

Taiwan

Taiwan election candidate risks China's anger with planned US trip

Washington and Taipei want to avoid further shows of force from Chinese military



Taiwan's vice-president Lai Ching-teh, centre, is the presidential candidate for the ruling Democratic Progressive party, which refuses to define Taiwan as part of China © Ann Wang/Reuters

Kathrin Hille in Taipei 4 HOURS AGO

Lai Ching-teh, Taiwan's vice-president and the ruling party candidate for January's presidential elections, is to make two stops in the US on a trip to South America next month, risking further threats from China.

Lai plans to stop over in the US on his way to and from the inauguration of Paraguay's president Santiago Peña on August 15, vice-foreign minister Alexander Yui said on Monday.

Lai's transit stops will not contain high-profile public engagements or locations that could provide a pretext for a strong reaction from Beijing, according to three people familiar with the plans in Taipei and one senior US administration official.

Both the Biden administration and the government of Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen want to avoid further shows of force from the Chinese military, which staged three-day exercises near [Taiwan](#) in April to "punish" Tsai for a US trip that featured a public meeting with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Beijing claims Taiwan as part of its territory and threatens to attack if Taipei resists unification indefinitely. [China](#) has ratcheted up military manoeuvres around Taiwan over the past three years, moves that Taiwanese officials view as an intimidation

campaign aimed at forcing negotiations on unification. Beijing describes its actions as legitimate pushback against what it calls meddling by foreign forces.

Washington had made clear to Beijing that China “should not use as a pretext any transit by vice-president Lai for brazen coercion or other provocative activities”, the senior US official said, adding that it should also not be used as “a pretext for interference in Taiwan’s election”.

“I’m cognisant, of course, [that at] the end of the day they make their own choices,” the US official said.

China has issued warnings or engaged in military posturing during all of Taiwan’s presidential elections since the country democratised in the mid-1990s, but they have usually failed to sway voters away from the Democratic Progressive party, to which Lai and Tsai belong and which refuses to define Taiwan as part of China.

Within the DPP, Lai has traditionally been more aligned with a more pro-independence wing. However, since launching his candidacy, he has pledged to stick to Tsai’s cautious line of preserving the status quo in the Taiwan Strait.

“The transit stops will be conducted in a way that is responsible in the light of current tensions but also upholds our government’s dignity and past precedent,” said one person familiar with the arrangements. The senior US official said Taipei was planning a low-key transit “consistent with the transits that came before it”.

Beijing immediately protested against Lai’s planned stopover. “China firmly opposes any form of official exchanges between the United States and Taiwan,” foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on Monday, adding that the country would “take resolute and forceful measures to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity”.

Taiwanese vice-presidents have made transit stops in the US as part of trips to diplomatic allies 10 times in the past 20 years, including two by Lai in San Francisco and Los Angeles on his way to and from Central America last year.

There is also a long-running precedent for Taiwanese presidential candidates to visit the US during their campaign and explain their positions on relations with China in speeches and meetings with administration officials.

Apart from last year’s transit stop, Lai visited Washington once as vice-president-elect in February 2020. But the US does not allow Taiwan’s presidents and vice-presidents to visit the capital in order to emphasise what it calls the unofficial nature of relations

with Taiwan, a condition agreed when it switched diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979.

DPP officials said it was not fair to Lai as a candidate that he was barred from visiting Washington now while rivals in the presidential race, who did not hold central government office, could go.

The presidential office declined to provide details on the US legs of the trip, which runs from August 12-18. Aides said it would take Lai through one city each on the US west coast and east coast.

Additional reporting by Aime Williams in Washington

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