

Top US health official makes provocative trip to Taiwan

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US Secretary of Health Alex Azar landed in Taiwan on Sunday for a three-day visit, becoming the highest-ranking American official to visit the island since the US ended its diplomatic relations with Taipei in 1979 and established formal ties with Beijing instead.

The purpose of Azar's visit is far more than just to affirm US collaboration with Taiwan over health issues or to acknowledge the relative success, to date, of its containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, it is another provocative step aimed at strengthening US-Taiwanese relations and potentially overturning the "One China" policy that has been central to US relations with China.

In establishing diplomatic ties with China in 1979, the US acknowledged the Chinese Communist Party regime in Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. Under the Taiwan Relations Act of the same year, the US declared that it would oppose any forcible attempt by China to integrate Taiwan, and authorised continuing arms sales to Taipei.

From the outset of his presidency, Trump openly called the "One China" policy into question, pointedly taking a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on assuming office in 2017. Tsai is a member of the Democratic People's Party that advocates a more independent stance for Taiwan, despite Beijing's warnings to take over by force if Taipei ever declares formal independence from China.

Under Trump, the US has boosted relations with Taiwan and stepped up arms sales, ignoring Chinese protests. In 2018, the US president signed the Taiwan Travel Act, authorising high-level official visits, both civilian and military, between the two sides. While Azar is not the only cabinet-level US official to visit Taiwan since 1979, he is certainly the highest-ranking.

Prior to meeting with Tsai on Monday, Azar told the

media that Taiwan was "a vital partner, a democratic success story, and a force for good in the world." He lauded Taiwan as "an open and democratic society, executing a highly successful and transparent COVID-19 response," then declared that it should be "recognised as a global health leader with an excellent track record of contributing to international health."

Azar's comments come in the wake of a keynote speech by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last month in which he overturned decades of US foreign policy towards China and declared in the language of Cold War propaganda that the "free world" must win out over the tyranny of "Chinese Communism." The very terms bear no resemblance to reality—capitalism, not communism, prevails in China, and democratic rights are under severe attack throughout the misnamed "free world," especially in the US.

To describe Taiwan as a "democratic success story" is to ignore both its past and present. For decades, the island was ruled by the brutal US-backed military dictatorship formed after the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) was driven from the mainland following the 1949 Chinese revolution. Confronted with widespread opposition, particularly from workers in the 1980s, the regime made a tactical decision to hold elections to provide a degree of legitimacy. The police-state apparatus established by the KMT, however, remains largely intact.

Azar's call for Taiwan to be recognised internationally as "a global health leader" is part of the Trump administration's efforts to back Taiwan's entry into various international bodies. China, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province, has blocked such moves as a de facto recognition of Taiwanese independence.

A bitter dispute erupted between Taiwan and the

World Health Organisation (WHO) in April as part of the US-backed campaign to accord Taipei observer status at the body's meetings. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared that he had been the subject of racist comments by Taiwanese officials, allegations that Taipei denied. China blocked Taiwan's presence at the World Health Assembly in May, and its campaign for observer status effectively stalled after the US withdrew from the WHO, alleging without any evidence that it was under Chinese influence.

Azar's visit to Taiwan is part of the Trump administration's accelerating confrontation with China. In particular, the US is keen to contrast Taiwan's relatively successful response to COVID-19 thus far to that of China, which Trump has repeatedly blamed for the global pandemic on the basis of unsubstantiated claims and outright lies. This has been an attempt to deflect attention from his own government's criminal negligence in allowing the virus to spread.

For its part, the Tsai administration in Taiwan is looking for greater US support and recognition. Tsai made no reference, let alone criticism, in her comments during Azar's visit of the disastrous US health policies that have resulted in 5 million cases of coronavirus and more than 161,000 deaths as of last weekend. Instead, she highlighted Taiwanese assistance to the US by supplying face masks, and noted that Trump and his officials had pointedly appeared in the White House with "Made in Taiwan" masks.

In the negotiations that led up to formal diplomatic relations between the US and China in 1979, Taiwan proved to be most contentious issue, and it remains so today. Not surprisingly, China has responded to Azar's visit. Foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin warned last week that Beijing would "take strong countermeasures in response to the US behaviour."

China's sensitivity on the issue of Taiwan stems not just from concerns that its sovereignty is being violated, but also because of the strategic position of the island as the US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific continues apace. Not only is the primary island of Taiwan just 130 kilometres from the Chinese mainland at the narrowest part of the Taiwan Strait, but a number of heavily-fortified Taiwanese islets are just kilometres off the Chinese coast.

The Trump administration is deliberately and recklessly stoking one of the most potentially explosive

flashpoints in Asia as it ratchets up the pressure on Beijing across the board—diplomatically, economically and militarily. Any move by the US to expand military ties with Taiwan, including visits by warships, joint military exercises or a visit by a top level US military figure, rather than the civilian Azar, would dangerously raise tensions across the Taiwan Strait as well as between the US and China.



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