

US angers China with high-profile Taiwan visit



Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen meeting the US delegation led by Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar (right) at the Presidential Office in Taipei yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Beijing sends fighter jets into Taiwan Strait as US health chief meets island's leader

China sent two air force jets which briefly crossed the median line in the Taiwan Strait, shortly before United States health chief Alex Azar met Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen yesterday, said Taiwan's air force.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Azar, the highest-ranking US Cabinet official to visit Taiwan since 1979, when the two sides ended formal diplomatic ties, yesterday hailed Taiwan's "democratic success story, and a force for good in the world". He also praised Ms Tsai's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, in a meeting certain to raise tensions between Beijing and Washington.

China, which sees Taiwan as a breakaway province to be reunified by force if necessary, has always resolutely opposed official exchanges between any country and Taiwan.

In the highest-level official meeting between Taiwan and the US in four decades, Ms Tsai began the session by expressing her gratitude towards US President Donald Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Mr Azar for "their continued recognition of the Taiwan model's contribution to global anti-pandemic efforts, as well as their strong support for Taiwan's international participation".

She also said she expects notable progress on the joint collaboration between Taiwan and the US in developing Covid-19 vaccines.

In his opening remarks at the meeting, Mr Azar appeared to have mispronounced Ms Tsai's name – saying something which sounded closer to “shee”, which is the surname of Mr Xi Jinping, China's President.

Despite Mr Azar getting the pronunciation correct a few sentences later, Taiwan's main opposition party, the Kuomintang, expressed disapproval and called for the Presidential Office to demand an explanation from the visiting envoy.

The Presidential Office issued a response later in the afternoon, saying that after clarifying with Mr Azar's team, it was a mere pronunciation issue, and that Mr Azar was undoubtedly addressing Ms Tsai.

Mr Azar, who arrived in Taiwan on Sunday, said the first theme of his visit was to “recognize Taiwan as an open and democratic society, executing a highly successful and transparent Covid-19 response”.

The second and third are respectively to “reaffirm Taiwan as a longstanding partner and friend of the United States”, and to “note that Taiwan deserves to be recognized as a global health leader with an excellent track record of contributing to international health”.

Yesterday afternoon, Mr Azar also met Taiwan's Health Minister Chen Shih-chung, who heads the island's main Covid-19 response department, the Central Epidemic Command Centre.

Taiwan and the US yesterday signed their first memorandum of understanding (MOU) on health cooperation to expand cooperation on global health security, infectious disease control and vaccine development.

The US had condemned Taiwan's exclusion from the World Health Assembly in May, criticizing China's “spiteful action to silence Taiwan”.

“In light of further aggression from the (People's Republic of China), Taiwan does benefit from these types of symbolic acts, even if no concrete changes will come in the form of policy,” Mr Lev Nachman, a Fulbright Research Fellow and PhD candidate in political science from the University of California, Irvine, who focuses on Taiwanese politics, said yesterday, referring to the MOU and Mr Azar's visit.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said at a regular press briefing

in Beijing yesterday that the US should abide by the one-China principle, under which the US recognizes and has formal ties with China rather than Taiwan.

“What the US has done seriously violates its commitments on the Taiwan issue,” said Mr Zhao, who urged the US to “handle Taiwan-related issues carefully and properly to prevent harming cooperation in important areas between China and the United States, and harming the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait”.

China flew J-11 and J-10 fighter aircraft briefly onto Taiwan’s side at around 9 AM, Taiwan’s air force said yesterday.

The Chinese aircraft, the air force said, were tracked by Taiwan’s land-based anti-aircraft missiles and were “driven out” by patrolling Taiwanese aircraft.

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