

## US begins highest-level visit in decades

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A US government plane carrying US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar and his delegation lands at Taipei International Airport (Songshan airport) yesterday.

**Photo: Peter Lo, Taipei Times**

US Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Alex Azar yesterday arrived in Taipei aboard a US government plane at the head of a delegation that is the highest-level visit by a US official since Washington switched diplomatic recognition to China in 1979.

Azar's flight landed at Taipei International Airport (Songshan airport) at 4:48pm, nearly one hour earlier than scheduled, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

The apron where it landed is reserved for military aircraft, the Songshan Air Force Base Command said.

The members of Azar's delegation included HHS Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response Robert Kadlec, HHS Chief of Staff Brian Harrison and American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Chairman James Moriarty.

They were welcomed on the apron by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Tien Chung-kwang (田金枝), Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Director-General Chou Jih-haw (周志豪) and AIT Director Brent Christensen.

After a short talk with the officials, Azar waved to reporters.

The visitors were then given COVID-19 tests in the airport's VIP guest room, after having had one in the US, the ministry said.

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While in Taiwan, the visitors would be kept in a “diplomatic bubble.” They would be transported in special vehicles, would stay on a designated hotel floor and be kept separate from members of the public, Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中) has said.

The delegation is to meet with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) this morning and witness the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on bilateral health cooperation with Chen in the afternoon.

The MOU would be signed by Christensen and Taiwan Council for US Affairs Chairperson Jenni Yang (楊珍妮) at the CDC in Taipei, the AIT said.

Tomorrow, Azar is scheduled to visit Taiwanese mask manufacturers and deliver a speech to public health graduate students and alumni of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention training program, a source familiar with the matter said.

On Wednesday, he would visit the Taipei Guest House to pay respects to the late former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) before departing Taiwan, the source said.

Meanwhile, China’s South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative yesterday wrote on Twitter: “USS Ronald Reagan with USS Antietam spotted in the #EastChinaSea on Aug 8, amid the upcoming US high-level delegation visit to #Taiwan.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said that Azar’s visit would be “consistent with the policies of previous times,” while Beijing vowed to respond to the US’ “wrong move.”

The last US senior Cabinet-level official to visit Taiwan was in 2014, when Gina McCarthy, then-administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency, led a delegation.

According to the US’ Presidential Succession Act, an HHS secretary is placed ahead of the US secretary of energy.

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