

China's foreign minister visits Vietnam to counter US overtures

Wang on vaccine diplomacy tour after visits by Austin and Harris

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BEIJING/HANOI -- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Vietnam on Friday, hoping to reassert Beijing's influence following high-profile trips to the country by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and the defense chief in recent months.

Vietnam marks the first leg of Wang's four-country Asian tour through Wednesday, which also includes Singapore, Cambodia and South Korea.

After Wang's meeting with Vietnam Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh, Hanoi announced that China is supplying 3 million more doses of COVID-19 vaccine to Vietnam.

With Vietnam experiencing an acute shortage of COVID-19 vaccines, Wang hopes to win over Hanoi by offering vaccine supplies. The country decided in June to procure Chinese vaccines but less than 4% of Vietnam's population is fully vaccinated.

Locked in territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Vietnam is not considered a country friendly to Beijing.

In October last year and January this year, Wang visited all the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, except for Vietnam. But aggressive overtures by Washington have made Wang's trip imperative.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited in July, followed by Harris in August. They also visited Singapore, Wang's next destination.

In Singapore, Harris called out Beijing for continuing "to coerce, to intimidate, and to make claims to the vast majority of the South China Sea."

Singapore is experiencing a resurgence of infections, and Wang, who is also a state councilor, is expected to offer China's cooperation in combating the pandemic.

Cambodia, another stop on his tour, is the most China-friendly nation in Southeast Asia. Wang will reaffirm Cambodian infrastructure development under the Belt and Road initiative, as well as bilateral coordination on the South China Sea issue.

In South Korea, Wang will discuss North Korean denuclearization.

Beijing and Seoul have improved relations in recent years. Wang may be able to convince South Korea to announce its participation in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. Such a statement would serve as a rebuke to calls in the U.S. and Europe to boycott the Games over human rights.