

Taiwanese presidential contender to make provocative US “stop-overs”

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Taiwan’s vice-president, Lai Ching-teh, is planning two stops in the US next month during a broader tour of the Americas. Lai, who is also the ruling Democratic Progressive Party’s (DPP) candidate in presidential elections next January, is known for his pro-independence views that will further exacerbate tensions with China if he is elected.

Beijing regards Taiwan as part of China, which is de facto accepted by the US and the overwhelming majority of countries around the world. Under the One China policy, countries recognise Beijing as the legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan. China calls for peaceful reunification but has long warned that any declaration of formal independence by Taipei will be met by force.

Encouraged by Trump and Biden, the current Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has increasingly antagonised Beijing by pushing for wider international recognition and ties, while stopping short of formally declaring independence from China. En route to central America in March-April, Tsai held a series of meetings with senior US politicians during her “stops” including with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. These provoked condemnation from Beijing and Chinese military exercises near Taiwan.

Tsai’s trip followed a high-profile visit to Taiwan in August 2022 by then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi which triggered angry protests from Beijing and greatly intensified tensions between the US and China. The house speaker is second in line to the presidency after the vice-president. Pelosi’s visit was followed by extensive Chinese war games around Taiwan.

Lai’s trip, announced on Monday, is nominally to participate in the presidential inauguration in Paraguay—one of the few countries with diplomatic relations with Taipei, not Beijing. The Taiwanese vice-

president and the US both claim that the trip will seek to avoid further inflaming tensions with China, but the very fact that it is going ahead is calculated to do precisely that.

Even as it accelerates the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the Biden administration has stepped up its preparations for conflict with China, which it regards as the chief threat to its global domination. By increasingly rendering the One China policy a dead letter by strengthening political and military ties with Taipei, the US is goading China into taking military action against Taiwan. Lai’s planned trip is another step in that direction.

Lai and the White House justify the stop-overs by pointing to the increasing frequency of the practice, including by Taiwanese presidential candidates and other political figures. However, when the US and China established diplomatic relations in 1979, Washington cut off official ties with Taiwan and strictly limited unofficial contact.

In 1995, the visit by Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui to the US, nominally as a private citizen, triggered a major military confrontation between the US and China, known as the Third Taiwan Strait crisis. Since then, Washington has deliberately eroded the longstanding diplomatic protocols to the point where the Biden administration has removed virtually all barriers to top level contact between US and Taiwanese officials, including military officers.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning told a press briefing on Monday that Beijing has made an official complaint to the US over Lai’s travel plans. “China will closely follow the situation and take resolute and strong measures to safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity,” Mao said.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that during the visit

by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Beijing last month, Chinese officials expressed concern that Lai's pro-independence attitude could further aggravate US-China tensions and asked whether the US had a vested interest in the outcome of the Taiwanese presidential election.

Blinken apparently repeated the standard line from Washington—the US will be even-handed and opposes meddling in the election—which is absurd. Despite its current rhetoric about easing tensions with China, the Biden administration has not changed its confrontational stance one iota.

US strategic planning to exploit Taiwan as a potential casus belli for war with China would suffer a significant set-back if the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), won the presidential election. The KMT, representing sections of the Taiwanese ruling class heavily dependent on trade and investment with China, favours dialogue and an easing of tensions with Beijing.

As the Taiwanese presidential campaign informally gets underway, Lai appears to have toned down his more aggressive statements in support of Taiwanese independence. After becoming DPP chairman in January, Lai declared that he would follow the current cross-strait policy of maintaining the uneasy status quo and temper the party's confrontational approach to China that was seen as contributing to major losses in last year's local elections.

There is no mistaking, however, Lai's support for formal independence from China and that he would quickly fall into line with Washington's aggressive strategy towards Beijing. When he was appointed as the island's premier in 2017, Lai described himself as "a pragmatic worker for Taiwan independence." Lai declares that he will continue the current President Tsai's policy, but is associated with the DPP's more hardline, pro-independence faction. Under Tsai, there has already been a significant military build-up and consolidation of ties with Washington.

Lai was chosen as the DPP's presidential candidate in May. In an effort to moderate his tone, Lai declared during his speech that Taiwan was "already an independent and sovereign nation and therefore there is no need to declare independence." Far from reassuring Beijing or indeed nervous Taiwanese voters, the comments only mean that Lai is not wanting an

immediate confrontation. As he well knows, the lack of formal independence has definite consequences for the Taiwanese ruling class as the island is excluded from most international fora.

Campaigning on Monday, Lai declared that Taiwan wants closer ties with the US, adding that he was looking forward to the day when "the president of Taiwan can walk into the White House." The remark was clearly aimed at sending a message to his supporters that he has not resiled from his pro-independence stance. As Lai and the Biden administration know, such a step would recklessly provoke a dangerous US military confrontation with China.



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