.

Earlier this month, the head of the Shin Bet reportedly told Israeli Cabinet ministers that he opposed the continued use of his agency's technology to track coronavirus cases.

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Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said no amount of pressure from external forces could “shake China's determination and will to safeguard national sovereignty and Hong Kong's prosperity and stability.”

He urged the US to abide by international law and stop interfering in Hong Kong's affairs, and not sign a sanction bill into law.

His comments came after the US House of Representatives joined the Senate in approving a bill to rebuke China over its crackdown in Hong Kong by imposing sanctions on groups that undermine the city's autonomy or restrict freedoms promised to its residents.

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If the bill becomes law, “China will definitely take strong countermeasures, and all consequences will be borne by the US side,” Zhao said at a daily briefing.

China stands firm on Hong Kong laws

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UK

Lockdown leads to cleaner air

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Data gathered on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) found dramatic drops in nitrogen oxides and nitrogen dioxide between the start of lockdown and April 30.

While the positive effects of the shutdown on air quality was not felt evenly across the country, urban environments saw drops in the levels of nitrogen oxides of between 30% to 40% on average.

There is significant evidence these gases exacerbate and may even cause asthma over time, and have been linked to heart disease, diabetes and may have an impact on birth outcomes.

Nitrogen dioxide also dropped by an average 20% to 30% in urban centres, with the greatest falls recorded at roadsides.

The gas was of particular interest to scientists during the coronavirus pandemic because it inflames the lungs and can reduce immunity to lung infections.

One of the biggest drivers in the drop in pollutants is believed to be road traffic, which fell by 70% over the period in question according to the Department for Transport.

The data was published following a call for evidence by Defra’s Air Quality Expert Group.

More than 50 organisations submitted data by the close of the call on April 30, including university research groups, commercial organisations, industry bodies and local authorities. One of its stated aims was to try to gain insight into the impact of air quality on viral infection.

It said it would “not be surprising” if there was a link between an individual’s exposure to air pollution and the occurrence or the severity of Covid-19 infection.

But it added: “Such studies require very careful control for confounding influences, and further work is needed before there can be confidence in their findings.”

UK

BBC to axe hundreds of jobs across England

The BBC has announced plans to cut around 450 jobs across England.

The broadcaster said that BBC England must save £25 million by the end of March 2022.

BBC England is the home of the corporation’s local radio stations and regional TV news, and according to the BBC will “undergo a significant reinvention”.

It comes after the BBC last month said it was axing more than 150 roles in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Last month outgoing director-general Lord Tony Hall launched a programme of voluntary redundancy across the BBC.

The BBC already had an £800 million savings target before the coronavirus pandemic led to an additional £125 million deficit.

Helen Thomas, the director of BBC England, said: “I’m proud people have turned to us for trusted news and information in huge numbers during COVID-19, proving the importance of our local and regional services. But those services were created more than 50 years ago, have changed very little and need significant reinvention. That has meant taking some difficult decisions.

“We are in the age of the Facebook community group and the WhatsApp neighbourhood chat. We must adapt to better reflect how people live their lives, how they get their news and what content they want.

“We’re going to modernise our offer to audiences in England by making digital a central part of everything we do. We’ll take forward lessons from COVID-19 that will make us more agile and more in touch with communities while also ensuring we’re as efficient as we can be. I’m confident we can evolve our local and regional services while improving our impact and better serving our audiences.”
AUSTRALIA

China accused of unsettling region

The defence minister has accused China of deeply unsettling the Indo-Pacific as Australia shifts its full military focus to the region.

Linda Reynolds says China’s expansion has put Australia in a precarious position.

“They have not positively contributed to Australia’s - or the region’s - security and stability,” Senator Reynolds told a defence forum.

“Australia has watched closely as China has actively sought greater influence in the Indo-Pacific. “Australia is far from alone in being troubled by this.”

The government is spending another $270 billion on defence over the next decade to protect against China’s militarisation and the fallout from coronavirus.

It has also instructed the Australian Defence Force to focus squarely on the region, rather than far-flung conflicts.

Peter Jennings from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute believes the country could be heading to a potential military crisis off the coast of China within the next year or two.

“What is new is the realisation that the risk of conflict is upon us right now, not a comfortably distant 20 years away,” he said.

“The (defence strategic) update abandons a long-held strategic view that we would have 10 years of ‘strategic warning time’ to prepare for a large-scale conflict.”

Jennings has also urged the prime minister to apply his strategic lens to Australia’s “thin diplomatic effort” in Southeast Asia.

“We must work with the region to show that it’s possible to push back against (Chinese) domination,” he said.

Reynolds does not believe Australia’s concerns will surprise the Chinese government.

“We have been very clear in expressing our concerns about developments that are inconsistent with international law or may undermine the sovereignty of nations,” she said.

NEW ZEALAND

Peters brawls with China over Hong Kong laws

New Zealand has joined countries that have expressed criticism of a Chinese law that attacks personal freedoms in Hong Kong.

Risking a further rebuke from China, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters has defended Kiwis’ right to protest for Hong Kong independence.

This week, New Zealand joined a chorus of criticism of the new “security law” enacted by China, which erodes the city-state’s autonomy.

The laws threaten star chamber trials and curtails on media, as well as huge punishments for protest actions.

Crucially, Beijing maintains the law will apply to non-Hong Kongers outside Hong Kong.

Peters said New Zealand was deeply disappointed at the law’s passage, and claimed the government “consistently emphasised its serious concern about the imposition of this legislation on Hong Kong without inclusive consultation”.

The Chinese Embassy issued a pointed statement saying “legislation for safeguarding national security in (Hong Kong) is purely China’s internal affair”.

“We urge the New Zealand side to respect China’s sovereignty, abide by international laws and basic norms of international relations, stop interfering in Hong Kong affairs and China’s internal affairs, and do more to promote the sound and steady development of the China-New Zealand relations,” an embassy statement read.

Peters, 75, was present at the 1997 handover ceremony between the United Kingdom and China, when the UK’s lease on the influential port city expired and China took over governance, promising “one country, two systems”.

The deputy prime minister said New Zealand “was not interfering in anybody’s affairs” but asked China respect its “one country, two systems” pledge.

He then served up China’s own argument back to the superpower, suggesting what Kiwis chose to say and believe in was their own business.
RUSSIA

Russian President Vladimir Putin shows his passport to a member of an election commission as he arrives to take part in voting at a polling station in Moscow. – AP

Most voters in Russia have approved amendments to the country’s constitution that will allow President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036, Russian election officials said after all the votes were counted.

Kremlin critics said the vote was rigged.

In the week-long balloting that concluded on Wednesday, 77.9% voted for the changes, and 21.3% voted against, with 100% of the precincts counted by Thursday morning, Russia’s Central Election Commission said. The turnout exceeded 64%, according to officials.

The reported numbers reflect the highest level of voter support for Putin in 10 years. In the 2018 presidential election, 76.7% of voters supported his candidacy, while in the 2012 election only 63.6% did.

But Kremlin critics say the numbers alone show they are false, with an unrealistic approval rating for the Russian leader amid wide frustration in the country over declining living standards.

“A record in falsifying votes has been set in Russia,” opposition politician Alexei Navalny said in a Facebook post. “The announced result has nothing whatsoever to do with the people’s opinion.”

Putin’s approval rating was at 59% in May, according to the Levada Center, Russia’s top independent pollster. That was the lowest in two decades.

The week-long plebiscite was tarnished by widespread reports of pressure on voters and other irregularities, with independent election observers criticizing the voting procedure as having a complete lack of transparency and independent control.

For the first time in Russia, polls were kept open for an entire week to bolster turnout and avoid election-day crowds amid the coronavirus pandemic — a provision that Kremlin critics denounced as an extra tool to manipulate the outcome, as ballot boxes remained unattended for days at night.

NORTH AMERICA

Pompeo casts doubt on bounty threat

President Donald Trump and top officials have stepped up their defense of the administration’s response to intelligence assessments that Russia offered bounties for killing US troops in Afghanistan.

Trump’s national security adviser said he had prepared a list of retaliatory options if the intelligence proved true.

Trump, meanwhile, called the assessments a “hoax” and insisted anew he hadn’t been briefed on them because the intelligence didn’t rise to his level. However, National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien said both the CIA and Pentagon did pursue the leads and briefed international allies.

“We had options ready to go,” O’Brien said. “It may be impossible to get to the bottom of it.”

At a State Department news conference, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the situation was handled “incredibly well” to ensure the safety of US troops.

“We took this seriously, we handled it appropriately,” Pompeo said, without giving additional details. He said the administration receives intelligence about threats to Americans “every single day” and each is addressed.

Pompeo added that Russian activity in Afghanistan is nothing new and that Russia is just one of many nations acting there. He said Congress has had similar information in the past, and that he often receives threat assessments that don’t rise to the level of a presidential briefing.

The president has repeatedly said he wasn’t briefed on the assessments that Russia offered bounties because there wasn’t corroborating evidence.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany pointed to an individual who she said made the decision not to brief Trump, identifying the person as a female CIA officer with more than 30 years of experience.

“The national security adviser agreed with that decision,” McEnany said. “It was the right decision to make, and at this moment as I speak to you it is still unverified.”
EUROPE

Eurozone jobless rise contained

The unemployment rate in the 19 countries that use the euro currency inched higher to 7.4% in May from 7.3% in April as governments used active labor market support programs to cushion the impact of the virus outbreak on workers.

The figures released by statistics agency Eurostat show how European governments have held down the rise in unemployment through programs that pay part of workers’ salaries in return for companies not laying them off.

The support is granted because the companies are not to blame for the economic trouble - countries around the world have had to limit business, travel and public life to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The idea is to support the recovery since companies will not have to recruit and train new workers, having kept their staff.

In Germany, the eurozone’s largest economy, 6.7 million people were still on wage support programs in June. The program pays at least 60% of missing pay when workers are put on shorter hours or no hours.

The US jobless rate has risen to 13.3% in May from 3.5% in February. New US figures on the jobless rate and first-time unemployment claims are due out later Thursday.

REST OF THE WORLD

Coronavirus infections soar across India

India’s coronavirus tally stands at more than 604,000 infections, with 100,000 of those cases reported in the past four days.

Health authorities have reported 19,148 new cases in the past 24 hours.

India’s Health Ministry said the death toll from the virus is now 17,834 people.

The worst-hit three states, including those home to the cities of Mumbai and New Delhi, account for more than 60 per cent of the country’s cases.

Despite the surge in infections, the western beach state of Goa, a popular backpacking destination, opened for tourism with the state government allowing 250 hotels to reopen after more than three months.

Tourists will either have to carry COVID-19 negative certificates or get tested on arrival.

The state has so far reported 1387 positive cases with four deaths.

Many industries and businesses have reopened across the country, and Indians have cautiously returned to the streets. Schools remain closed.
Schools seek exemptions for foreign teachers

**New Zealand**

Foreign-trained teachers have been a key part of official efforts to relieve the shortage and last year nearly 1000 overseas teachers gained visas to work in New Zealand.

Secondary Principals Association president Deidre Shea said schools would normally be starting to look overseas now to fill some of next year’s vacancies.

“Going forward into 2021 it’s likely that we will need to employ folk from overseas in order to be sure that we get enough quality teachers into our schools,” she said.

“At the moment that’s not possible and that’s causing some concern in some areas, where for example jobs have been offered and accepted and of course people can’t travel now.”

She said principals were only now starting to raise their fears about the staffing situation and they would be asking for an exemption allowing foreign-trained teachers to enter the country to take up jobs. However, Shea said the pandemic could have positive effects on teacher supply.

“People perhaps returning to teaching, people perhaps returning to teaching, there has been a trend in a number of countries. In the current pandemic, the numbers coming out of training.”

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**Australia**

**Trade surplus rises as imports tumble**

Australia’s trade surplus rose 2.0 per cent to $8.03 billion in May, as imports fell faster than exports.

Exports dropped 4.0 per cent to $35.7 billion, while imports dropped 6.0 per cent to $27.7 billion, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed on Thursday.

“While disappointing expectations for a $9.0 billion surplus, the overall trade balance was largely unchanged from last month’s now downwardly revised $7.8 billion,” NAB economist Kaixin Owyong said in a note.

“The trade surplus remains elevated, following a larger fall in imports than exports over the past three months.”

Imports of consumption goods was steeply lower, down 14 per cent to $8.9 billion.

Exports of rural goods fell 10 per cent to $3.6 million, driven by a 31 per cent drop in cereal grains and cereal preparations.

Coal export earnings dropped by 13.3 per cent, or $635 million.

A broad fall in imports was offset somewhat by imports of non-monetary gold, which more than doubled.

“Australia’s international trade surplus has - on balance - been boosted by the net impacts of the pandemic,” Westpac economist Andrew Hanlan said in a note.

“Imports are trending lower as domestic demand contracts. Goods exports, while not immune from the global recession, have been more resilient.”