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China's Xi Considers Visiting Central Asia, Potential Meeting With Putin Next Month

Tentative change in Chinese president's schedule comes after Pelosi's trip to Taiwan sparked fear in Beijing of accidental military encounter



By *Keith Zhai* [Follow](#)

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Preparations are under way for Chinese leader Xi Jinping to travel to Central Asia to meet with Russia's Vladimir Putin and other leaders at a regional summit in mid-September, according to people familiar with the planning.

The tentative addition of a trip to Mr. Xi's schedule was prompted by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan earlier this month, which was seen in Beijing as an escalation of Western pressure on China, some of the people said.

People involved in preparations for the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, scheduled to take place this year in the Uzbek city of Samarkand on Sept. 15 and 16, said Mr. Xi's office signaled this week that he might attend in person, though they cautioned that his plans remain in flux. The office has also begun preparing bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the summit with the leaders of Pakistan, India and Turkey,

who are also making plans to attend, they said.

Planning for Mr. Xi's attendance began only after angry warnings and threats of retaliation failed to dissuade Mrs. Pelosi from visiting Taiwan, a democratically self-governed island that Beijing claims as part of China, according to some of the people. China's leadership is concerned that intensified tensions with Washington over Taiwan could lead to an accidental military encounter, they said.



China's Foreign Ministry, the Kremlin, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization didn't immediately respond to requests for comment. Russia's state-run TASS news agency said in June that Mr. Putin planned to attend the summit but didn't mention a meeting with Mr. Xi.

A trip to Samarkand would underline Mr. Xi's goal of cultivating tighter security relationships with countries that aren't U.S. allies as a bulwark against Western efforts to contain China, Chinese officials said.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a regional security bloc founded by China, Russia and Central Asian states in 2001, and it has been described by some observers as a "NATO of the East," referring to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The group expanded in 2017, adding India and Pakistan. Observer states include Iran and Afghanistan, while Turkey is listed as a dialogue partner.

Diplomats from some SCO countries said Mr. Xi was expected to attend, though a final decision has yet to be made on whether he would do so in person or virtually.

Mr. Xi last traveled abroad in January 2020, when he visited Myanmar shortly before Beijing publicly acknowledged the severity of the Covid-19 outbreak then quickly spreading in central China.

“Our world has entered a new period of volatility and transformation with the combined impact of major changes,” Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said in a regular news conference ahead of a meeting of SCO foreign ministers late last month. “China is ready to work with all parties to strengthen solidarity and mutual trust.”

The Wall Street Journal earlier reported that Mr. Xi is planning to visit Southeast Asia and meet face-to-face with President Biden in November, in what would be the first such encounter since Mr. Biden’s inauguration. In an interview with Bloomberg News published on Friday, Indonesian President Joko Widodo said that Mr. Xi is planning to attend the Group of 20 summit on the resort island of Bali in November, which Mr. Biden is also expected to attend.

A meeting with Mr. Putin ahead of the meeting with Mr. Biden would send a signal of Mr. Xi’s commitment to strong China-Russia ties, which were described by the Chinese foreign ministry as having “no limits” after an earlier meeting between Messrs. Putin and Xi in February in Beijing, just weeks before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Mr. Putin this week called Mrs. Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan a “thoroughly planned provocation” by the U.S., designed to sow chaos. Beijing said the Russian leader’s remark demonstrated “high-level strategic coordination between China and Russia.” The two militaries will also conduct side-by-side drills later this month in the Russian Far East, another sign of Chinese support for Moscow amid Western anger at Mr. Putin over the Ukraine invasion.

Mr. Xi’s trip could also help Beijing reduce tensions with India. The giant Asian neighbors have been locked in a long-running dispute over their Himalayan border that flared into a deadly military clash in 2020. India is also part of a group of democratic countries along with the U.S., Australia and Japan called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad, that aims to counter China’s growing influence in Asia.

More recently, the two governments bickered over a Chinese survey ship’s port call in Sri Lanka this month—a visit that New Delhi fears is a potential precursor to Beijing using the island nation as a base for military activities in the Indian Ocean.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, most of Mr. Xi’s meetings with global leaders have

been done virtually. He spoke with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June as part of a virtual summit of the so-called Brics nations that also included Mr. Putin, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. The Chinese leader's last face-to-face meeting with Mr. Modi took place in 2019.

India's Ministry of External Affairs declined to comment.

—*Chun Han Wong contributed to this article.*

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