

US-China relations

Taiwan's top security officials make secret trip to US for talks

Visit to Washington area this week comes at sensitive time in relations between Beijing and Taipei



The last 'special channel' talks were in February 2023 when Joseph Wu, pictured, and Wellington Koo met the US side across the river from Washington in northern Virginia © Reuters

Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington YESTERDAY

Taiwan's top foreign policy officials have made a secret trip to the greater Washington area for talks with the US, the first such visit since President Lai Ching-te took office in May.

Foreign minister Lin Chia-lung and Joseph Wu, Taiwan's national security adviser, have been in the Washington area this week for the talks that are known as the "[special channel](#)", according to several people familiar with the visit.

The US and Taiwan have held the "special channel" talks for years, but their existence was [first disclosed by the Financial Times](#) in 2021 when the two sides, including Wu who was then foreign minister, met in Annapolis, Maryland. The channel is seen as a rare opportunity for a larger group of senior officials from both sides to hold detailed talks.

Successive US administrations have kept the channel under wraps to avoid Chinese criticism of the sensitive engagement. Beijing claims sovereignty over Taiwan, which has maintained an unofficial relationship with Washington since the US normalised relations with China in 1979.

The last special channel was in February 2023 when Wu and Wellington Koo, then

national security adviser and now defence minister, met the US side across the river from Washington in northern Virginia.

Under a long-standing practice, Taiwan's foreign minister and defence minister cannot enter the District of Columbia, so the channel has usually been held in the greater Washington area.

The people familiar with the situation did not disclose the location or the timing of the discussions. The Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office, the de facto Taiwanese embassy in Washington, declined to comment on the talks. The White House declined to comment.

The channel comes at a sensitive time as China watches to see how Lai will handle relations with Beijing and Washington. The Chinese government has described Lai as a "dangerous separatist" and worries that he is more likely to take steps towards official independence than his predecessor Tsai Ing-wen. Some US officials are also privately nervous about Lai, who is inexperienced in foreign affairs and seen as more unpredictable than Tsai.

Evan Medeiros, a China expert at Georgetown University and former top White House Asia adviser, said the special channel was "one of the most sensitive and important mechanisms in global politics today".

"The meeting comes at a critical time given Taiwan's recent election. Clear and consistent communication between Taipei and Washington is essential, especially as People's Republic of China pressure grows," Medeiros added.

The US has grown increasingly concerned about rising Chinese military activity around Taiwan. China held huge military exercises around the island, including firing ballistic missiles overhead for the first time, in 2022 just after then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei. It has intensified its military activity since the Pelosi visit.

Randy Schriver, a former top Pentagon Asia official, said the special channel was always important because of the limited contacts allowed because of the unofficial relationship". But he said it was particularly so now given the increasingly assertive Chinese military activity near Taiwan.

"A lot of people have the impression that [People's Liberation Army] military activity spikes around events like the Pelosi visit or [presidential] inaugurations and then enters a normal and steady status quo, but the PLA continues to do more things and evolve. We are seeing more night-time exercises and things like air-air refuelling on the eastern side of Taiwan" he said, citing one example

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