

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



China-Taiwan Weekly Update, February 20, 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 52 recall petitions, 36 of which target opposition legislators and 16 of which target legislators from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The 2024 legislative election results and recent polling suggest that up to 12 Kuomintang (KMT) and 6 DPP legislators are at risk of getting recalled.**
- **Taiwanese prosecutors indicted former KMT legislator Chang Hsien-yao on February 12 for allegedly acting on behalf of the PRC to interfere in Taiwan's 2024 presidential election.**
- **The US State Department revised its Taiwan Fact Sheet to remove language that states it does not support Taiwan independence. The PRC criticized the change and may use it to frame future PRC actions toward Taiwan as responses to US escalation.**
- **Russian and PRC military and surveillance assets operated in southern Japanese waters and airspace in February, according to the Japanese government.**
- **South Korea expressed support for Taiwan’s participation in international organizations for the first time, as part of a trilateral joint statement issued with the United States and Japan at the Munich Security Conference in Germany on February 15.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

Taiwanese civil society groups have now submitted 52 recall petitions, 36 of which target opposition legislators and 16 of which target legislators from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The 2024 legislative election results and recent polling suggest that up to 12 Kuomintang (KMT) and 6 DPP legislators are at risk of getting recalled. The 52 recall election petitions have received signatures from over one percent of eligible voters in their respective districts, meeting the threshold to advance the recall process.[1] Some of the 52 recall petitions target the same legislator, though each petition is considered an independent proposal. 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 commences. A special election must be held within three months if a majority of voters vote to recall the elected official and this majority exceeds 25 percent of eligible voters in the district.

The Legislative Yuan (LY) currently has no majority party with the DPP holding 51 seats, the KMT holding 54 seats (including two KMT-aligned independents), and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) holding eight seats. The KMT and TPP have a majority in practice, however, given the recent alignment between them. The DPP could regain control of the LY if its supporters can recall and replace six KMT legislators and maintain all contested DPP seats. DPP legislative caucus chair Ker Chien-ming called for a mass recall campaign against opposition legislators on January 4 in response to significant polarization and major disagreements between the opposition and ruling party. The KMT responded by announcing a recall campaign of its own.

Twelve KMT legislators and six DPP legislators are likely the most vulnerable to being recalled. Seven of the KMT legislators and three DPP legislators won their 2024 legislative races by slim margins, which their opposition could overcome in a special election. Legislators Yeh Yuan-chih (KMT-New Taipei City VII), Niu Hsu-ting (KMT-Taoyuan City I), Tu Chuan-chi (KMT-Taoyuan City II), Lu Ming-che (KMT-Taoyuan City III), Sean Liao Wei-hsiang (KMT-Taichung City IV), Yu Hao (KMT-Nantou County II), Huang Chien-pin (KMT-Taitung County), Wu Pei-yi (DPP-Taipei City V), Chang Hung-lu (DPP-New Taipei City VI), and Wu Chi-ming (DPP-New Taipei City X) all won their races by roughly five percentage points or less in 2024.[2] All but Lu Ming-che, Chang Hung-lu, and Wu Chi-ming flipped their seats in the 2024 election, making them more vulnerable to flipping to the previous party.[3] Taiwanese political commentators identified eight additional high-risk candidates based on their relatively slim margins of victory (ten percentage points or less), high numbers of signatures collected for the recall movement, and significant public movements against them. Those include Wang Hung-wei (KMT Taipei City III), Lee Yen-hsiu (KMT-Taipei City IV), Lo Chih-chiang (KMT Taipei City VI), Hsu Chiao-hsin (KMT-Taipei City VII), Fu Kun-chi (KMT-Hualian County), and Rosalia Wu Szu-yao (DPP-Taipei City I).[4] Fu Kun-chi and Rosalia Wu are notably the KMT majority leader in the LY and the secretary general of the DPP's legislative caucus, respectively. Indigenous DPP legislators Chen Ying (Lowland Aborigine Constituency) and Wu Li-hua (Highland Aborigine Constituency) are also considered high risk due to the unique election procedures for Indigenous legislators and the lack of

strong support for the DPP in these constituencies. Indigenous legislators have six reserved seats within the LY, and the top three candidates from each constituency are given seats.[5]

While it is unlikely that all high-risk candidates will be removed from their seats, it is possible that Taiwanese civil society groups can shift the balance of power within the LY to favor the ruling DPP. The LY, under KMT leadership, has proposed budget cuts that would hinder certain Taiwanese defense efforts, despite the DPP urging to increase defense spending. These budget cuts and general disunity within the Taiwanese government could leave Taiwan more vulnerable to PRC coercion.

KMT- and TPP-backed amendments to Taiwan's Public Officials Election and Recall Act could make additional recall efforts more difficult, however. President William Lai Ching-te promulgated amendments on February 18 requiring those who initiate and sign recall petitions to provide photocopies of their identification cards instead of their ID numbers and addresses.[6] The amendment comes into effect on February 20, impacting all ensuing recall petitions.

Taiwanese prosecutors indicted former KMT legislator Chang Hsien-yao on February 12 for allegedly acting on behalf of the PRC to interfere in Taiwan's 2024 presidential election.[7] Prosecutors allege that Chang took directions from PRC officials beginning in June 2023 to advocate for business magnate Terry Gou's nomination as the KMT presidential candidate. The indictment accuses Chang of engaging in illegal activity, such as fabricating polling data and organizing election-related events to support Gou's candidacy.[8] The indictment claims that Chang signed and sent a document titled "Variables and Possible Developments in the 2024 Taiwan Presidential Election" to CCP officials and met with Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Chairman Wang Huning in September 2023. Wang is the second highest CCP policymaker on Taiwan (after Xi Jinping) and led the PRC effort to influence Taiwan's presidential election.[9]

The KMT had already designated New Taipei City Mayor Hou Yu-ih as its presidential candidate in May 2023.[10] Prosecutors claim that Chang was trying to replace Hou with Gou on the KMT presidential ticket on behalf of the PRC.[11] The PRC very likely favored Gou due to his outspoken advocacy for greater cross-strait engagement compared to Hou, who held a ran on a comparatively moderate platform. The KMT nominated Hou over Gou based on polls that showed Hou's support surpassing Gou's by a slight margin, indicating that Hou was the more competitive candidate against the DPP.[12] The PRC's apparent insistence on Gou's accession as KMT candidate despite Hou's popularity reveals that it prioritized promoting a candidate who was more closely aligned with the PRC rather than one who was most likely to win against the DPP.

Chang served his first legislative term for the KMT-aligned, pro-unification People First Party (PFP) from 2005–2008 before a second term as a KMT legislator from 2008–2012. Chang later held the position of deputy minister of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) — the primary agency responsible for handling cross-strait relations — under KMT President Ma Ying-jeou from September 2013 to August 2014.[13] The government removed Chang from his position on suspicion of leaking state secrets to the PRC but did not prosecute him, citing a lack of evidence.[14]

Chang's alleged co-optation by the PRC underscores the PRC's stratagem of targeting Taiwanese citizens who sympathize with the concept of a shared national identity between the PRC and Taiwan. Kaohsiung investigators discovered Chang's activities through his interaction with For Public Good Party Vice Chairman Hsu Shao-tung, who is similarly under investigation for illegal election-related activities on behalf of the PRC. The For Public Good Party, like the PFP, is a nationalist pro-unification party with no presence in the ROC government.

There have been several other cases of members of pro-unification organizations acting on behalf of the PRC in recent months. Taiwanese authorities detained six Taiwanese individuals led by retired ROC Lieutenant General Kao An-kuo on January 22 on charges of collaborating with the CCP to form a pro-unification armed group that would support a PLA invasion of Taiwan.^[15] The ROC Ministry of Interior dissolved the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) on January 2 for its involvement in organized crime and intelligence activities on behalf of the PRC.^[16]

The CCP and the KMT-led Pan-Blue coalition both recognize “one China” that includes Taiwan but differ on whether that “China” is the PRC or the ROC. The acceptance of “one China” under the ROC flag and the need for eventual unification was prevalent in Taiwan for decades under KMT rule. Chinese identity has fallen dramatically among Taiwanese citizens in the 38 years since Taiwan's democratization, however, while Taiwanese national identity became dominant.^[17] The PRC co-optation of Taiwanese citizens exploits remaining Chinese nationalist sentiment throughout the KMT-aligned coalition of pro-unification parties and other segments of Taiwanese society. The PRC appeals to shared nationality to persuade Taiwanese agents that the PRC champions the cause of unification, despite this outcome conflicting with KMT-led opposition to unification under the PRC and its principle that the ROC is the legitimate government of China.

The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) accused the DPP government on February 12 of blocking the resumption of cross-strait tourism that the PRC announced last month.^[18] Taiwan has maintained that the resumption of cross-strait tourism depends on the PRC's engagement with the ROC government and the PRC's desisting from exploiting tourism as a tool of coercion against Taiwan.

The PRC Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) currently allows only Fujian Province residents to visit Taiwan's outlying Kinmen and Matsu islands but no other locations in Taiwan. The PRC announced on January 17 that it was preparing to allow residents of Fujian Province and Shanghai to book group tours to Taiwan for the first time since 2020. Tour groups traveling from the PRC to the ROC had been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. Taiwan's MAC stated that it had received applications from tour groups but was not approving them for now. The council called for the two sides to first negotiate and coordinate the reopening of tourism through the Taiwan Strait Tourism Association (TSTA) and Association For Tourism Exchange Across the Taiwan Straits (ATETS), both of which are semi-official organizations created by the ROC and PRC, respectively, to facilitate coordination and negotiations for cross-strait tourism.^[19] The two tourism associations have yet to begin negotiations at the time of writing.^[20] PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) spokesperson Zhu Fenglian stated on February 12 that the PRC was unopposed to negotiating through the two associations

but that this was not a prerequisite for cross-strait tourism.^[21] Zhu accused the DPP of obstructing tourism and being insincere in welcoming PRC tourists.^[22]

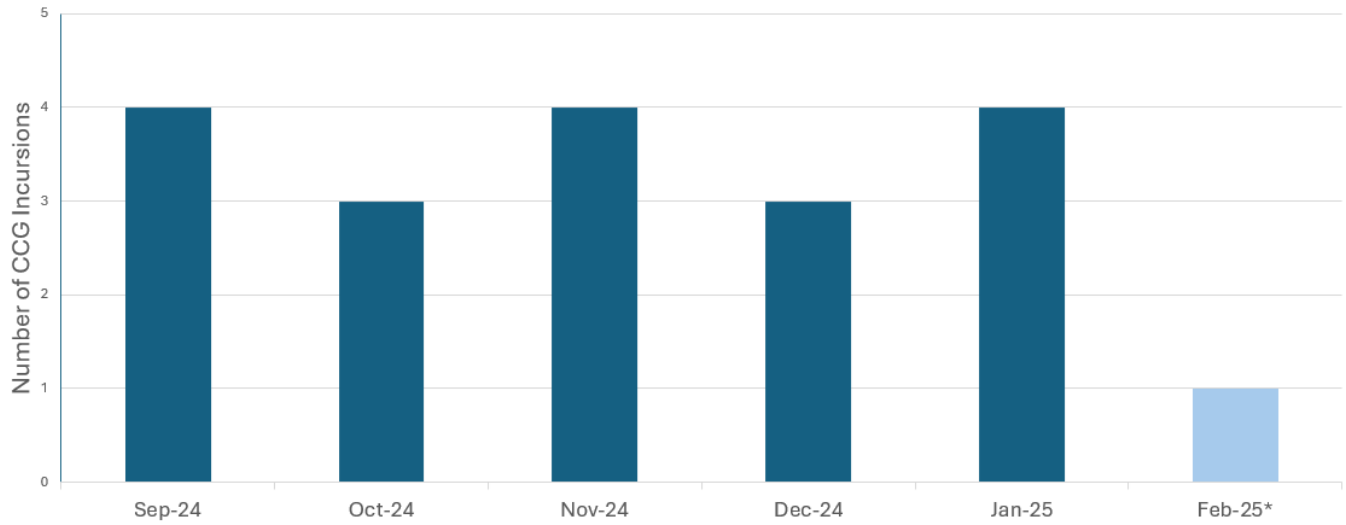
The TAO's criticisms come shortly after ROC officials rejected multiple PRC requests from Shanghai hoping to attend the Taipei Lantern Festival.^[23] KMT Taipei City Councilor Lee Ming-hsien accused the DPP of using cross-strait tourism as a "political bargaining chip" and said that cross-strait exchanges took place via the private sector in the past.^[24] MAC Minister Chiu Chui-cheng had said that a Shanghai TAO delegation that hoped to attend the festival from February 2–16 submitted its application to enter Taiwan too late for the MAC to review. The MAC previously blocked PRC media figures and Shanghai TAO director Jin Mei from entering Taiwan for the Taipei-Shanghai Twin Cities Forum in December 2024, citing the PRC's military and legal coercion against Taiwan in 2024.^[25]

The PRC exploits delays in cross-strait tourism negotiations to portray the DPP as obstructing the normalization of cross-strait relations and frame itself as a promoter of peaceful cross-strait exchanges. Accusing the DPP of politicizing cross-strait tourism amid resumption negotiations benefits the PRC's dual aims of strengthening cross-strait economic linkages while framing itself as the constructive party and the DPP as uncooperative.

The PRC has normalized incursions into the restricted waters of Taiwan's Kinmen Islands in the past year with three to four incursions per month. Four China Coast Guard (CCG) ships conducted "law enforcement patrols" into the restricted waters around Kinmen on February 14. The incursion was consistent with previous incursion in recent months despite slight changes in timing and specific activities.^[26] February 14 marked one year since a Taiwanese Coast Guard vessel collided with a PRC fishing boat in Kinmen's prohibited waters, leading to the deaths of two PRC fishermen. This incident seemed to prompt the PRC to begin normalizing CCG incursions into waters around Kinmen. There have been 57 such incursions as of February 14, 2025.

The CCG has normalized three to four patrols into Kinmen's restricted waters per month in the last six months. These follow a regular pattern of four CCG ships simultaneously entering Kinmen restricted waters from the south of the island. Incidents earlier in 2024, particularly around Lai Ching-te's inauguration as president of Taiwan, saw wider variance in the number of CCG ships and number of monthly incidents. May 2024 notably saw nine confirmed CCG incursions and an incident where two PLA supply ships entered Kinmen restricted waters, which is the highest level of activity that ISW could confirm in one month.^[27]

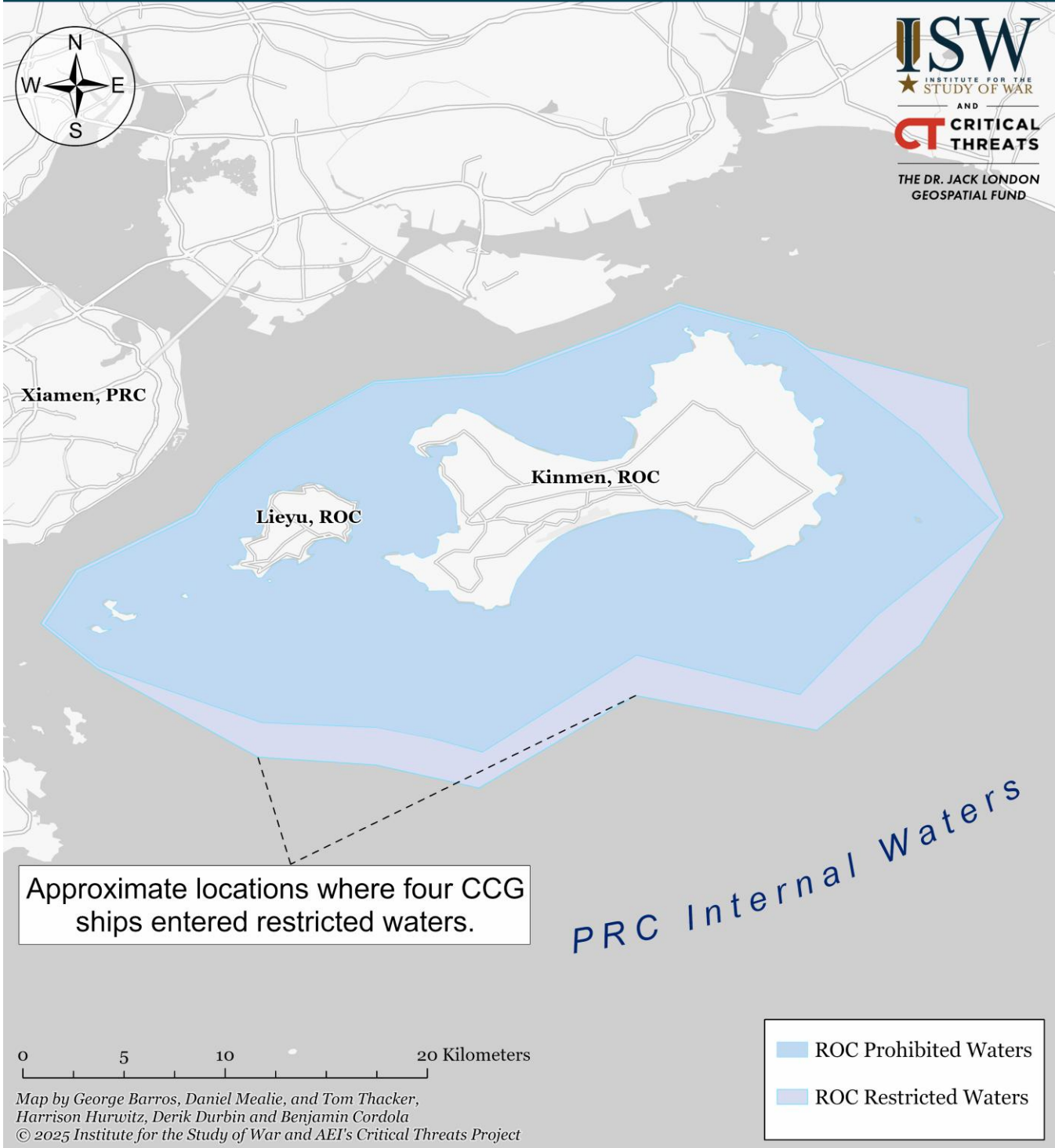
The bar graph below shows monthly incident counts from September 2024 to February 14, 2025. There are discrepancies in the available information between February 2024 and August 2024 that ISW was unable to corroborate at the time of this writing, so it is omitted from the graph.



**February data up to February 14, 2025*

Source: Taiwan Coast Guard Association

Chinese Coast Guard Violations of Kinmen's Restricted Waters (February 14)



China

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) protested the US and Canadian warship transits through the Taiwan Strait, asserting that the transits violated PRC sovereignty and territorial integrity. Two US Navy vessels transited the Taiwan Strait from February 10 to 12, and a Canadian Navy vessel transited the Taiwan Strait on February 16.[28] This was the first US Navy transit in the Taiwan Strait under the second Trump administration. The United States refrained from publicizing the transit in the way that the Biden administration ordinarily did.[29] The Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense (MND) stated that the US ships were the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Ralph Johnson* and the Pathfinder-class survey ship USNS *Bowditch*. [30] The Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) identified the Canadian ship as Halifax-class frigate HMCS *Ottawa* and noted that the transit was the first time a Canadian warship transited the Taiwan Strait in 2025 and the sixth time since Canada released the Indo-Pacific strategy in November 2022.[31] The PRC MFA and PLA Eastern Theater Command responded to both transits with typical rhetoric, stating that the PRC opposes “provocations” under the “pretext” of freedom of navigation.[32] The PRC MFA first began arguing that the Taiwan Strait was under PRC sovereignty and jurisdiction in June 2022, contradicting its long-standing acceptance of the Taiwan Strait as international waters, and has maintained the position since then.[33]

The PRC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) placed Liu Weidong, deputy head of the major state-owned defense contractor China South Industries Group Corporation (CSGC), under investigation for corruption. The CCDI announced that Liu was under investigation on suspicion of “serious violations of Communist Party discipline and the law,” a reference to corruption, though official details have yet to be released.[34] Liu was appointed deputy general manager of CSGC in 2018. CSGC, also known as China Ordnance Equipment Group Corporation, is a leading producer of armaments for the PLA. CSGC produces equipment, including mobile assault weaponry, advanced munitions, optoelectronic products, and “anti-terrorism technology.”[35] The PRC’s State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) reported that CSGC-produced equipment is used by all PLA services, the People’s Armed Police, and PRC security forces.[36]

CCDI has conducted numerous corruption investigations into individuals connected with defense contracting and equipment procurement for the PLA in recent years. Mid-2023 to early 2024 saw a wave of purges and corruption investigations among high-ranking PLA officers associated with defense acquisitions, especially for the PLA Rocket Force, and civilian leaders of the PRC’s defense industry. These purges, which included the removal of former PRC Defense Minister Li Shangfu and former PLA Rocket Force commander Li Yuchao, drove speculation about the efficacy of PLA capabilities and leadership.[37] Xue Jianguo, a former executive for PRC defense giant Norinco, was placed under investigation for corruption in a similar manner to Liu in January 2025.[38] The PRC anti-corruption campaign in the defense sector shows that the CCP leadership maintains serious concerns about military readiness and the trustworthiness of the military and defense industry leadership.

The US State Department revised its Taiwan Fact Sheet to remove language that states it does not support Taiwan independence. The PRC criticized the change and may use it to

justify future PRC aggression toward Taiwan. The State Department removed language stating that “we do not support Taiwan independence” in what it called a “routine” revision.[39] The updated readout states that “We expect cross-strait differences to be resolved by peaceful means, free from coercion, in a manner acceptable to the people on both sides of the Strait.”[40] The updated fact sheet also reads that “The United States will continue to support Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organizations, including membership where applicable,” a change from earlier language in support of Taiwan’s membership in international organizations “where statehood is not a requirement.”[41] The United States had similarly revised its Taiwan Fact Sheet language around “Taiwan independence” in May 2022 but changed it back within weeks following a PRC rebuke.[42] The ROC in a statement to the Associated Press praised the updated webpage as “positive and friendly toward us, reflecting the close and amicable partnership between Taiwan and the United States.”[43]

PRC MFA spokesman Guo Jiakun criticized the change on February 17 and accused the United States of sending “a seriously wrong signal to the ‘Taiwan independence’ forces.”[44] The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) gave a statement containing similar language on the same day. TAO spokeswoman Zhu Fenglian called the revision a “serious regression” and warned the DPP against “relying on the US to seek independence.”[45]

The PRC may frame the new language on the fact sheet — as it did in 2022 — as an escalation and use it to justify further coercive actions against Taiwan, including actions it already intended to take. The PRC has repeatedly described Taiwanese independence as “separatism” and external support for it as the greatest threat to peace in the Taiwan Strait. It often repeats such language in admonishments of US support for Taiwan, including arms sales and high-level visits. The PRC has used what it claims to be pro-independence “provocations,” especially from the administration of Taiwan President William Lai Ching-te, to justify significant escalations in coercive activities against Taiwan in 2024, including large-scale military exercises. The PRC very likely planned this coercive escalation in advance, however, having labeled Lai a dangerous separatist regardless of the actions he has taken while in office.[46]

Northeast Asia

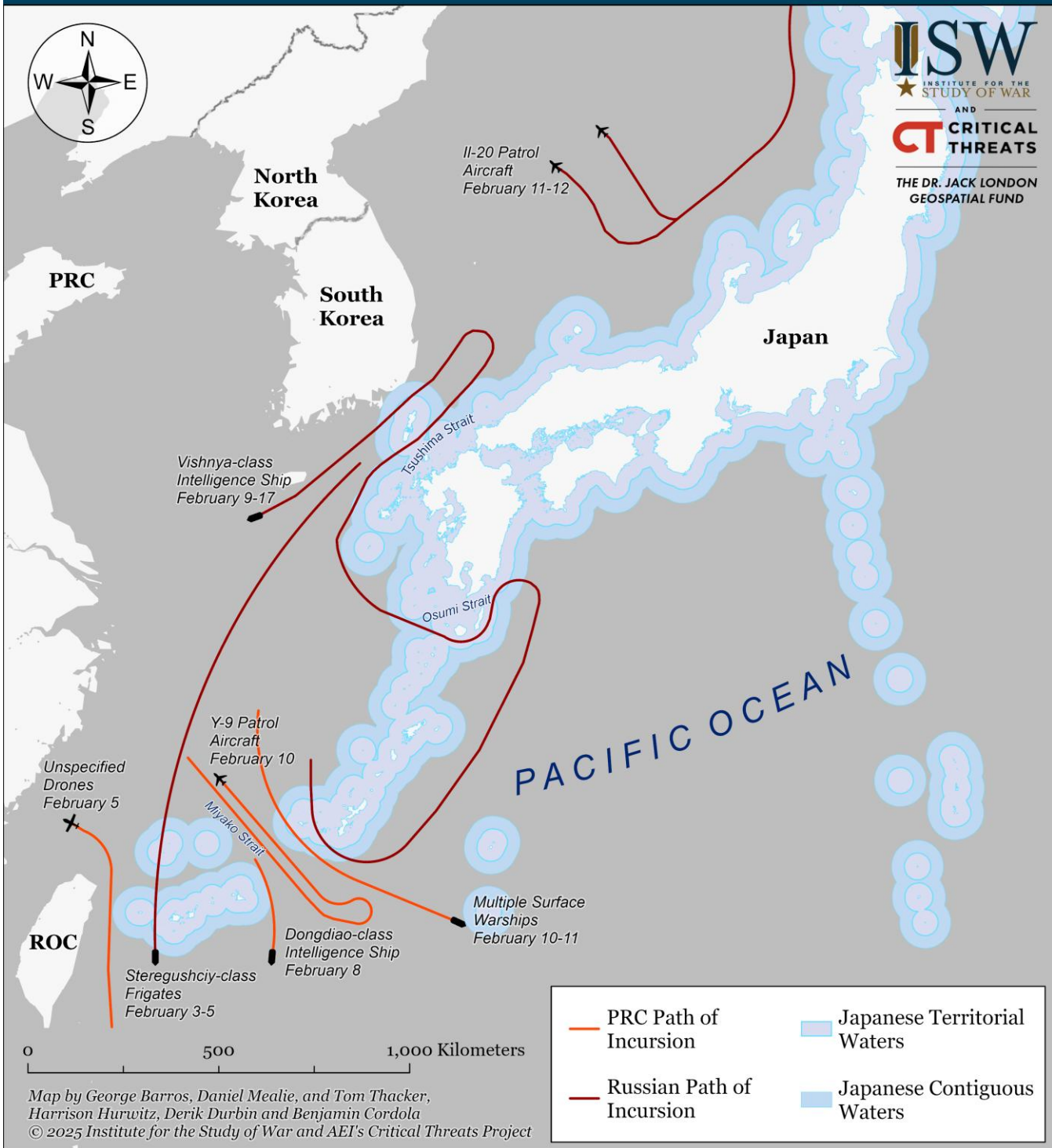
Japan

Russian and PRC military and surveillance assets operated in southern Japanese waters and airspace in February, according to the Japanese government. The Russian Navy Vishnya-class intelligence gathering vessel *Kareliya* (ship number “535”) transited the Osumi Strait on February 9 and Tsushima Strait from February 10 to 11. [47] The ship has a history of lingering around Japanese waters. The *Kareliya* notably sailed through the Tsushima Strait and Miyako Strait in November 2024 as well.[48] Japan’s military spotted Russian Steregushchiy-class frigates near Yonaguni Island, the Japanese island closest to Taiwan, on February 5.[49] The PRC also had numerous assets around Japan. Two PRC drones flew between Taiwan and the Ryukyu Islands on February 5, and a Y-9 patrol aircraft made a round trip to the Pacific Ocean by passing between Okinawa and Miyako Island on February 10.[50] PLA Navy vessels sailed through the Miyako Strait on February 10 and 11. These vessels included a Luyang III-class guided missile destroyer, Jiangkai II-class frigate, and Fuchi-class replenishment ship on February 10 and a different Luyang III-class guided missile destroyer,

Jiangkai II-class frigate, Yujiao-class landing ship, and Yusheng-class landing ship on February 11. [51] A PLA Navy Dongdiao-class intelligence gathering ship sailed through the Miyako Strait on February 8. [52] These ships do not include the PRC's daily coast guard patrols around the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands, which the PRC claims. Many of the PRC and Russian assets also passed through Tsushima Strait, which is a channel between Korea and Japan — this is an extremely important and busy maritime shipping route and is a key waterway for Russian naval access to the Pacific.[53]

This activity represents an apparent uptick in Russian and PRC activity around southern Japan, though such activity has precedent. The PRC conducted what is believed to be a blockade exercise in the Miyako Strait in December 2024.[54] The Miyako Strait is a key chokepoint between Taiwan and the Japanese archipelago as one of the widest gaps in the first island chain connecting the Pacific Ocean to the East China Sea.[55] The PRC and Russia have a history of conducting military exercises together — the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) China Power Project tracked eight joint exercises in 2021, 10 in 2022, seven in 2023, and seven between January and July 2024.[56]

Russian and PRC Military and Espionage Assets around Japan, February 2025



North Korea

North Korea allowed foreign tour agency staff to enter the country for the first time since it closed its borders in 2020 due to COVID-19. North Korea likely aims to use tourism to acquire hard currency to fund government spending, including military programs.^[57]

Koryo Tours, a Beijing-based UK travel company specializing in North Korea tours, announced on its website that its staff crossed into the northeastern North Korean border city of Rason on February 14 as part of “a special trip for staff only” to inspect new tourism sites. The company stated that it “will be able to 100 percent confirm the opening of Rason, North Korea, to tourists.”^[58] North Korea has been gradually opening its border to certain foreign guests since 2024. North Korea invited Russian citizens as their first foreign visitors since the COVID-19 shutdown in February 2024 and allowed Swedish diplomats to return to work at the country’s embassy in September 2024.^[59] This growing sign of resuming tourism comes as North Korea completes the seven-year construction of Wonsan Kalma beach resort, one of North Korea’s biggest tourism sites, which covers 1.1 square miles and includes 17 hotels, 37 hostels, 29 shopping centers, and 35 public service establishments.^[60] Vostok Intur agency, a Russian tour company, has started offering a tour package priced at \$1,750, which includes a seven-night itinerary, all flights, and sightseeing tours.^[61] New tourism sites, such as the Kalma resort, could offer North Korea’s biggest patrons, Russia and the PRC, a legitimate way to funnel cash into the North Korean regime despite international sanctions. Pyongyang could use this revenue to support military programs, including nuclear activities, either by directly funding them or freeing up other regime resources.

South Korea

South Korea expressed support for Taiwan’s participation in international organizations for the first time as part of a trilateral joint statement issued with the United States and Japan at the Munich Security Conference on February 15.^[62]

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi, and South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul held their first trilateral meeting since US President Donald Trump’s second term began. They released a joint statement that reaffirmed their shared commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific, stating their opposition to “any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion in the waters of the Indo-Pacific, including the South China Sea.” The statement highlighted the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and expressed support for the ROC’s “meaningful participation in appropriate international organizations.” The three countries also agreed to strengthen trilateral security cooperation, address the North Korean threat, and enhance economic security and resilience.^[63] PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun stated that the PRC “firmly opposes relevant countries’ attempts to put together small circles to interfere in [its] internal affairs.”^[64]

The joint statement marks a significant shift with South Korea aligning more closely with the US and Japanese efforts to counter the PRC. The statement marks the first instance of South Korean support for ROC participation in international organizations, although South Korea reportedly requested the inclusion of the word “appropriate” before “international organizations” to reduce likely dissatisfaction from the PRC. This contrasts with a previous joint statement from February 7 by Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru, which excludes this qualifier.^[65] The trilateral statement also added

the phrase “by force or coercion” when opposing attempts to alter the status quo in the Indo-Pacific, a phrase not included in the November 2024 joint statement after the US-ROK-Japan summit.[66] These additions reflect South Korea’s increasing willingness to join US-led efforts in taking a tougher stance on the PRC, especially as the United States intensifies its rivalry with the PRC by imposing tariffs on PRC goods. It remains uncertain whether South Korea will maintain this level of support for Taiwan in the long term, as the country potentially faces an early presidential race in June that could shift its position on the PRC if a progressive, PRC-sympathetic administration comes to power.

South Korea’s data protection regulator has confirmed that the DeepSeek artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, developed by a PRC-based startup, sent user data to ByteDance, the owner of TikTok.[67] The Personal Information Protection Commission (PIPC) announced on February 18 that it has temporarily halted new downloads of DeepSeek in South Korea due to concerns about its data collection practices. The PIPC identified the data leak by analyzing communication logs through a proxy server and found that user information was being transmitted to ByteDance when users accessed DeepSeek.[68] The PIPC stated that the leaked information amounts to approximately 1.2 million cases but cannot yet “confirm what data was transferred and to what extent.”[69] DeepSeek responded by sending a representative to South Korea to discuss its data privacy policy. The PRC’s foreign ministry has stated that it expects its companies to comply with local laws.[70]

South Korea is part of a growing number of countries, including the United States, Italy, Japan, the ROC, and the United Kingdom, that have either restricted or banned the use of the app due to data protection concerns. PRC’s Data Security Law grants the government access to corporate data from PRC-based companies, such as DeepSeek and ByteDance.[71] It is not immediately clear why DeepSeek was sending data to ByteDance, however, as ByteDance is a separate company that does not have an ownership stake in DeepSeek. ByteDance is developing its own AI model called Doubao.[72]

Southeast Asia

The PLA engaged in dangerous air maneuvers to block Australian and Philippine aircraft traveling over the South China Sea. These incidents highlight growing PRC willingness to harass supposed violations of its claimed airspace over the South China Sea. Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles stated that an Australian P-8A Poseidon was traveling in international airspace near the disputed Paracel Islands on February 13 and was intercepted by two PLA Air Force (PLAAF) J-16 fighter jets. One of the PLA fighter jets conducted a dangerous maneuver, firing flares 100 feet from the Australian aircraft, according to the Australian defense minister.[73] The PRC claimed that the Australian aircraft violated its airspace and that it was quickly expelled in response.[74] Neither the pilot nor the aircraft were damaged or harmed.[75]

The Paracel Islands are a disputed archipelago in the South China Sea that the PRC controls and that Vietnam and Taiwan also claim. The islands have a small PRC population and military presence. The PRC also illegally claims a “straight baseline” around the entire archipelago, which means that it considers all the waters within the archipelago as well as the airspace above them to be PRC sovereign territory. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) holds that countries can claim 12 nautical miles of territorial waters around any islands and “rocks” (but not reefs or other kinds of maritime features) that they control, but only specially designated “archipelagic states” can draw straight-baseline “boxes” to claim sovereignty over the waters around entire archipelagos.[76] The PRC

is not an archipelagic state, and its maritime claims around the Paracels have no status under international law. Countries, including Australia and the United States, sometimes conduct military operations around the Paracel Islands to challenge the PRC's illegal maritime claims and ensure freedom of navigation.

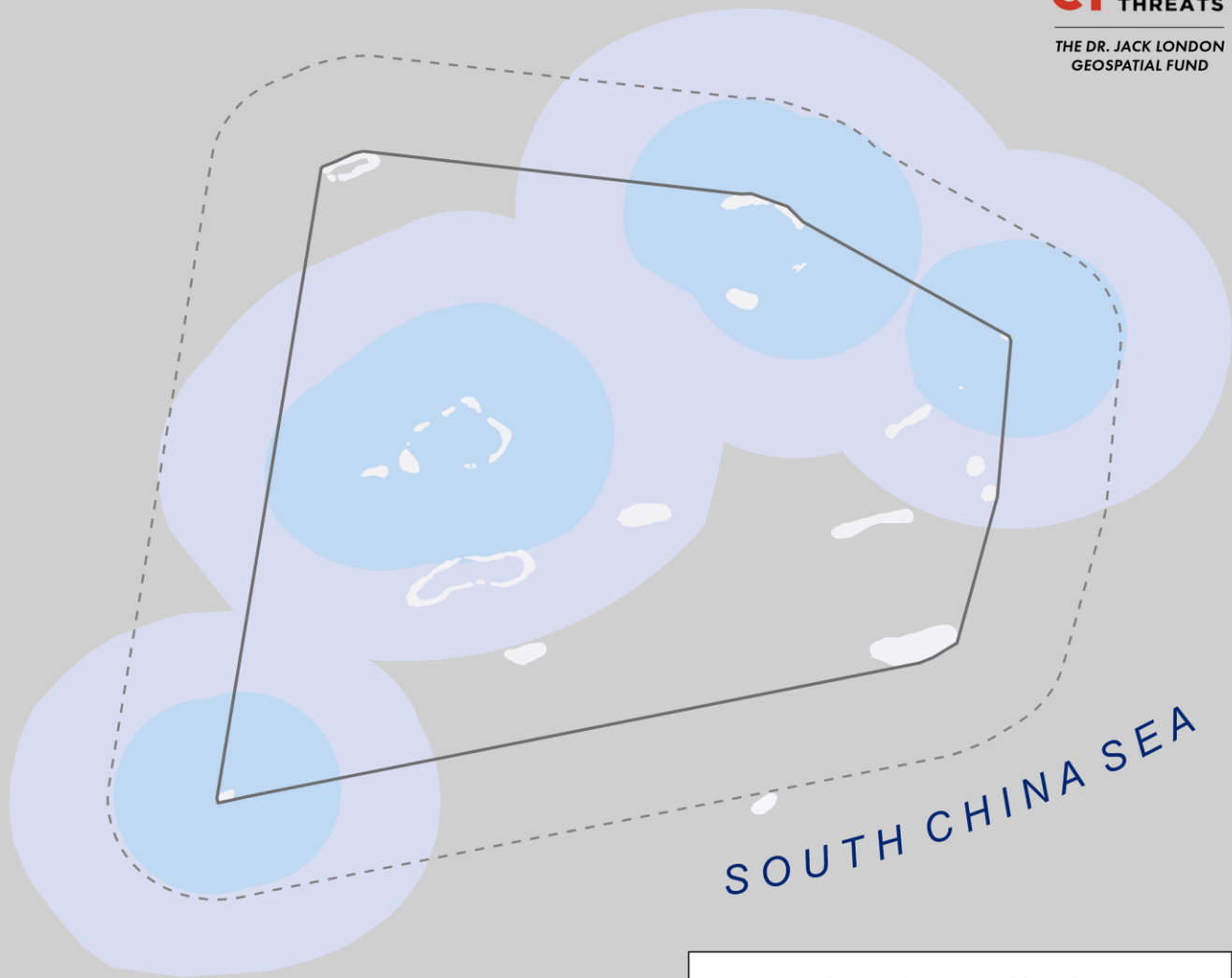
A PLA naval helicopter intercepted a Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) plane on February 18 as it was conducting a maritime domain awareness flight over the disputed Scarborough Shoal. Philippine officials said that the helicopter came up to three meters (10 feet) from the plane in order to force it from the airspace of Scarborough Shoal.^[77] PLA Southern Theater Command spokesperson Tian Junli accused the Philippines of illegally violating PRC sovereignty and claimed that the PLA dispatched air and naval forces to expel the plane “in accordance with laws and regulations.”^[78] Scarborough Shoal is a disputed atoll that the PRC and Philippines both claim and is within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The PRC has controlled the shoal since 2012 and uses its Coast Guard, navy, and maritime militia to prevent other countries from accessing it.^[79]

The PRC has a history of conducting dangerous maneuvers in response to purported “foreign encroachment.” It has repeatedly intercepted and fired flares in the path of foreign, especially Philippine, government aircraft over disputed territories in the South China Sea. CCG vessels have blocked, rammed, and fired water cannons at Philippine government ships attempting to conduct operations in places including Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands. A PRC destroyer approached and disrupted an Australian diving operation in Japan’s exclusive economic zone in 2023, injuring several divers.^[80] A PLA Air Force jet intercepted an Australian Seahawk helicopter in the Yellow Sea and used flares to disrupt ongoing operations in 2024.^[81]

PRC Illegal Maritime Territory Claims in the Paracel Islands



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Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, and Tom Thacker,
Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin and Benjamin Cordola
© 2025 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- PRC-claimed territorial baseline
- - - PRC-claimed territorial waters boundary
- UNCLOS-recognized Territorial Waters
- UNCLOS-recognized Contiguous Zone

The PRC signed deals with the Cook Islands focusing on seabed mining, disaster relief, cultural exchange, and hydrography. These deals could provide the PRC with increased access to key resources and political influence in the Pacific Islands. Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown toured the PRC and visited Harbin from February 10–14, attending the closing ceremony of the 9th Asian Winter Games.[82] Brown met with PRC Premier Li Qiang on February 14. A PRC MFA readout stated that the PRC is “willing to deepen cooperation in multilateral fields,” specifically in the “fields of ocean, infrastructure construction, agriculture and fisheries.” The readout said that the Cook Islands would continue to follow the one-China principle.[83]

The PRC is likely planning to mine critical minerals in the Cook Islands seabed. The Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority (SBMA) accompanied Brown and met with PRC counterparts to discuss joint seabed mineral exploration efforts, according to *Nikkei*.^[84] Deep-sea sites in the Cook Islands contain nodules of cobalt and nickel. Cook Islands government sources have emphasized the economic value of the nodules, which they state have applications in clean-energy technology.^[85] The Cook Islands issued three companies licenses to explore the seabed in 2022 but has yet to approve resource extraction, pending environmental impact assessments.^[86] None of the three companies currently licensed in the Cook Islands have links with the PRC. The PRC does sponsor the highest number of exploration licenses across the International Seaboard Authority of any member state, however.^[87]

The PRC established diplomatic relations with the Cook Islands in 1997 and announced a comprehensive strategic partnership with the nation in 2018 along with several other Pacific Island countries.^[88] Increased cooperation between the PRC and Cook Islands further cements the relationship, paves the way for PRC critical mineral mining, and offers the PRC a means of expanding its influence in the islands. Cooperation on disaster relief, which would likely be conducted with military vessels, also offers the PRC military inroads into a strategically critical location near Australia and New Zealand. The PRC has used infrastructure, security, and tourism deals as a means of securing political support and access rights from small Pacific nations on numerous occasions, most notably a 2022 security agreement with the Solomon Islands that allowed for PRC port access and military presence in the country.^[89]

The PRC-Cook Islands agreement has sparked concerns of PRC influence within the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance’s sphere of influence. The Cook Islands maintains its own government but is in free association with New Zealand. Cook Islands residents carry New Zealand passports.^[90] New Zealand, a member of the Five Eyes along with the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia, has expressed dismay that the Cook Islands struck a deal with the PRC without consulting Wellington first. The agreement has prompted protests among Cook Islands citizens concerned about the PRC’s growing influence.^[91] Approximately 400 people protested at the parliament in the Cook Islands’ capital, Avarua. The protesters, who were also demonstrating against proposals to give up the New Zealand passport, carried signs labelled “stay connected with NZ.”^[92] Cook Islands President

Mark Brown is facing a no-confidence vote in Parliament following the controversy over the PRC deal.[93]

Russia

PRC officials welcomed US-Russia talks to end the war in Ukraine but called for “all stakeholders” to be involved in negotiations. The PRC may exploit rifts in the US-European relationship to portray itself as a responsible and impartial mediator while seeking a role for itself in shaping negotiations. US and Russian officials concluded preliminary talks about the Ukraine war in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on February 18 without the presence of Ukrainian or other European officials. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other European officials expressed concerns about being excluded from the negotiations, though US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that both Ukraine and Europe will ultimately be involved and that “no-one is being sidelined.”[94] PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at the Munich Security Forum on February 14 that “all stakeholders” in the war, including the European Union, should participate in peace talks. PRC ambassador to the UN Fu Cong and MFA spokesperson Guo Jiakun welcomed the US-Russia talks in Riyadh but likewise reiterated Beijing’s hope that “all relevant parties and stakeholders involved in the Ukraine crisis will engage in the peace talks process.”[95]

The PRC has consistently claimed to be an impartial mediator and voice for peace in the war in Ukraine, despite adopting Russian rhetorical framing about the war and providing dual-use goods and economic support to Russia throughout the war. It previously called for Russia’s participation in Ukraine talks where Russia was absent, such as the Swiss Summit on Peace in Ukraine in June 2024.[96] It also co-founded the “Friends of Peace” group at the United Nations and proposed a six-point “peace plan” with Brazil as part of an effort to promote the involvement of “Global South” countries in Ukraine negotiations. The PRC considers itself to be part of the Global South and frames itself as a leader of Global South countries, though PRC officials have repeatedly said that it is not a party to the “Ukraine crisis.”[97]

The recent PRC advocacy for “all stakeholders” to be involved in peace talks suggests an effort to appeal to European and possibly Ukrainian fears of being sidelined in the negotiations. The PRC still wishes to maintain a beneficial economic relationship with Europe, which is a much larger trading partner for the PRC than Russia is.[98] Recent events including the Riyadh talks, the Trump administration’s imposition of tariffs on European goods, and US Vice President JD Vance’s speech at the Munich Security Conference that criticized European countries have all fed European fears of US abandonment.[99] The PRC may wish to exploit these divisions to improve its own relations with Europe and possibly gain European support for a role in Ukraine peace negotiations. Zelenskyy said on February 17 that there could be a role for the PRC at the negotiating table.[100] Beijing’s recent appointment of Lu Shaye, a notoriously abrasive “wolf warrior” diplomat, to the post of Special Representative for European Affairs may undermine its effort to charm Europe, however.[101] Beijing may also worry that a US-Russia negotiated deal that includes economic relief for Russia, which Rubio and Russian officials hinted at, will reduce Russia’s dependency on the PRC after the war ends.[102]



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