

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



China-Taiwan Weekly Update, February 13, 2025

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The China–Taiwan Weekly Update is a joint product from the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute. The update supports the ISW–AEI Coalition Defense of Taiwan project, which assesses Chinese campaigns against Taiwan, examines alternative strategies for the United States and its allies to deter the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) aggression, and—if necessary—defeat the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The update focuses on the Chinese Communist Party’s paths to controlling Taiwan and cross–Taiwan Strait developments.

Key Takeaways

- **Taiwanese civil society groups have now submitted recall petitions targeting 31 opposition Kuomintang (KMT) legislators and 13 legislators from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Recall efforts could shift the balance of power within the Legislative Yuan (LY) by reducing the KMT-led majority.**
- **Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior (MOI) investigated claims that Taiwanese and PRC companies helped Taiwanese nationals illegally procure PRC identification cards in support of an expansion of CCP United Front soft power operations against Taiwan.**
- **The ROC Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported sighting six PRC high-altitude balloons near Taiwan in one day, with one passing directly over the main island.**
- **The PRC’s new directive restricting online publication of military-related information reflects the PRC’s heightened sensitivity to leaks that expose military capabilities and the reinforcement of CCP control over the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) by silencing narratives that challenge party authority.**
- **PRC General Secretary Xi Jinping met with South Korea’s National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province on February 7, 2025. The meeting reflects the PRC’s growing efforts to strengthen ties with South Korea amid its escalating trade war with the U.S. and political instability in South Korea.**

- **The PRC’s appointment of Lu Shaye as special representative for European Affairs signals that Beijing intends to take a more aggressive posture in negotiations with the European Union.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

Taiwanese civil society groups have now submitted recall petitions targeting 31 opposition Kuomintang (KMT) legislators and 13 legislators from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Recall efforts could shift the balance of power within the Legislative Yuan (LY) by reducing the KMT-led majority. These 44 recall petitions have received signatures from more than 1 percent of the eligible voters in their electoral district, clearing the first threshold to initiate a recall election.[1] The next step is for recall petitioners to get signatures from at least 10 percent of eligible voters within the relevant electoral district within 60 days. Once Taiwan’s Central Election Commission verifies these signatures, the recall vote can commence. If a majority of voters vote to recall the elected official, and this majority exceeds 25 percent of eligible voters in the district, a special election must be held within three months to fill the vacated seat. The LY currently has no majority party, with the DPP holding 51 seats, the KMT holding 54 (including two KMT-aligned independents), and the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) holding 8 seats. The opposition has a majority in practice, however, because the KMT and TPP have typically aligned on key issues. The DPP could regain control of the LY if its supporters can successfully recall and replace six KMT legislators and maintain all contested DPP legislative seats.

KMT- and TPP-backed amendments to Taiwan’s Public Officials Election and Recall Act could make recall efforts more difficult, however. The opposition parties passed an amendment on December 20, 2024, requiring those who propose or sign a recall initiative to provide a copy of their ID card instead of their ID numbers and addresses.[2] The Executive Yuan requested a reexamination of the amendment in January 2025, but the LY voted along party lines to preserve the amendment on February 11.[3] The TPP, though not facing a potential recall of its elected legislators, has voiced its opposition to the mass recall campaign. Acting TPP Chairman Huang Kuo-chang called DPP efforts to recall KMT legislators an act of “green authoritarianism,” a reference to the DPP official party color. [4] President William Lai Ching-te has 10 days to sign the bill into law after the LY sends it to him. Petitions that complete both rounds of signature collection before the bill is signed into law will not be subject to the amendment, though it is possible that the KMT may use this amendment as an opportunity to challenge the legality of recall proceedings.

Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior (MOI) investigated claims that Taiwanese and PRC companies helped Taiwanese nationals illegally procure PRC identification cards in support of an expansion of CCP United Front soft power operations against Taiwan. The MOI initiated its investigation after Taiwanese Youtuber Pa Chiung made a video documentary alleging that between three to five Taiwanese travel companies and public relations firms, as well as two PRC companies, helped Taiwanese citizens apply for PRC ID cards during trips to the PRC.[5] Taiwanese media described Pa as an “anti-CCP” Youtuber, whose content investigates PRC United Front activity targeting Taiwanese nationals.[6]

The United Front is a whole-of-government and society effort to advance the CCP's ideology and interests by co-opting non-government segments of Chinese society. United Front activities against Taiwan support PRC efforts to politically assimilate Taiwan, particularly by inculcating in the Taiwanese public CCP notions that the PRC is the only legitimate government of China and Taiwan is a part of that China. United Front work can also support covert and clandestine activities, such as infiltration, manipulation, co-optation, and intelligence gathering on target groups.[7]

The MOI is investigating whether the Taiwanese companies assisted the Taiwanese nationals in illegally obtaining the ID cards in breach of Taiwan's Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area.[8] The MOI also aims to determine whether the Taiwanese companies' actions "were purely commercial" or part of a larger United Front operation to promote the PRC's annexation of Taiwan, as Taiwan designates commercial activities by Taiwanese companies in the PRC as permissible by law.[9] Taiwan's Interior Minister Liu Shyh-fang stated that Taiwan's and the PRC's citizenship registration systems "are mutually exclusive," making it illegal for Taiwanese citizens to simultaneously hold PRC citizenship documents or household registrations.[10] The MOI has interviewed over 30 individuals it identified as possessing PRC ID cards as part of its investigation, though Pa Chiung made an unverified claim that up to 200,000 Taiwanese citizens may have obtained PRC IDs in the last decade.[11] Taiwan's Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau called Pa's claims exaggerated.[12] Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council also announced that three Taiwanese nationals have had their citizenship revoked due to possession of illegal PRC ID cards since it began its investigation in January.[13]

The PRC's issuance of IDs to Taiwanese nationals dovetails with efforts to encourage people-to-people exchanges between Taiwan and the PRC to promote the PRC's political incorporation of Taiwan.[14] The Fujian United Front Work Department announced a plan in January to promote further Taiwanese visits to the PRC by increasing professional exchanges in various fields, adding more flights between Taiwan and Fujian Province, and encouraging first-time visitors to find jobs in the province.[15] Fujian is central to Beijing's "peaceful reunification" efforts because it is the site of the "Fujian Cross-Strait Integration Zone," which the PRC unveiled in 2023 to strengthen ties between Fujian and Taiwan and facilitate the integration of Taiwanese nationals into Fujian's society, economy, and governance.[16] The issuance of PRC ID cards to Taiwanese people is one of many policies intended to make it easier for Taiwanese to live, work, study, invest, and travel in Fujian and elsewhere in the PRC.

These efforts may represent PRC "passportization" efforts against Taiwan, wherein the PRC seeks to legitimize its claim on the island by granting PRC documents to Taiwanese nationals and support rhetoric identifying Taiwan as a part of China. The PRC could attempt to use Taiwanese citizens' possession of PRC ID cards as justification for intervention in Taiwan under the pretense of protecting "PRC citizens" from oppression under the DPP government. The passportization campaign against Taiwan bears similarities with Russia's passportization campaign in occupied Ukrainian territory, wherein Russia uses those who have "willfully" adopted Russian citizenship to support assertions that its territorial claims "are incontrovertible and irreversible," providing further justification for Russia's military occupation of Ukraine.[17] Residents of Taiwan's Kinmen and Matsu archipelagos, which the PRC consider to be part of Fujian province, may be particularly vulnerable to such "passportization" efforts. The islands' residents rely on the PRC economically and often travel to and from the PRC mainland. Pa Chiung's documentary showed that Taiwanese citizens who take the ferry from Kinmen

to Xiamen, Fujian, are encouraged to register for a Taiwan Compatriot Certificate, which enables them to travel freely to the PRC, buy property and establish a bank account, the first steps in obtaining residency in the PRC.[18] Kinmen in particular is a target of United Front efforts, including an initiative called the “Kinmen-Xiamen Common Living Circle,” which seeks to promote economic and cultural ties between Taiwan and the PRC. National Chengchi University Taiwan-China affairs researcher Soong Kuo-cheng stated that with further economic and integration through transport links, the PRC could integrate Kinmen into Fujian province and demonstrate that the ‘one country, two systems’ policy could be replicated with all of Taiwan.[19] The islands’ reliance on the PRC and the PRC’s emphasis on economic integration makes it likely that the PRC’s passportization program has disproportionately affected the residents of the islands.

The ROC Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported sighting six PRC high-altitude balloons near Taiwan in one day, with one passing directly over the main island. This marked the highest number of PRC balloons in Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in one day since February 10, 2024.[20] The MND reported nine PRC military aircraft, two official ships, and six warships — a “normal” number of non-balloon ADIZ incursions — near Taiwan during the same period as the balloon sightings (February 6–7).[21] The MND began reporting PRC balloons in its ADIZ in December 2023. Balloon activity spiked in volume and increased to daily frequency during the weeks leading up to Taiwan’s election on January 13, 2024, then gradually tapered off until April 2024.[22] MND began reporting balloon sightings again in November 2024, which gradually increased in subsequent months.[23] At least 16 PRC balloons flew through Taiwan’s ADIZ in January 2025, including seven that flew directly over Taiwan, and 13 in February as of the time of writing (at least two of them over Taiwan).[24] The balloon overflights are part of a broader PRC effort to harass Taiwan, degrade its response capabilities, and strain its resources, consistent with the effect of normalizing ADIZ incursions more generally.[25] Balloons are able to enter Taiwan’s airspace without triggering a Taiwanese military response, unlike military aircraft.

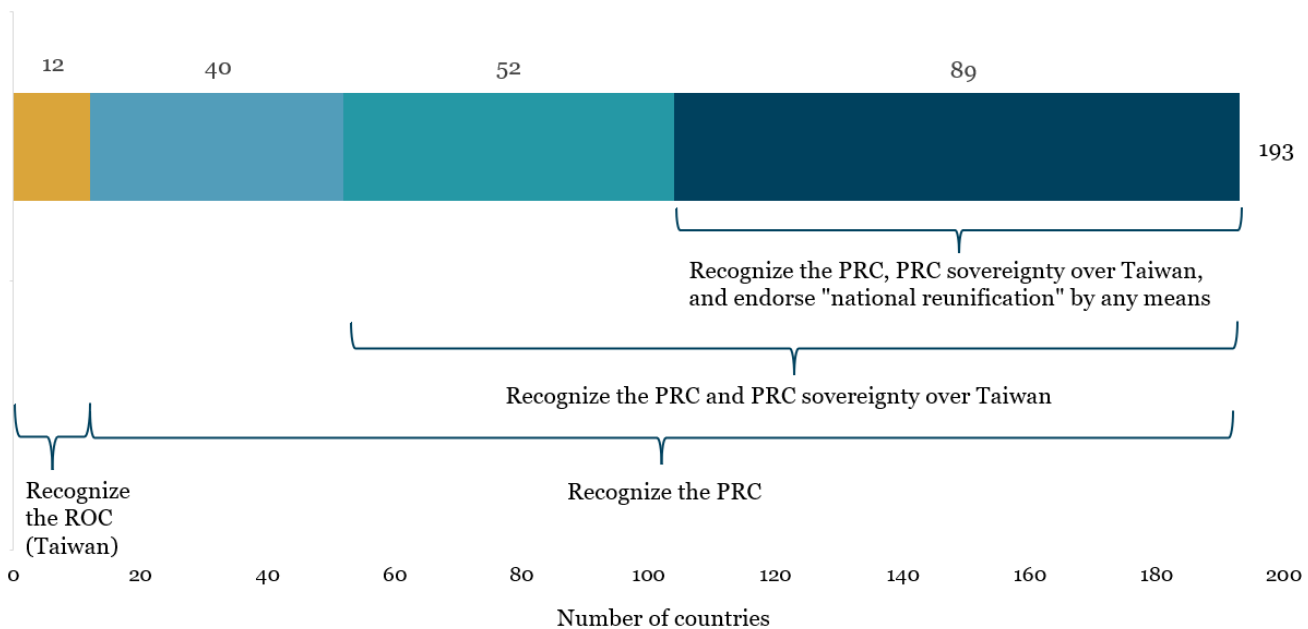
The PRC balloons over Taiwan also likely serve surveillance and other data collection purposes that may help the PRC plan military activities such as airstrikes. The PRC has maintained that balloons sighted over Taiwan are “mostly” weather balloons.[26] Reuters reported that most weather balloons fly 80,000–120,000 ft above the ground; the balloons spotted in Taiwan between December 2023 and April 2024 flew between altitudes of 10,000–40,000 ft, however.[27] A similar PRC spy balloon crossed the United States in February 2023 at an altitude of 60,000 ft.[28] PRC surveillance balloons could provide the PRC with a low-cost, deniable means of collecting intelligence on Taiwan’s topography and meteorology, among other things.

The PRC is using its political influence in developing countries to create the impression of widespread international support for its goals to annex Taiwan. Studies by the *Economist* and the Lowy Institute found that dozens of “Global South” countries, especially in Africa, adopted language in support of “all” PRC efforts to achieve “national reunification” in the last two years. The Australian think tank The Lowy Institute’s January 2025 study broke UN member states into five distinct categories based on their stances on the status of Taiwan. No countries can have diplomatic relations with both the PRC and Taiwan due to Beijing’s insistence on its “one-China principle.” Only 11 UN states, plus Vatican City, formally recognize the ROC over the PRC. 40 countries, including the United States, recognize the PRC government in Beijing

but stop short of recognizing the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan. 142 countries explicitly recognize the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan; of these, 119 have endorsed Beijing's one-China Principle directly. A further subset of 89 "Beijing backer" countries recognize the PRC, support the one-China principle, and support the PRC's actions to "achieve national reunification" without specifying a preference for peaceful means.[29] The *Economist* published a similar study on February 9 that identified 70 countries that recognize PRC sovereignty over Taiwan as well as "all" efforts by the PRC to achieve national reunification. The study noted that 97% of those 70 countries were in the Global South, and that the vast majority of them adopted that new wording in the past 18 months.[30] Many African countries joined this category for the first time during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in September 2024, when 53 African states signed a joint statement that said "Africa [...] firmly supports all efforts by the Chinese government to achieve national reunification." [31]

The PRC has sought to cultivate pro-PRC sentiment globally by portraying itself as a leader of the Global South and has used this diplomatic goodwill to garner support for its stance against the ROC. The PRC's efforts to garner support for Taiwan "reunification" efforts suggests that the PRC is prioritizing information operations designed to create the appearance of a global consensus. PRC foreign policy officials likely understand that very few of the Global South countries that have expressed approval for reunification efforts would substantively aid either side in an invasion of Taiwan. The PRC likely aims instead to use the rhetorical support it has created among Global South countries to create the appearance of legitimacy for any actions it chooses to take against Taiwan. Beijing wishes to take a leadership role in the international system, including in existing institutions, and it needs the support of as many countries as possible. Gaining rhetorical support from a growing number of countries for "all efforts" at "reunification" can help insulate the PRC from some of the reputational damage it may incur if it takes aggressive action against Taiwan.

The Lowy Institute and *Economist* studies also reveal that the degree of "international consensus" behind the PRC stance on Taiwan is less overwhelming than it claims. The PRC often claims that the 180 UN member states that recognize the PRC rather than Taiwan, as well as UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, constitute an overwhelming international consensus in support of its "one China principle" that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the PRC. UNGA 2758 was the 1971 resolution that expelled "the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek" (i.e., the ROC) from the United Nations and gave "China's" UN seat to the PRC instead. The resolution does not mention the status of Taiwan, however. PRC officials reference this supposed consensus in response to any countries that they perceive to be supporting Taiwan's independence or opposing the PRC's sovereignty claim over Taiwan. Not all countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan explicitly recognize Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan, however. Even countries that recognize Beijing's sovereignty claims do not necessarily endorse "reunification" by force. The UN as an institution has clarified that it does not endorse Beijing pursuing "reunification" by any means it wishes.[32]



Source: The Lowy Institute, *The Economist*

Lowy Institute data has been modified to include Vatican City and reflect Sri Lanka's new position from January 2025. Data excludes the PRC and ROC themselves

China

The PRC's new directive restricting online publication of military-related information reflects the PRC's heightened sensitivity to leaks that expose military capabilities and the reinforcement of CCP control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by silencing narratives that challenge party authority. The PRC published directives on February 8 that limit the information that PRC military bloggers and media outlets are permitted to share online regarding the PLA.^[33] The directive prohibits online military information providers from “producing, copying, publishing, or disseminating” previously undisclosed information about the military, including troop activities, the development, testing, and deployment of weapons and equipment; information about military facilities, and more. The stated aims of the directives, according to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), are to strengthen the management of information to prevent the leaking of military secrets, manage public opinion relating to the military, and stop the spread of disinformation.^[34] Tighter restrictions on what content is allowed to be published online imply greater challenges for monitoring PRC military developments in the open source.

The directive signals the PRC's increasing sensitivity over leaks that threaten to expose certain capabilities and possible intentions amid the PRC's ongoing development of new military technology and equipment. The rules apply to any entities that publish online information about the military, such as media outlets, military units and departments, security-related education institutions, and individual scholars and bloggers. PRC military bloggers and social media users have previously circulated footage of military hardware that potentially undermines the confidentiality of PLA

capabilities. PRC netizens shared pictures and videos of a previously unknown sixth generation stealth combat aircraft flying above Chengdu on December 26.[35]

The directive, which takes effect on March 1, also focuses on maintaining the CCP's control over the PLA. The directive emphasizes the responsibility of publishers of military-related content not to spread notions that contradict the CCP's absolute authority over the PLA and the CMC Chairman Responsibility System. The CMC Chairman Responsibility System refers to a concept that emphasizes the CMC Chairman (Xi Jinping)'s centrality in the military hierarchy and command structure.[36] The directive encourages publishers of military-related content to endorse Xi Jinping's political theory, including Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military. This doctrine promotes the notion that Xi's organizational reforms of the PLA, orientation of the CCP around Xi, and emphasis on strict CCP control of the PLA are necessary to strengthen the PLA as a fighting force. The explicit connection indicates that Xi regards insufficient consensus over the CCP's governance of the military as an inhibitor of the PLA's warfighting capability.

The issuance of the directive follows several recent incidents that may indicate tension in the PLA regarding party-military relations. The PRC Ministry of Defense (MOD) announced on November 28 that it had suspended Director of the Political Work Department of the CMC Miao Hua amid his investigation for suspected "serious violations of discipline." [37] Miao Hua was the highest-ranking political commissar in the PLA, a position that carries the ultimate responsibility of instilling Xi's vision of political loyalty throughout the military. Multiple PLA affiliated organizations published articles in December 2024 that emphasized tenets of collective leadership and intra-party democracy as the guiding principles of the party's governance of the military, which is inconsistent with Xi's vision of centralized hierarchy.[38] The CMC subsequently replaced the political commissar of the PLA Ground Force on December 23, possibly signaling that Xi held other high-ranking officers responsible for perceived failures to achieve his version of political loyalty.[39] The new directive outlined plans to increase scrutiny over public agencies and military commands' dissemination of military-related content through media training.

The directive's focus on silencing undesirable views regarding the CCP's control over the military amid instability in the highest echelons of the PLA's political commissars signals that the CCP perceives the sources of these narratives as threats that ultimately inhibit the PLA's effectiveness as a fighting force.

Northeast Asia

Japan

The PRC strongly condemned a joint statement by US President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba for its comments on Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands. Trump and Ishiba met in Washington, DC, on February 7 for their first bilateral summit. A joint statement from the two leaders encouraged the "peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues" and "opposed any attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion." [40] Japanese newspaper *Nikkei* reported that this was the first time the United States' and Japan's stated position on the Taiwan Strait explicitly opposed changes to the cross-strait status quo through "coercion." [41] The joint statement also expressed support for Taiwan's "meaningful participation" in international organizations.[42] PRC MFA spokesperson Guo Jiakun said that the PRC was "strongly dissatisfied"

and lodged “solemn representations” with the US and Japanese governments over the statement, which he claimed “blatantly interferes in China's internal affairs, attacks and smears China, and exaggerates regional tensions.” He said that “the Taiwan issue is purely China's internal affairs and the core of China's core interests,” stressing that Japan, in particular, “should be more cautious in its words and deeds” due to its history of colonizing Taiwan. He argued that Japan and the United States should abide by the one-China principle and clearly oppose Taiwan’s independence if they truly want peace. He further stated that Taiwan “has no basis, reason or right” to participate in international organizations that only admit sovereign states.[43]

The PRC also objected to Trump's and Ishiba’s statements about the Senkaku Islands, a disputed but Japan-administered uninhabited archipelago in the East China Sea. Trump and Ishiba reaffirmed in their joint statement that the US-Japan mutual defense treaty of 1960 applies to the Senkaku Islands, which means that an attack on the islands would trigger US military intervention to aid Japan. The United States has held this position since 1972. The two leaders also stated their “strong opposition to any action that seeks to undermine Japan’s longstanding and peaceful administration of the Senkaku Islands.”[44] The PRC and Taiwan also claim the Senkaku Islands under the name “Diaoyu Islands,” and PRC coast guard vessels patrolled within the islands’ contiguous zone nearly every day of 2024 and 2023 to assert PRC legal jurisdiction there.[45] MFA spokesperson Guo stated that “the Diaoyu Islands and their affiliated islands are China's inherent territory. China's activities in the relevant waters are completely legitimate and legal.”[46]

The PRC’s especially strong objection to the Trump-Ishiba comments on Taiwan likely results from the fact that the comments signaled a new level of US-Japan alignment in opposition to what the PRC perceives to be its core interests. The US and Japanese opposition to cross-strait reunification by force is longstanding. The addition of “coercion” in the language of the joint statement, however, extends that opposition to a greatly expanded range of PRC “gray zone” activities including coast guard patrols around Taiwanese territory, coercive economic measures, cyberattacks, and other nonviolent means that the PRC has employed to intimidate or pressure Taiwan. The inclusion of “coercion” in the language also brings the joint statement more in line with the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, which stipulates that the United States shall maintain the capacity “to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan.”[47] The Trump-Ishiba joint statement did not include concrete commitments of action against PRC coercion but signified an intent by Japan and the United States to more strongly challenge tactics that the PRC regularly uses to advance its eventual goal of “reunification.” Beijing also views US-Japan rhetorical alignment on the Taiwan issue as part of a trend of anti-PRC coalition-building within the PRC’s home region. The PRC very likely fears that such a coalition will reduce its chance of successfully annexing Taiwan and will be used to “contain” the PRC within the First Island Chain. The PRC MFA’s reaction to the Senkaku Islands statement was relatively mild, by contrast, both because the US-Japanese position on that subject is not new and because the Senkaku Islands are of lesser importance to the PRC than Taiwan.

North Korea

A PRC regional bank is reportedly involved in facilitating financial transactions related to North Korean minerals, potentially enabling North Korea to circumvent international

sanctions. South Korean media outlet *Daily NK* reported on February 5, citing sources in the PRC, that “Bank A” has been handling payments for mineral trade transactions between PRC companies and North Korean trading firms since January 23.[48] The UN Security Council’s sanctions under Resolution 2371 prohibit the export of North Korean minerals. The report claims that North Korea is earning “tens of thousands of yuan in monthly operating profit, with a 0.5-1% commission per transaction.” The report also accused the bank of “falsifying transaction records” to conceal large transfers of money from the PRC to North Korea and disguising the nature of the items traded. The report suggested that local PRC government officials may be cooperating with North Korean firms as import-export businesses are required to report their activities to the local authorities. Despite this, the PRC maintains that it “faithfully fulfills its due international obligations.”[49] The report’s allegations, nevertheless, would point to ongoing efforts by the PRC to help North Korea circumvent international sanctions and generate illicit revenues for its regime.

South Korea

PRC General Secretary Xi Jinping met with South Korea’s National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province on February 7, 2025.[50] The meeting reflects the PRC’s growing efforts to strengthen ties with South Korea amid its escalating trade war with the U.S. and political instability in South Korea. Woo, in China for the Asian Winter Games, invited Xi to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in South Korea in October. Xi indicated that he would seriously consider the invitation, which would mark his first visit to South Korea in 11 years.[51] Woo also addressed the PRC’s export restrictions on South Korean films and games, imposed in retaliation for South Korea’s deployment of the US-provided Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2017.[52] Xi acknowledged the importance of cultural exchange in bilateral relations and said that it should not be hindered by unnecessary complications.

The meeting could signal Xi’s efforts to leverage South Korea’s political instability to strengthen economic ties with South Korea amid the PRC’s intensifying trade war with the United States. US President Donald Trump imposed 10% duties on all PRC imports, to which the PRC responded with retaliatory duties.[53] South Korea, a key-US ally, is especially important to PRC efforts to weaken a US-led economic coalition. South Korea faces a leadership vacuum and an expected early presidential election in June after President Yoon Suk-yeol’s impeachment. The potential presidency of Lee Jae-myung, the opposition party leader, could signal a South Korean foreign policy shift from a pro-US stance to a more balanced approach between the PRC and the United States. Xi’s meeting with Woo may indicate the PRC’s strategy to position itself favorably ahead of potential leadership changes in South Korea.

South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (NIS) accused the PRC’s artificial intelligence (AI) start-up DeekSeek of “excessively” collecting and storing user data on February 10.[54] The NIS said, “unlike other generative AI services, it has been confirmed that chat records are transferable as it includes a function to collect keyboard input patterns that can identify individuals and communicate with Chinese companies’ servers.” Several South Korean government agencies such as the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy; Ministry of National Defense; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and state-run Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power restricted or blocked access to DeepSeek

for their employees due to security concerns on February 6.[55] PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said the PRC “attaches great importance to and legally protects data privacy and security,” adding that the PRC has “never demanded, nor will it require, enterprises or individuals to collect or store data in an illegal manner,” in response to the South Korean government agencies’ ban on the app.[56] South Korea joins a growing list of countries, including the United States , Australia, Italy, and the ROC, that have banned the app for government employees due to security risks.[57] The concerns are linked to the PRC’s National Intelligence Law, which could allow the state to access corporate data.[58]

Oceania

The PRC appears to be exploiting divisions between the Cook Islands and New Zealand, which have a free association arrangement.[59] The Cook Islands will sign a comprehensive strategic partnership with the PRC as the PRC seeks to expand influence and access in the South Pacific. PRC MFA spokesman Guo Jiakun said that the Cook Islands has been “an important partner of China in the South Pacific region” since relations were established in 1997 and that bilateral ties are “not directed against any third party” in a regular press conference on February 10.[60] The MFA has not released information detailing the terms of the comprehensive strategic partnership at the time of writing. A Cook Islands government readout detailed that Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown would travel to Beijing from February 10–14 to sign the agreement, which “presents an opportunity to enhance cooperation across key sectors, including trade, investment, and tourism; infrastructure; climate resilience and renewable energy; agriculture; maritime and oceans, including shipping and seabed minerals development.”[61]

New Zealand and the Cook Islands have maintained a compact of free association, through which New Zealand funds aid and defense for the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands were administered by New Zealand until 1965. The islands are now self-governing, but citizens have New Zealand passports and citizenship, and the country does not have a UN seat. The United States recognizes the Cook Islands as an independent state, however. The Cook Islands and New Zealand agreed in 2001 to maintain regular discussions on foreign policy issues of mutual interest.[62] New Zealand officials expressed surprise amid the Cook Islands’ decision to sign a deal with the PRC. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of New Zealand Winston Peters said that New Zealand was “blindsided” by the development.[63] Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown argued that the Cook Islands were not obligated to inform New Zealand because the agreement with the PRC was not germane to policing or security issues.[64] Brown also rejected accusations of “secretive” Cook Islands-PRC engagement and argued that the agreement was in the Cook Islands’ “best interest.”[65]

ISW has tracked PRC diplomatic outreach in the South Pacific and noted that foreign direct investment (FDI), security cooperation, and military diplomacy can all offer the PRC a path to improve its power projection in Oceania.[66] The Solomon Islands signed a security agreement with the PRC in March 2022 that included granting the PRC access and replenishment rights to Solomon Islands ports, as well as the right to use its armed forces to protect Chinese projects and personnel in the Solomon Islands.[67] PRC agreements with other Pacific Island states have not included such overt concessions to PRC military interests but serve to expand PRC political influence in the countries to advance Beijing’s strategic ambitions and in some cases convince the countries to abandon their support for

Taiwan. A comprehensive strategic partnership with the Cook Islands could present the PRC with an opportunity to make political inroads with a country located close to New Zealand and the US territory of American Samoa. The Cook Islands has shown a willingness to reduce its dependence on New Zealand, including an announcement by Mark Brown on February 7 that the country could issue its own passports.^[68]

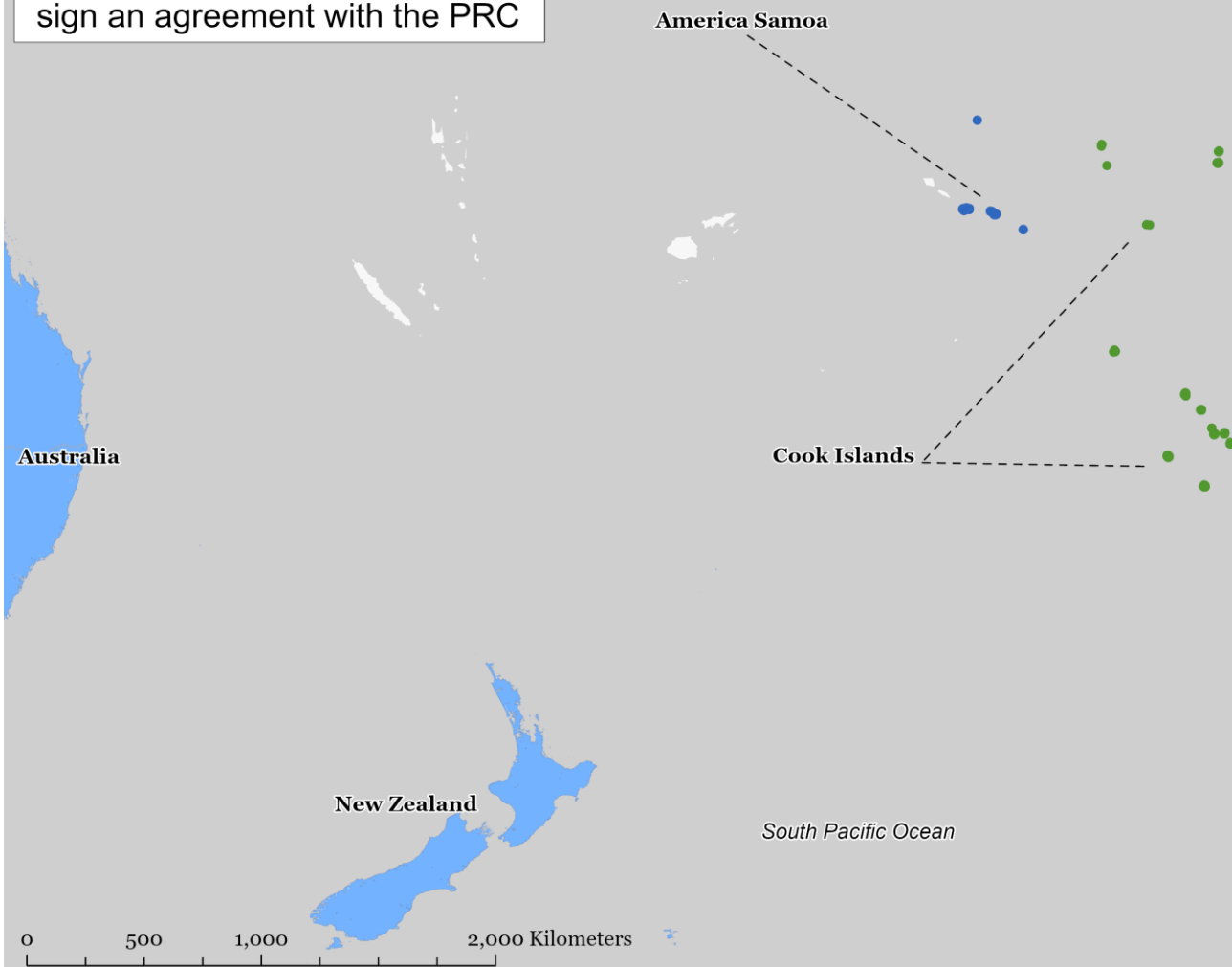
PRC efforts to expand influence in the Pacific have faced backlash from the Five Eyes intelligence sharing group, most notably the United States and Australia. New Zealand is a Five Eyes member state but has faced criticism for taking a softer approach toward the PRC than its counterparts.^[69] Current New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters expressed interest in expanding engagement with the Five Eyes and led the development of the Pacific Reset strategy, which sought to cultivate New Zealand's ties with Pacific neighbors.^[70]

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President of the Cook Islands visit to Beijing (February 10-14)



Feb 10-14: Cook Islands President Mark Brown traveled to Beijing to sign an agreement with the PRC



Map by Derik Durbin, Daniel Shats, and Alison O'Neil
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Europe

The PRC’s appointment of Lu Shaye as special representative for European Affairs signals that Beijing intends to take a more aggressive posture in negotiations with the European Union. Lu Shaye was the PRC’s ambassador to France from July 2019 to December 2024. He was one of Beijing’s most controversial ambassadors due to his combative “wolf warrior” style, a term Lu embraced. The French foreign ministry summoned Lu seven times in his five-year tenure over various high-profile disputes, including his comment in April 2023 that ex-Soviet states do not have “effective status” under international law, which he made when asked whether he considered Crimea to be part of Ukraine. The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* cited “people familiar with the case” who said Lu had lost access to any relevant French government organs by the time he left Paris.[71] Lu replaced Wu Hongbo as the PRC Special Representative for European Affairs, a role that Wu held since it was created in 2019.[72] Lu’s special representative role is distinct from the post of PRC Ambassador to the EU, which is held by another diplomat. “Special representative” is an ad hoc role that the PRC MFA creates when it sees a need to have one chief negotiator responsible for a broad region or issue area, such as European affairs, the Korean Peninsula, or climate change.

Lu’s appointment follows signs from European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that the EU may be softening its stance on the PRC. Von der Leyen, widely described in Western and PRC media as a prominent “China hawk” for her efforts to reduce the EU’s reliance on the PRC, said in a speech at the EU Ambassadors Conference on February 3 that there is “room to engage constructively with China – and find solutions in our mutual interest,” including “agreements that could even expand our trade and investment ties.”[73] She said the EU would continue “de-risking” policies to “rebalance” EU-PRC trade and investment relations, however.[74] Von der Leyen’s apparent shift toward the PRC may stem from uncertainty about the future of the US-EU economic relationship in the near term, as US President Donald Trump had promised tariffs on EU goods.[75] Trump announced on February 11 that the United States would raise tariffs on foreign aluminum and steel to 25%, prompting condemnation and a promise of “firm and proportionate countermeasures” from von der Leyen.[76]

The PRC’s promotion of Lu Shaye as its top representative to the EU likely signals Beijing’s intent to aggressively negotiate against European “de-risking” policies. The PRC may seek to take advantage of the shakiness of the EU’s economic relationship with the United States, its largest trading partner.[77] Lu’s “wolf warrior” approach is more likely to offend and alienate his European interlocutors, however, than to improve the EU-PRC trade relationship.

Lu’s appointment may also portend the PRC taking a more overtly pro-Russia stance on the war in Ukraine. The PRC’s main negotiator on the Ukraine War is Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui, but Lu Shaye’s new role may position him as an important voice as well.[78] The PRC has consistently claimed to be an impartial mediator and voice for peace in the war in Ukraine, despite providing dual-use goods and economic support to Russia throughout the war. It has refrained from overtly endorsing Russia’s invasion and political aims, but has adopted Russian framing in many ways including defending Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” about NATO expansion, criticizing Western aid to Ukraine for “adding fuel to the fire,” opposing unilateral sanctions on Russia, proposing peace plans that do not call for withdrawing Russian troops, and refusing to call the war a war.[79] The PRC

distanced itself at the time from Lu's comments undermining the sovereignty of former Soviet states.[80] Its elevation of Lu to such a key position may signal a tacit acceptance of his views, however.

PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi is scheduled to visit the UK on February 13 to hold talks with British Foreign Secretary David Lammy for the first UK-China Strategic Dialogue since 2018.[81]

The UK under Conservative leadership experienced strained relations with the PRC over issues such as the Hong Kong crackdown and allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang.[82] The Labour Party has made improving relations with the PRC one of its main foreign policy objectives.[83] The party acted on this rhetoric by holding numerous meetings between top UK and PRC officials since Prime Minister Keir Starmer took power in July 2024. Lammy visited Beijing in mid-October where he met with Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.[84] PRC President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Kier Starmer met at the G20 summit in November 2024, the first meeting between a British PM and Xi since 2018 — the press statement stated that talks would continue.[85] British finance minister Rachel Reeves visited Beijing in mid-January in an effort to revive economic and financial talks, which were last held in 2019.[86] PRC-UK relations appear to be warming as a result of increased diplomatic engagement, which contrasts with the appointment of Lu Shaye as special representative for European Affairs due to his combative approach to foreign policy. The PRC has previously criticized the UK's participation in the Five Eyes and AUKUS alliances due to PRC beliefs that these alliances tools used by the United States to constrain PRC activity and prevent the PRC from achieving its strategic and foreign policy goals.[87] The UK is unlikely to halt its participation in Five Eyes or AUKUS, but the PRC could be attempting to create points of division between the US and its allies.

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