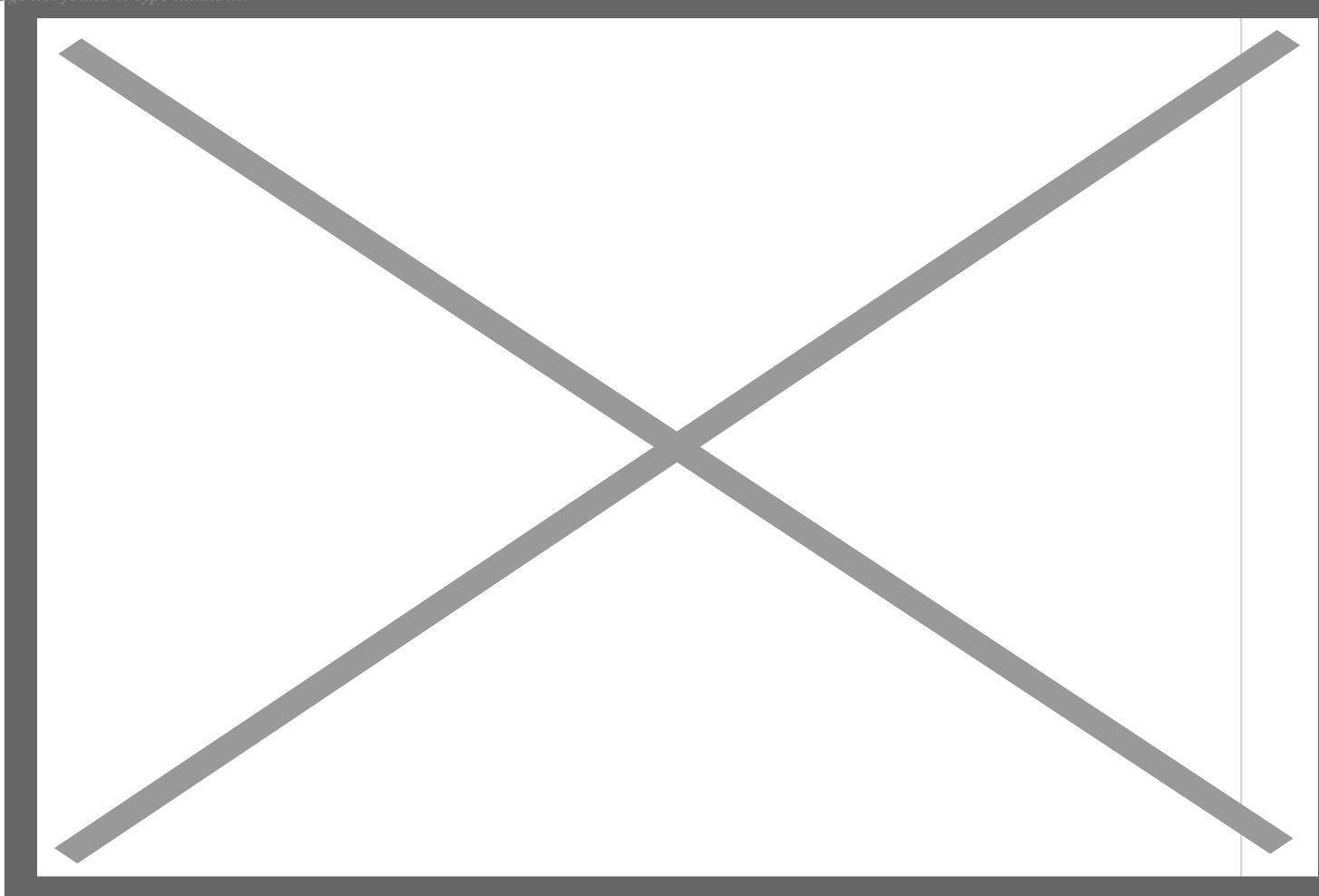


Honduras announces plans to open diplomatic relations with China

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Honduran President Xiomara Castro talking to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at a military event. Xiomara Castro said she was supportive of the switch while she was on the campaign trail [File: Fredy Rodriguez/Reuters]

Tegucigalpa, March 16 (RHC)-- Honduran President Xiomara Castro has said she wants her country to open official diplomatic ties with China, in a move that would end its official relationship with the self-ruled island of Taiwan. Xiomara Castro, who said during her election campaign in 2021 that she would switch ties to Beijing before later backtracking, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday night that she had instructed her foreign minister to begin the process of recognising the People's Republic of China.

The move was “a sign of my determination to comply with the Government Plan and expand borders freely,” she wrote. “We have to look at things very pragmatically and seek the best benefit for the Honduran people,” Honduran Foreign Minister Eduardo Reina later told local television, according to the Reuters news agency.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said it had expressed serious concern to the Honduran government and urged it to consider its decision carefully and not “fall into China's trap.”

While Xiomara did not mention Taiwan in her tweet, China does not allow countries to maintain formal relations with Taipei if they recognise Beijing. Analysts said Honduras move was not unexpected given Xiomara's campaign comments and recent discussions with China about financial assistance – in February Reina announced Beijing would provide the funding for another dam along the Patuka River.

“I think we are somewhat prepared, so I don't think it's going to be a big issue,” Yao-yuan Yeh, the director of the Taiwan and East Asia Studies Programme at the University of St Thomas in Texas told Al Jazeera. “But it could cause the public in Taiwan to have a little panic since we've been abandoned by another country again.”

China has been trying to deepen links with Taipei's remaining allies since Tsai Ing-wen was first elected president of Taiwan in 2016. Several countries, including the Solomon Islands, have made the switch.

In Central America, a region that the United States has long seen as within its sphere of influence, Nicaragua broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 2021. If Honduras does switch, only Belize and Guatemala will formally recognise Taiwan, which will be left with just 13 formal diplomatic allies around the world, compared with 22 when Tsai took office.

“Central American recognition of Taiwan is a legacy of the Cold War,” Bruno Binetti, a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics and an expert in China relations in Latin America, told Al Jazeera in emailed comments. “Much has changed since then, including China's spectacular economic rise. Decades ago Taiwan was actually a more appealing economic partner than China. That's ancient history, Taiwan just can't compete with China's huge market.”

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