Top level Taiwanese ministers hold secret talks in Washington

Peter Symonds
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The *Financial Times* reported on Saturday that Taiwan's foreign minister Joseph Wu and national security adviser Wellington Koo will travel to the United States for secret talks this week with senior White House officials. Washington and Taipei have both refused to confirm the discussions. Asked directly, Wu said he was not able to comment on whether he would be in Washington this week.

The FT report was based on five unnamed officials said to be familiar with the talks. Jon Finer, the US deputy national security adviser and Wendy Sherman, deputy secretary of state, will reportedly take part in the discussions with the Taiwanese delegation. The talks will be held at the Virginia headquarters of the American Institute in Taiwan—a nominally private organisation set up to manage US relations with Taiwan.

The very fact that high level talks are taking place behind closed doors reveals again the close ties that the Biden administration is developing with Taiwan while claiming to still adhere to the "One China" policy. Since 1979, US-China relations have been premised on Washington's de facto recognition of Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan.

Following on from Trump, Biden has torn up longstanding diplomatic protocols limiting contact with Taiwan, boosted arms sales to Taipei and increased US military activity in the immediate area, including through the narrow Taiwan Strait separating the island from the Chinese mainland. Washington is deliberately goading Beijing which has repeatedly declared that it will use force if necessary to prevent Taipei from declaring formal independence.

Biden has also explicitly declared on four separate occasions that the US would defend Taiwan militarily, effectively tearing up Washington's longstanding policy of "strategic ambiguity"—that is, refusing to confirm that the US would come to the aid of Taiwan in a war with China in all circumstances. The policy was aimed at reining in deliberately provocative acts by Taipei as well as warding off military action by Beijing.

The US-Taiwan talks this week take place as the Biden administration has ramped up tensions with China through its belligerent response to a Chinese balloon that drifted into US airspace. Washington inflated the incident into a major security threat insisting, without any substantiation, that China had deliberately sent a spy balloon over US military installations. A US Air Force fighter shot the balloon down on February 4.

The *Financial Times* reported that the talks are known as the "special channel"—keeping them hidden not only from China but also the American public. The newspaper revealed the existence of the diplomatic channel two years ago when Taiwan's foreign minister Wu met with US officials in Annapolis.

No details of the nature of this week's US-Taiwan discussions have been revealed. However, US planning and preparations for war with China will undoubtedly be at the top of the agenda. The meeting takes place only days after Michael Chase, the top Pentagon official for China, travelled to Taipei—a trip also shrouded in secrecy.

According to the Taiwan-based *United Daily News*, Chase visited the country's Ministry of National Defence and associated think tank, as well as meeting with members of the opposition Kuomintang. He is only the second high-level US defence official to visit Taiwan since 1979, following a trip in 2019 by Heino Klinck, then-deputy assistant secretary for East Asia.

Speaking to a delegation of US lawmakers in Taipei

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yesterday, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said that "Taiwan and the United States continue to bolster military exchanges." She added that Taiwan would cooperate even more actively in the future with the US and other partners to confront global challenges such as "authoritarian expansionism"—a thinly veiled reference to China.

The latest US delegation led by Ro Khanna, a member of the US House China Select Committee, is focused on strengthening economic and technological ties, particularly with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company which dominates the global production of computer chips. In comments to Tsai, Khanna, who represents Silicon Valley, emphasised the need "to continue to build the economic partnership on technology and also of course the partnership on military and defence."

The increasingly frantic character of the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific was revealed in a leaked memo by Air Force General Michael Minihan last month to his commanders, telling them that his gut feeling was that the US would be at war with China by 2025. The memo contained detailed orders to step up training and ensure as a matter of urgency that all personnel have their affairs in order—that is, be ready for immediate deployment to a war zone.

The US is also strengthening the Taiwanese military based on the strategy it has pursued in Ukraine—to provoke Russia into a war in Ukraine that will weaken and destabilise the Russian regime and the country as a whole. The *New York Times* reported last October on high-level discussions in the White House and Pentagon to intensify "efforts to build a giant stockpile of weapons in Taiwan."

The Biden administration has continued large sales of arms to Taiwan. The huge US military budget passed by Congress last December included, for the first time, direct military aid to Taiwan. It authorised up to $10 billion in security assistance and fast-tracked weapons procurement.

Details of the talks underway between top Taiwanese and US officials this week are unlikely to surface publicly, especially as neither side is even acknowledging their existence. But they are a further ominous sign of the advanced preparations for a US-led conflict with China even as Washington and its NATO allies are escalating the war in Ukraine against Russia.

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