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# Taiwan President's U.S. Trip Touches a Flashpoint in U.S.-China Ties

Visit by Tsai Ing-wen is likely to determine whether relations between the U.S. and China deteriorate further

By *Charles Hutzler* [Follow](#) in *Washington* and *Joyu Wang* [Follow](#) in *Taipei*

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The U.S. and China have described Taiwan as the most volatile flashpoint in their increasingly fraught bilateral relations.

Now, after months of sparring by Washington and Beijing over the Ukraine war, a suspected surveillance balloon, TikTok and other issues, Taiwan is set to return to the center of great power tensions, with the island's leader traveling to the U.S.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen is stopping in New York and Los Angeles on her way to and from Central America, with plans to meet House Speaker Kevin McCarthy next week in California. Some in the Biden administration are concerned that the visit will give Beijing the pretext to conduct military exercises near the island, as it did last summer, or erode Taiwan's security in other ways, according to officials.

As Ms. Tsai's arrival in New York on Wednesday approaches, U.S. officials have been sounding out Ms. Tsai's government to ensure her trip stays within past norms, while also urging Beijing against reacting strongly, the officials and people familiar with the talks said.

Visits by Taiwanese presidents to the U.S. are always carefully managed affairs, with Washington trying to give the island's leaders a way to show that their government has U.S. support, without giving Beijing an opening for forceful retaliation.

How the three governments handle the visit is likely to determine whether Washington- Beijing relations deteriorate further. All three are readying their militaries for a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is a longstanding U.S. partner that Beijing regards as its territory, and domestic politics make

U.S. partner that Beijing regards as its territory, and domestic politics make compromise difficult for each.

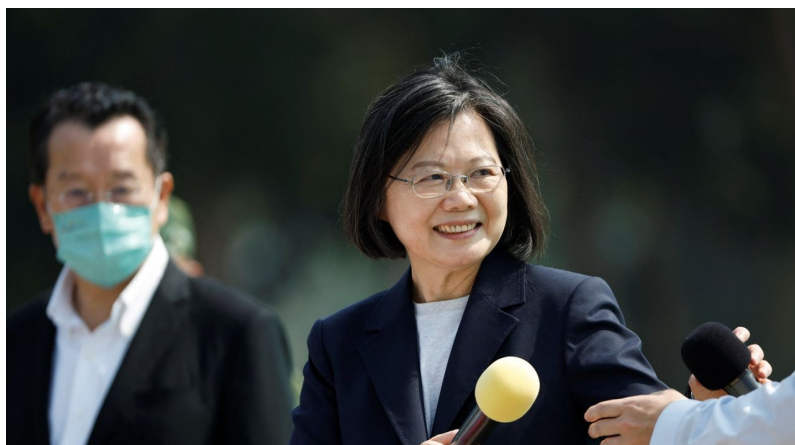
“There is a possibility that the transit, if not carefully handled, could blow up in everybody’s face,” said Bonnie Glaser, who heads the Indo-Pacific program at the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. “It could end up with a major display of military force by the Chinese, which will introduce even more friction into the U.S.-China relationship,” she said.

China, which stated its displeasure at Ms. Tsai’s trip, opened formal diplomatic relations over the weekend with Honduras, which cut its decades-old ties with Taiwan. Ms. Tsai’s trip takes her to two of Taiwan’s 13 remaining diplomatic partners, Guatemala and Belize, neighbors of Honduras.

Ms. Tsai’s stops in the U.S. are officially called “transit” visits—language that is part of the delicate diplomacy meant to maintain a U.S.-China-Taiwan equilibrium. Taiwanese presidents have made dozens of such visits over the years, including several by Ms. Tsai, with minimal pushback from Beijing, Biden administration officials said.

“There is no reason for Beijing to turn this transit, which is consistent with longstanding U.S. policy, into something it is not or use it to overreact,” the State Department said.

But China carefully scrutinizes the visits for signs that the U.S. and Taiwan are testing the limits of Beijing’s tolerance, and Taiwan’s leaders at times have pushed the envelope to try to show their influence in the U.S. House Speaker McCarthy would be the highest-level U.S. politician to meet a Taiwan president on American soil since the transit visits started.





Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen is set to visit New York and Los Angeles and plans to meet with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California.

PHOTO: CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS/REUTERS

Ties now between Taiwan and the U.S. are more robust than at any time since Washington switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, according to officials and political analysts, with more communication among defense officials and higher-level contacts between the governments. That closeness puts immense pressure on Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who has said the Taiwan issue should not be passed from generation to generation.

Beijing has put off U.S. requests earlier this month for Mr. Xi and President Biden to speak by phone in an effort by the administration to settle some of the recent rancor. Beijing wants to wait to see how Ms. Tsai's visit plays out before agreeing to any leader-level call, Chinese officials said.

"We strongly oppose any form of official interaction between the U.S. and Taiwan, strongly oppose any U.S. visit by the leader of the Taiwan authorities regardless of the rationale or pretext," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told reporters last week. "The reported trip is not so much a 'transit,' but an attempt to seek breakthroughs and propagate 'Taiwan independence.'"

A successful trip would help Ms. Tsai show that her party can manage close relations with the U.S. without provoking a harsh response from Beijing. That would boost her current vice president's chances of winning a pivotal election to succeed her early next year when her two terms as president end.

"China has been ramping up its aggressive behavior and this is a general concern," said Kolas Yotaka, a spokeswoman for Ms. Tsai. "We think the best response is deeper cooperation with our partners to safeguard peace in the region and protect our common democratic values."

This week, Ms. Tsai's predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou, began a 12-day tour of China, the first former president of Taiwan to set foot in the mainland since 1949. Ms. Tsai's office has sought to play down the China trip by Mr. Ma, who favored

closer ties with Beijing when he was president between 2008 and 2016.

Some lawmakers from Mr. Ma's party, the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, and members of the public have voiced concern that the island might be dragged into war as part of U.S.-China rivalry. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, along with Beijing's stepped-up military pressure on Taiwan, has created a sense of urgency within Ms. Tsai's government and the U.S. about the need to harden Taiwan for eventual conflict.

Early this year, Washington and Beijing seemed poised for detente. Tensions had subsided from their last bout of friction over Taiwan: then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to the island in August. Then, the U.S. detected the suspected Chinese surveillance balloon crossing North America and delayed high-level talks with Beijing before shooting down the craft, further angering Chinese leadership.

Both sides have drawn sharper lines over the war in Ukraine, with Mr. Xi holding a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow last week. Beijing, which has bolstered Moscow by buying energy and boosting trade, has tried to position itself as a potential peacemaker and portrayed the U.S. as irresponsible for arming Kyiv.

One concern for the administration is a closed-door reception on Thursday in New York by the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank, to award Ms. Tsai its global leadership award. A current fellow at the institute is Mike Pompeo, the former Trump administration secretary of state who, while visiting Taiwan last year, urged in a Facebook post that the U.S. grant formal diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.

The Biden administration has said U.S. policy remains unchanged. A move to formal recognition of Taiwan would likely be seen by Beijing as a reneging on four decades of U.S. diplomatic commitments and potentially cross a red line China has set out for triggering military action.

Hudson said Mr. Pompeo isn't attending. The think tank declined to release a list of invitees and other details of the event.

On her way back from visiting Guatemala and Belize, Ms. Tsai is due to meet at the Donald Reagan Presidential Library with House Speaker McCarthy. Other

the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library with House Speaker McCarthy. Other Republican members of Congress, including Rep. Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, who leads a special committee on U.S. competition with China's Communist Party, are expected to attend.

Taiwan's foreign minister, Joseph Wu, said last week that Ms. Tsai would also meet with members of the Democratic Party.

In Taipei, government and ruling party officials are concerned that any misstep during Ms. Tsai's trip might put further strain on its troubled relationship with Beijing—or mar relations with Washington.

Some lawmakers in the opposition Kuomintang, along with pro-opposition media and a number of academics, have suggested that the U.S. is treating Taiwan like a pawn in its competition with Beijing. Some pointed to chipmaking powerhouse Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co.'s decision to build a \$40 billion factory in Arizona, saying it amounts to forced technology transfer that primarily benefits the U.S.

“The Americans are our good friends and have helped us so much over the past several decades, but I remain skeptical,” Kuomintang lawmaker Wu Sz-huai said during an appearance by Taiwan's foreign minister before the legislature last week. “They put their own national interests first, not Taiwan's national interests.”

Taiwan's government has characterized some of the criticisms as misinformation designed to weaken ties between Washington and Taipei and predicted such attacks would intensify ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

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### **Corrections & Amplifications**

Chinese leader Xi Jinping has said the Taiwan issue should not be passed from generation to generation. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said Mr. Xi has said that China's goal of taking control of Taiwan should not be left to the next generation. (Corrected on March 28)

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*Tensions'.*