

China-Taiwan Weekly Update, November 16, 2023

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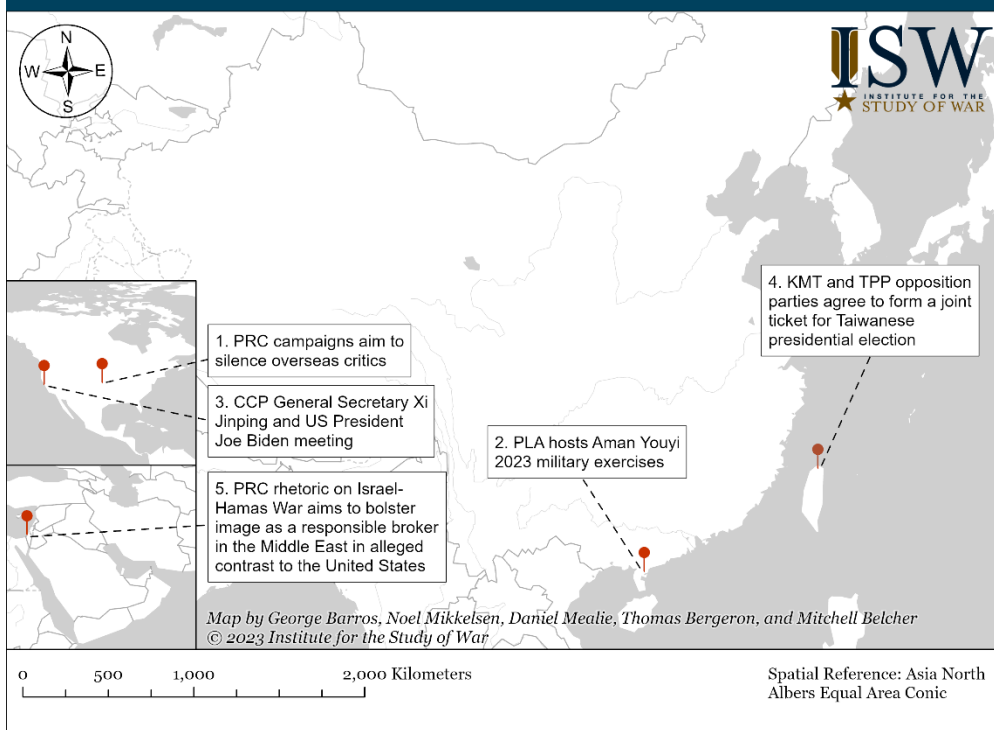
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The China–Taiwan Weekly Update focuses on the Chinese Communist Party’s paths to controlling Taiwan and relevant cross–Taiwan Strait developments.

Key Takeaways

1. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is expanding its suppression of dissents by targeting overseas Chinese expatriate critics.
2. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam will participate in the Aman Youyi 2023 military exercise with People’s Liberation Army forces for the first time, which buttresses CCP efforts to construct a Sino-centric regional security order.
3. US President Joe Biden and PRC President Xi Jinping announced the resumption of US-PRC military-to-military talks and cooperation to combat illegal fentanyl production after their meeting in San Francisco.
4. The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) and Kuomintang (KMT) overcame the biggest hurdle to forming a joint presidential ticket on November 15 and plan to announce the ticket order on November 18.
5. The PRC continued using the Israel-Hamas War to bolster its image as a fair, responsible broker in contrast to the “biased” United States while framing Israel as the driver of the war. The PRC has also expanded its diplomatic outreach in the Middle East while building its image as an important and fair broker in the region.

China-Taiwan Update Political-Military Events (November 8, 2023 - November 16, 2023)



China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is expanding its suppression of dissents by targeting overseas Chinese expatriate critics. The party previously targeted the owner of the “Teacher Li is Not Your Teacher” X account in December. The owner is a PRC national living in Italy who published videos of dissent in the PRC amid the end of the Zero-Covid policy from November to December 2022.[1] The party has since expanded its reach to also target dissidents in the United States, such as Jiajun Qiu, by a combination of internet and potential overseas in-person harassment. The Chinese Ministry of Public Security complements these threatening messages by running secret police stations in locations such as New York City to induce fear into diaspora communities and coerce dissidents into silence.[2] These police stations serve as the enforcement mechanism to induce fear into individuals, such as Qiu. Their presence, regardless of whether undercover agents follow dissidents, such as Qiu, presents an omnipresent sense of fear and tension to these individuals to coerce them into silence.

- The local police visited the “Teacher Li is Not Your Teacher” X account owner’s parents’ house in the PRC at midnight to intimidate them into persuading their son to stop posting. The police repeated these visits at differing hours, but the X account owner continued to post despite his parents’ pleas.[3] This demonstrates that the party previously used domestic harassment to achieve political goals that involved overseas expatriate critics.

- CNN reported on November 13 that Qiu faces dozens of accounts impersonating him as well as threats to his safety from unidentified sources that he claims have ties to the CCP.[4] Qiu said that “every day I live in a sense of fear,” which reflects the persistent pressure that the CCP aims to inflict on expatriate citizens.[5]

Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam will participate in the Aman Youyi 2023 military exercise with the People’s Liberation Army forces for the first time, which buttresses CCP efforts to construct a Sino-centric regional security order. [6] The CCP seeks to develop a regional security architecture where it is the primary power broker rather than the United States.[7] The trend of growing military to military relationships between the PRC and these three countries fits into this regional vision. Aman Youyi began as a bilateral Sino-Malaysian exercise in 2014, before Thailand joined in 2018.[8] The expansion of the exercise to include Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam demonstrates and messages the tangible impacts of this architecture. The 2023 iteration is also the first year that Aman Youyi will occur in Chinese waters, off the coast of Zhanjiang, Guangdong.[9] The exercise occurring in Chinese waters reinforces the image of a Sino-centric security architecture.

- Cambodia already conducts periodic military exercises with the PLA, such as Golden Dragon.[10] Laos began to do so in 2023 with the Friendship Shield exercise.[11] Vietnam also conducted a joint patrol with the People’s Republic of China Coast Guard in April. This was the first time the two countries’ coast guard leaders jointly commanded a patrol.[12]

US President Joe Biden and PRC President Xi Jinping announced the resumption of US-PRC military-to-military talks and cooperation to combat illegal fentanyl production after their meeting in San Francisco. PRC President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden met in San Francisco on November 15 on the sidelines of the APEC Leaders’ Meeting to discuss a variety of issues affecting US-China relations. The two had not met since November 14, 2022, in Bali, Indonesia. A White House official readout after the meeting and PRC state media said the two had agreed to resume bilateral cooperation to combat global illicit drug manufacturing and trafficking and high-level military-to-military talks. PRC officials and state media described the meeting as “positive, comprehensive, and constructive.”[13] The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs also strongly criticized Biden’s comment after the meeting that Xi was a “dictator” but did not publicize the controversy.

- Biden and Xi announced they would resume cooperation to combat global illicit drug manufacturing and trafficking, including synthetic drugs like fentanyl, and establish a working group for ongoing communication and law enforcement coordination on counternarcotics issues.[14]
- Biden and Xi agreed to resume high-level military-to-military communications, the U.S.-China Defense Policy Coordination Talks, and the U.S.-China Military Maritime Consultative Agreement meetings, as well as telephone conversations between theater commanders.[15] The PRC severed such talks with the United States in August 2022 following then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan. President Biden said before the meeting that resuming military-to-military talks was his goal.[16]
- President Biden maintained that Xi Jinping was a “dictator” in comments after his meeting with Xi. Reuters reported the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson called these comments “extremely wrong and irresponsible political manipulation” during her November 16 press conference.[17] The spokesperson’s comments on this topic were omitted from the MFA’s readouts of the press conference.[18]

Biden and Xi affirmed the need to address the risks of advanced AI systems and improve AI safety through US-PRC government talks and agreed to establish an inter-governmental dialogue on artificial intelligence.[19] The PLA has invested billions of dollars in AI systems for military use.[20] Differences between the United States and PRC in ethical and operational regulatory limits for AI systems remain unclear and are a potential point of friction.

- The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post exclusively reported on November 11 that “sources familiar with the matter” said the two sides would pledge a ban on artificial intelligence in autonomous weaponry and in the control and deployment of nuclear warheads.[21] No such ban was announced after the meeting as of noon Eastern Time on November 16.
- The PRC also has not endorsed the US-led Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy, which aims to build international consensus on regulating military AI.[22]

Biden and Xi also discussed a wide range of other issues affecting US-China relations, including Taiwan, human rights, trade, climate change, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Palestine conflict.[23] They praised agreements reached by the US and PRC climate envoys before the meeting but did not announce agreements on any of these other topics.

- U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and China Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua met in Sunnylands, California from November 4-7 and released a joint statement on November 14. They agreed to resume talks on climate cooperation, including curbing methane and plastic pollution, and to operationalize the Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s.[24]

Taiwan

The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) and Kuomintang (KMT) overcame the biggest hurdle to forming a joint presidential ticket on November 15 and plan to announce the ticket order on November 18. TPP candidate Ko Wen-je and KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih agreed on a method to determine the ticket order for the joint ticket. The issue was a key sticking point that stalled progress on cooperation since the two parties entered formal negotiations on October 14.[25] The two parties agreed to use opinion polls from November 7-17 to determine the selection of a joint candidate but did not specify which polls they will consider.[26] The parties will appoint their own polling statisticians to contribute additional internal polls and determine which public polls qualify.[27] This outcome is consistent with ISW’s earlier assessments that the two parties would unite under a joint ticket before the candidate registration deadline on November 24.[28]

- The parties agreed to a point system in which a candidate will receive one “point” for each poll in which he has more support than the other candidate. This means that the candidate leading in a poll wins one point.
- The November 15 agreement provides Hou with an advantage in the selection process in polls where he is trailing behind Ko by a number of percentage points smaller than the margin of error.[29] If, for example, a poll shows Ko ahead of Hou by 2.5 percentage points but the margin of error is 3 percentage points, Hou would take the point.

- The data from several polls within the November 7-17 timeframe indicates the advantage provided to Hou could be the deciding factor in the evaluation process. A landline poll from CNEWS released on November 13 showed Ko polling at 0.2 percentage points higher than Hou.[30] This difference is less than the poll's 2.17 percent margin of error. As a result, Hou would win the point for this poll. A poll from United Daily News released on November 14 shows support for a Ko-led ticket is one percentage point higher than support for a Hou-led ticket.[31] This difference is less than the poll's 2.9 percent margin of error. Hou would once again win the point for this poll.

The polls that the parties decide to use could have a significant role in selecting the presidential candidate for the joint ticket. Levels of candidate support vary widely across polls according to each polling organization's specific survey scenarios and methods. These considerations will affect the outcome of the evaluation process.

- Taiwan's election authorities confirmed independent candidate Terry Gou's eligibility to run on November 14.[32] However, some polls do not consider Gou's candidacy when surveying respondents. Gou's inclusion in the polls to determine the presidential candidate could be disproportionately helpful or harmful to Ko or Hou, depending on the poll.
- Differences in polling numbers are wider in polls that measure individual candidate support. Differences in polling numbers are narrower in polls that compare support for a Ko-led joint ticket versus a Hou-led joint ticket. Using polls that compare support between Ko-led and Hou-led joint tickets is more favorable to Hou because the difference is more likely to fall within a given poll's margin of error.[33]
- Polling methodology has implications for the evaluation process. Generally, polls conducted by mobile phone emphasize Ko's popularity over Hou, while polls that use a higher proportion of landline phones reflect higher levels of support for Hou.[34]

The formation of a KMT-TPP joint ticket will significantly diminish Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate and frontrunner Lai Ching-te's chances of victory. Most polls suggest that a KMT-TPP joint ticket would outperform the DPP in the elections, regardless of the presidential candidate on the joint ticket.[35] A Ko-led ticket will likely pose an especially difficult challenge for the DPP, which shares a similar voter demographic to the TPP.[36]

The KMT and TPP would need to form a coalition government in the case their joint ticket wins in the presidential election. Such a coalition is unprecedented in Taiwan's history. The agreement that the two parties reached on November 15 arranged for a joint TPP-KMT committee to manage the presidential ticket and selection of legislative candidates for the coalition. The agreement also stipulates that positions in policymaking institutions will be allocated based on proportional representation in the legislature, except for matters of defense, diplomacy, and cross-strait relations.[37] The KMT currently holds 38 seats in the Legislative Yuan and the TPP holds 5 seats. Reconciliation over policy differences will be an obstacle for the two parties in a coalition government because they hold disparate views on cross-strait policy and engagement with the Chinese Communist Party.[38]

Israel-Hamas War

The PRC continued using the Israel-Hamas War to bolster its image as a fair, responsible broker in contrast to the “biased” United States while framing Israel as the driver of the war. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and state propaganda outlets have repeatedly condemned violence between Palestine and Israel since October 7 but never condemned Hamas. They continued to call for an immediate ceasefire and promoted a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders.[39] PRC MFA officials maintained their strong condemnation of Israeli military actions in the Gaza Strip and called them beyond the scope of self-defense.[40] The MFA strongly condemned the violence around the al-Shifa Hospital and the bombing of the UN compound in Gaza.[41] State media outlet Global Times strongly implied Israel was responsible for bombing the al-Shifa hospital and criticized the United States and its allies for their “perfunctory” response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.[42] The PRC’s targeted criticism of Israel and call for an immediate ceasefire align with the views of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Arab states.[43]

- The PRC’s call for a two-state solution aligns with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states but differs from Iran. Iran rejects a two-state solution.[44]

PRC Deputy Representative to the UN Geng Shuang condemned comments by an Israeli official about using nuclear weapons in Gaza.[45] Israel Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu said on November 5 that Israel could drop a nuclear bomb in the Gaza Strip.[46] Geng criticized the comment as “extremely irresponsible and disturbing.” Geng’s statement did not mention that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu disavowed Eliyahu’s comments and indefinitely suspended him from his post.[47] Geng further urged Israel to accede to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons as a non-nuclear weapon state and to place all its nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards.[48]

The PRC has also expanded its diplomatic outreach in the Middle East while building its image as an important and fair broker in the region. PRC officials have highlighted the PRC’s diplomatic efforts to meet with Middle Eastern states and other relevant actors to bring an end to the violence.[49] These actions also serve to garner support as a leader in the international system, especially with the Global South. The PRC also backed the first United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution about the Gaza Strip.

- The MFA said on November 8 that Foreign Minister Wang Yi had met with officials from 18 countries and international organizations to discuss the Gaza war.[50] Wang had meetings or calls with only two high-ranking Middle Eastern officials in the two months prior to October 7.[51]
- MFA Department of West Asian and North African Affairs Director-General Wang Di met with Iran’s Foreign Ministry Deputy for Political Affairs Ali Bagheri and other Iranian officials on November 11. The event was the first bilateral meeting between PRC and Iranian officials since the war in Gaza began. Iranian officials said they hoped to work with the PRC to de-escalate the war.[52]
- The UN Security Council passed its first resolution on the Gaza war on November 15. The resolution called for “urgent and extended” humanitarian pauses and corridors in the Gaza Strip to allow the provision of essential goods and services. It also called for Hamas and other groups to release all hostages. The PRC voted for the resolution and promoted its implementation in official statements and state media. The PRC is the rotating president of

the UN Security Council in November.[53] The United States, UK, and Russia abstained from the vote.[54]

The MFA did not confirm claims by senior Hamas official Ali Baraka on November 2 that a Hamas delegation will soon visit Beijing but said the PRC “maintained close communication with relevant parties.” In the same statement, Baraka also claimed that “China and Russia met with the leaders of Hamas,” possibly referring to Russian and Chinese Middle East envoys visiting Doha, Qatar, on October 20.[55] ISW cannot confirm a direct meeting between PRC and Hamas officials. Doha hosts a Hamas political office and has been the site of ongoing Qatar-mediated negotiations between Israel and Hamas since the war in Gaza began, however.[56]

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