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Taiwan Presidents' U.S. Transit Visits

Introduction

Since 1994, five sitting presidents of self-governing Taiwan, which also calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), have undertaken a combined 30 trips abroad that have included transit stops in the United States. U.S. policy has been to permit the most senior Taiwan officials to stop over in the United States only while en route to other locations. Taiwan authorities have portrayed U.S. permission for such stopovers as affirmation of U.S. support for Taiwan, an East Asian democracy with which the United States has maintained close unofficial ties since 1979. The People's Republic of China (PRC, or China), which claims sovereignty over Taiwan but has never controlled it, asserts that such stopovers are inconsistent with U.S. commitments to maintain only unofficial relations with Taiwan.

In July 2025, a spokesperson for the Department of State maintained that "transits by high-level Taiwan officials, including presidents, are fully consistent with [U.S.] longstanding policy and practice." Other senior Taiwan officials restricted to transit visits have included Taiwan's vice president and premier. When Taiwan's then-President Tsai Ing-wen transited in 2023, a White House official stated that "[t]ransits are not visits," that they are "private, and they're unofficial," and that they are "consistent with [the United States'] longstanding, unofficial relationship with Taiwan." Department of State officials echoed those statements. One added, "Such transits are undertaken out of consideration for the safety, comfort, convenience, and dignity of the traveler." Taiwan presidents routinely meet with Members of Congress during their U.S. stopovers. Some Members have proposed allowing Taiwan presidents to visit the United States in other specific circumstances (see, e.g., the 118th Congress's S. 477 and H.Con.Res. 71.)

Evolution of U.S. Policy

Unofficial Relations

U.S.-Taiwan relations have been unofficial since January 1, 1979, when the United States broke diplomatic ties with the ROC to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. In 1978 and 1982 U.S.-PRC joint communiqués, the United States stated that it would "maintain cultural, commercial, and other *unofficial* relations with the people of Taiwan" (emphasis added). The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (P.L. 96-8; 22 U.S.C. §3301 et seq.) provides the legal basis for unofficial U.S. relations. (See CRS In Focus IF10275, *Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations*.)

1994 Taiwan Policy Review

After U.S. derecognition of the ROC, the U.S. executive branch initially interpreted unofficial relations with Taiwan as precluding any presence by Taiwan presidents on U.S.

soil. In May 1994, the Clinton Administration adjusted that policy to allow then-Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui to refuel his plane in Hawaii on his way to Central America but not to spend the night. Reportedly piqued by U.S. restrictions, Lee declined to leave his plane. Some Members of Congress saw the Administration's treatment of Lee as disrespectful. A Senator observed that the U.S. government allowed Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, to visit the United States. The American public might question, Senator Frank H. Murkowski suggested, "why our friends such as the Taiwanese are kept so far out and others without formal diplomatic relations with the United States can come to Washington [DC]."

In September 1994, then-Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Winston Lord testified before Congress about a Clinton Administration Taiwan policy review. Under questioning from Senators, Lord stated, "[U]nder our new policy, we will permit overnight visits. We will permit anything consistent with security and comfort and convenience so long as it's a transit visit." The next month, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Technical Corrections Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-416). Section 221 of the act directs that whenever a Taiwan president or "any other high-level official of Taiwan" applies to visit the United States for discussions with federal or state officials concerning certain subjects, the official "shall be admitted." In the 119th Congress, Section 206 of the Department of State Policy Provisions Act (H.R. 5300) would direct that no funds made available by the act be used in contravention of that provision of P.L. 103-416.

President Lee's 1995 Private U.S. Visit

In 1995, President Lee sought to make a private visit to his alma mater, Cornell University. The Clinton Administration initially denied the request and assured the PRC that no such visit would take place. President Clinton pivoted to approve the visit after the 104th Congress passed H.Con.Res. 53, which stated the sense of Congress "that the President should promptly indicate that the United States will welcome a private visit by President Lee Teng-hui to his alma mater." (The vote was 396-0 in the House and 97-1 in the Senate.) Lee visited Cornell in June 1995 and delivered a public address celebrating the achievements of "the Republic of China on Taiwan." In response, the PRC carried out missile launches and major military exercises. In 1996, the PRC launched more missiles and staged a joint amphibious landing exercise in an apparent attempt to drive down support for Lee ahead of Taiwan's first direct presidential election, which Lee won. The United States responded by dispatching two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area. The events are now known as the third Taiwan Strait Crisis, following earlier crises in 1954 and 1958.

Transits After 1995

Since President Lee's 1995 private visit to Cornell, the U.S. government has confined all Taiwan presidents to transits through the United States en route to and from other destinations (i.e., the dwindling number of countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan). (Of Taiwan's 12 remaining diplomatic partners, seven are in Latin America and the Caribbean, three are in the Pacific, and one—the Holy See—is in Europe. See CRS In Focus IF12646, *Taiwan and the International Community*.)

Pursuant to the Taiwan Relations Act, the United States conducts unofficial relations with Taiwan through the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), a private corporation that operates under a contract with the U.S. Department of State. AIT's Taipei Main Office issues transit visas for Taiwan presidents and their delegations. AIT's Washington [DC] Headquarters processes their requests for port courtesies, including expedited processing and clearance at U.S. ports of entry and security arrangements. Some Members of Congress and state and local officials have publicly met with transiting Taiwan presidents. Executive branch officials have not. Stopovers have sometimes included visits to U.S. government facilities and have frequently included banquets with members of the Taiwan diaspora. Transiting presidents have not visited Washington, DC. Extensive Taiwan media coverage has become routine. The chairperson of AIT's Board of Trustees has usually accompanied Taiwan presidents on their stopovers, with the managing director of AIT's Washington [DC] Headquarters filling in when needed. (The position of AIT chairperson has been vacant since the start of the second Trump Administration.)

The Taiwan Travel Act (2018)

In 2018, Congress passed the Taiwan Travel Act (P.L. 115-135). Section 3(b)(2) of the act states that it should be U.S. policy to “allow high-level officials of Taiwan to enter the United States, under conditions which demonstrate appropriate respect for the dignity of such officials, and to meet with officials of the United States, including officials from the Department of State and the Department of Defense [DOD] and other Cabinet agencies.” (DOD is now “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347 of September 5, 2025.)

Taiwan Presidential Transits 2016-2026

Over two four-year terms in office (2016-2024), President Tsai of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) made seven overseas trips with transit stops in the United States (see **Table 1**). On her last stopover, in 2023, Tsai met with then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, the highest-ranking U.S. official to meet with a Taiwan president on U.S. soil. The PRC response included three days of large-scale joint military exercises around Taiwan.

Current President Lai Ching-te, also of the DPP, who succeeded Tsai in May 2024, made his first overseas trip as president in late 2024, with transit stops in Hawaii and the U.S. territory of Guam. In response, a spokesperson for the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the PRC “firmly opposes any form of official interaction between the U.S. and the Taiwan region.” The spokesperson urged the United States to abide by its commitments and “stop aiding and abetting ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces.”

In August 2025, President Lai reportedly sought to transit through New York and Dallas on his way to and from Paraguay, Guatemala, and Belize—all diplomatic partners of Taiwan. The second Trump Administration reportedly declined to grant approval for the New York stop. President Lai did not make the trip. He has yet to transit through the continental United States as president.

Table 1. Transit Visits by Taiwan Presidents Lai Ching-te (2024-present) and Tsai Ing-wen (2016-2024)

Leader/ Dates in U.S.	Diplomatic Partners Visited	U.S. Transit Sites	Selected Activities
Lai: 11/30- 12/2, 12/4-5, 2024	Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Palau	Honolulu, Guam	Met Hawaii and Guam governors; calls with Speaker Mike Johnson and Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries
Tsai: 3/29-31, 4/4-6, 2023	Guatemala, Belize	New York, Los Angeles	Met Speaker Kevin McCarthy, Minority Leader Jeffries, New Jersey governor
Tsai: 7/11-13, 7/19-21, 2019	Haiti, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia	New York, Denver	Call with Speaker Nancy Pelosi; visited National Center for Atmospheric Research; met Colorado governor
Tsai: 3/26-27, 2019	Palau, Nauru,* Marshall Islands	Honolulu	Live public video address to D.C.'s Heritage Foundation
Tsai: 8/12-13, 8/18-19, 2018	Paraguay, Belize	Los Angeles, Houston	Spoke at Reagan Presidential Library; met New Mexico governor; visited NASA's Johnson Space Center
Tsai: 10/28- 29, 11/ 3-4, 2017	Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands*	Honolulu, Guam	Visited USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii; met Guam governor
Tsai: 1/7-8, 1/13-14, 2017	Honduras,* Nicaragua,* Guatemala, El Salvador*	Houston, San Francisco	Visited MD Anderson Cancer Center; met Texas governor
Tsai: 6/24-25, 6/30-7/1, 2016	Panama,* Paraguay	Miami, Los Angeles	Call with House Speaker Paul Ryan

Source: Office of the President, Taiwan.

Note: * = subsequently broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Susan V. Lawrence, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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