



By: TA | AP Insight

Can Taiwan opposition leader's visit to China reduce tensions?



Taiwan opposition leader Cheng Li-wun arrived in China on Tuesday at the invitation of President Xi Jinping, in what she's calling a "journey for peace" as Beijing pushes for the self-ruled island to come under its control.

The visit is the first by a Taiwanese opposition leader in a decade and comes ahead of a meeting in Beijing between Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump scheduled to take place in May.

Meanwhile, Taiwan's opposition-controlled parliament has stalled attempts by its government to pass a **\$40 billion special defense budget**, expected to fund arms deals with the United States and the development of Taiwan's indigenous defense industry.

China claims the self-ruled island as its own territory and has not excluded the use of force to take it.

Beijing has been ramping up its military pressure against the island by sending warplanes and naval vessels near it almost daily, while its military occasionally stages **live-fire drills** around the island, the latest in December.

The U.S. State Department said such activities "increase tensions unnecessarily" and called on Beijing to cease military **pressure** against Taiwan.

Before leaving Taipei, the chairwoman of the Kuomintang party told reporters that Taiwan must spare no effort to prevent war and seize any opportunity to promote peace.

A few dozen supporters and detractors of Cheng showed up at Taipei's airport, chanting and holding signs.

"The purpose of this visit to mainland China is precisely to show the world that it is not just Taiwan that unilaterally hopes for peace," Cheng said.

"I believe that through this journey for peace, everyone is even more eager to see the sincerity and determination of the CPC

Central Committee to use peaceful dialogue and exchange to resolve all possible differences between the two sides," she added, referring to the initials of the Communist Party of China.

China takes issue with US arms sales to Taiwan

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said Tuesday relations with Taiwan were part of China's internal affairs.

"China's opposition to military ties between the U.S. and Taiwan is consistent and clear," spokesperson Mao Ning said.

Beijing has repeatedly criticized U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, in particular a **massive deal** announced by the Trump administration in December, valued at more than \$11 billion and that includes medium-range missiles, howitzers and drones.

China prohibits all its diplomatic partners, including the U.S., from maintaining formal ties with Taipei.

In a call in February between Xi and Trump, the Chinese leader said that "Taiwan will never be allowed to separate from China"

The U.S. is the island's strongest informal backer and arms provider, and the arms sale is expected to be discussed at the Xi-Trump summit.

In a call in February between Xi and Trump, the Chinese leader said that "Taiwan will never be allowed to separate from China," according to a Chinese government statement about the conversation released at the time. "The U.S. must handle the issue of arms sales to Taiwan with prudence," it added.

Beijing also said that the "Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-U.S. relations."

Taiwan's ruling and opposition parties hold different stances toward Beijing

It was not clear if Cheng was going to meet with Xi as part of her six-day trip to China, which started in the eastern metropolis of Shanghai and is set to conclude in Beijing.

The KMT, as Taiwan's main opposition party, is not in a position to strike agreements with Beijing that would affect the entire island; however, Cheng might sign party-to-party cooperation agreements with the Communist Party to reinstitute regular dialogue or boost ties at a municipal level between KMT-controlled localities and Chinese cities, said Wen-Ti Sung, a fellow with the Atlantic Council, an American think tank.



Cheng's visit contrasts sharply with Beijing's treatment of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te, with whom China does not engage, labeling him a "separatist"

Cheng's visit "may sideline the Taiwan Strait tension issue from the Xi-Trump summit, thus enabling the U.S.-China summit to focus on business areas of common interest rather than geostrategic points of contention," Sung said.

The KMT has proposed a smaller defense budget and criticizes the governing Democratic Progressive Party's larger budget as a "blank check" for arms purchases.

Cheng's visit contrasts sharply with Beijing's treatment of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te, with whom China does not engage, labeling him a "separatist."

Taiwan has been governed separately from China since 1949, when a civil war brought the Communist Party to power in Beijing. Defeated KMT forces fled to Taiwan, where they set up their own government.

Lai's party views Taiwan as a sovereign country, not a subordinate to China.

The KMT, meanwhile, officially recognizes only one China, which it interprets as the Republic of China that before 1949 included the mainland and today is Taiwan's official name.