



Sign language

Myanmar citizens living in Thailand showing the three-finger salute while protesting against the execution of pro-democracy activists, in Mae Sot near the Myanmar border, Thailand. — Reuters

Xi: Don't 'play with fire' over Taiwan

Biden warned over Pelosi's possible visit to island

WASHINGTON/BEIJING: Chinese leader Xi Jinping warned against playing with fire over Taiwan in a call with US President Joe Biden, highlighting Beijing's concerns about a possible visit to the Chinese-claimed island by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"Those who play with fire will perish by it," China's foreign ministry quoted Xi as telling Biden in their fifth call as leaders.

"It is hoped that the US will be clear-eyed about this."

Xi said Washington should abide by the "one-China principle" and stressed that China firmly opposes Taiwanese independence and outside interference.

Biden told Xi US policy on Taiwan had not changed and that Washington strongly opposes unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, the White House said.

Following the call, Taiwan thanked Biden for his support and said it would continue to deepen its security partnership with the United States, the foreign ministry said in a statement yesterday.

The White House said the long-scheduled call was part of the administration's efforts to deepen lines of communication with China and "responsibly manage our differences".

It has been particularly anxious



Long-distance call: A passerby watching Xi and Biden speaking on TV about their call at a shopping mall in Hong Kong. — Reuters

to lower the temperature on Taiwan.

A visit by the House speaker would be a dramatic, though not unprecedented, show of US support for the island, and some analysts worry such a move at a time of fraught US ties with Beijing could spur a major crisis and even unintended clashes.

Scott Kennedy, a China analyst at Washington's Center for Strategic

and International Studies, said leader-level contacts were essential to preventing this.

"One hopes they've done enough to avoid a collision in the near term, but it's clear there needs to be much more frequent and in-depth communication," he said.

Biden stressed the importance of maintaining lines of communication on Taiwan and the two also discussed areas where there was

the potential to expand cooperation, including climate change, health security and counter-narcotics, the official said.

While highlighting Taiwan, Xi also stressed that the world's two largest economies needed to maintain communication on macroeconomic policies, global supply chains, and safeguarding global food and energy security, China's readout said.

The senior US official also emphasised the importance of macroeconomic coordination.

Beijing has issued escalating warnings about repercussions should Pelosi — a Democrat like Biden — visit Taiwan.

Xi has vowed to bring Taiwan under Beijing's control, by force if necessary.

China has given few clues to specific responses it might make if Pelosi makes the trip, which she has yet to confirm.

The US official said Xi had used similar language about Taiwan before and said the two sides acknowledged differing views that have existed for 40 years.

"The conversation between the two about Taiwan, it was direct and it was honest," the official said, while declining to offer more specific details about Biden's mes-

sage to Xi.

The call lasted over two hours.

US officials had said it would have a broad agenda, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which China has yet to condemn.

Washington follows a "one-China policy" that recognises Beijing, not Taipei, diplomatically.

But it is obliged by US law to provide the democratically governed Taiwan with the means to defend itself, and pressure has mounted in Congress for more explicit support.

Some analysts believe Xi has an interest in avoiding escalation as he seeks an unprecedented third term in office this year.

Others say playing up the Taiwan issue could serve Xi as a domestic distraction from China's slowing economy.

Asked about the call, Taiwan's representative office in Washington told Reuters it was grateful to Biden "for underscoring the importance of our shared interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."

Meanwhile, AFP reported that both leaders have agreed to meet face-to-face sometime during the call.

Although this was their fifth phone or video call since Biden took office a year and a half ago, the summit would be their first in-person meeting as leaders.

No detail was given on the timing or location. — Reuters