

China sees US Secretary of Health's journey to Taiwan as a 'threat to peace'

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China and the United States are heading for a new encounter in the coming days, this time on Taiwan. Washington has announced that its health secretary, Alex Azar, will visit Taipei in the immediate future, the highest-ranking U.S. official to move to the island in the past six years. The Chinese government's response has come almost immediately: this visit to the island that Beijing considers an inalienable part of its territory poses "a threat to peace," foreign minister Wang Wenbin has said.

In a statement, the Department of Health has made it clear that the trip is backed by President Donald Trump. During his stay, he has explained, the secretary will express "the president's support for Taiwan's global (Taiwan) leadership on health issues" and highlight the democratic model as best suited to protecting citizen health.

As the Taiwanese government has advanced, Azar will meet with President Tsai Ing-wen and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Health, Joseph Wu and Chen Shih-Chung, respectively. "The presidential office warmly welcomes the U.S. delegation," said Taiwanese presidential spokeswoman Kolas Yotaka. No date has been set for the trip, although it is likely to happen next week and is scheduled to coincide with the funerals by President Lee Teng-hui, who died last week and considered the father of Taiwanese democracy.

The announcement depicts a new diplomatic slap from Washington to Beijing, after a series that last month included the official rejection of the Asian giant's maritime claims in the South China Sea and the closing order of the Chinese consulate in Houston, which Beijing retorted with the closure of U.S. representation in its central city of Chengdu.

"This visit is part of the U.S. policy of sending high-level officials to Taiwan to reaffirm U.S.-Taiwan friendship, develop common interests, and celebrate the common values linking the United States and Taiwan to the international family of democracies," the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Washington's de facto embassy on the island, said in a statement.

The Chinese government, which has never forcibly renounced unification, has systematically criticized every U.S. official's visit to Taiwan since Washington broke off its diplomatic relations with Taipei to establish them with Beijing in 1979, and scrutinizes every move the United States makes toward the island. Although there are no formal ties between Washington and Taipei, U.S. law obliges its government to defend the island from a possible invasion.

The Taiwanese issue "is the most sensitive issue in Chinese-American relations," spokesman Wang said Wednesday at his daily press conference. "We expect the United States to stop all official trade between the two sides to avoid damage to Chinese-American relations and to maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait," he added. China has lodged a formal protest with Washington following the announcement, according to the Foreign Ministry in Beijing.

Last month, China had announced the imposition of unspecified sanctions against Lockheed Martin, the lead contractor in an arms sale to Taiwan approved by the US Congress.

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