

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



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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

- **Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan (LY) passed opposition-backed amendments to the Constitutional Court after a Cabinet-mandated second review. The amendments will paralyze the Constitutional Court until the LY approves nominees to fill some of its vacant seats, and will make it temporarily impossible for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to block opposition-sponsored legislation.**
- **Taiwan’s National Security Bureau (NSB) released a report on January 12 highlighting organized crime and religious communities as infiltration channels to recruit agents and conduct espionage within Taiwan.**
- **The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) reported that 50,000 people attended its protest decrying the detention of TPP founder Ko Wen-je on corruption charges, which the TPP claims to be politically motivated. The content of these protests and the amount of support they have received have been the focus of PRC coverage, aligning with previous anti-DPP narratives within PRC-backed media.**
- **The PRC is building a fleet of barges with extendable piers that are likely designed to facilitate amphibious landings.**
- **The South Korean authorities discovered a 164-foot tall and wide steel framework installed by the PRC within the Provisional Measures Zones (PMZ) of the Yellow Sea in December 2024. This installation is part of the PRC’s ongoing efforts to assert territorial control over the disputed waters, taking advantage of the leadership vacuum in South Korea amid its internal political turmoil following President Yoon Suk-yeol’s martial law declaration on December 3, 2024.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (LY) passed opposition-backed amendments to the Constitutional Court after a Cabinet-mandated second review. The amendments will paralyze the Constitutional Court until the LY approves nominees to fill some of its vacant seats, and will make it temporarily impossible for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to block opposition-sponsored legislation. The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP), which together hold a majority of seats in the LY, passed amendments to the Constitutional Court Procedure Act on December 20 despite strong opposition from the DPP. The Executive Branch asked the LY to do a second review of the bill. The LY passed the bill again on January 10 with a 62-51 vote, with all 51 DPP legislators voting against. President Lai Ching-te must now sign the bill. The amendments require that a supermajority of 10 justices (out of a total of 15 on the court) be present to hear a case and at least nine justices vote to rule a law unconstitutional. The court currently has only eight sitting justices, and the opposition parties rejected all seven of the Lai administration's nominees to fill the vacant seats.[1] The court will therefore be unable to review the constitutionality of any laws until some of the vacancies are filled, eliminating the DPP's last institutional means of blocking opposition-backed legislation. Taiwan does not have a presidential veto.

The DPP legislative caucus filed for a constitutional review of the bill and a temporary injunction against its implementation on January 15, though President Lai has not yet signed the bill into law. The court does not rule on bills that have not been promulgated into law, however, and has never done so even to issue temporary injunctions. The DPP and Lai's Cabinet are considering proposing "preventive rights relief," a legal tool to protect people's rights before they are violated, to justify asking the court to make an exception. DPP politicians including Premier Cho Jung-tai argued that the paralysis of the Constitutional Court will seriously impact the rights of Taiwanese citizens, as most of the cases the court hears are submitted by citizens. Yang Hao-ching, director-general of the court's clerk department, said that the court handles temporary injunctions and preventive rights relief as separate matters.[2] KMT legislator Lo Chih-chiang argued that if the Constitutional Court issues temporary sanctions against Constitutional Court Procedure Law amendments that have not yet taken effect, it would be undermining the Constitution and democratic system by infringing on the legitimate right of the legislature to pass laws. KMT-leaning newspaper United Daily News reported that the KMT internally assesses it will be difficult to justify the court hearing the case before the bill becomes law.[3] The hearing and injunction would normally have to happen after President Lai signs the bill. But the court's current eight justices will be unable to hear the case concerning their powers without violating the new law after President Lai signs the bill, however. The dilemma may trigger a constitutional crisis in Taiwan. Lai is legally required to sign the bill by January 23.[4]

Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB) released a report on January 12 highlighting organized crime and religious communities as infiltration channels to recruit agents and conduct espionage within Taiwan.[5] The report highlights PRC intelligence and United Front agencies' exploitation of five major infiltration channels to support the PRC's recruitment of agents: organized crime gangs, underground financial institutions, shell companies, religious groups, and civil society groups.[6] The report states that PRC intelligence operatives attempt to use these societal elements to convince retired military officers to recruit active-duty personnel, establish spy networks via the internet, and provide financial inducements to lure targets, especially those who have problems with debt.

The NSB report also notes that PRC collusion with gangs presents the risk of armed groups assisting in military operations against Taiwan.[7] An AEI-ISW report from May 2024 on PRC short-of-war coercion against Taiwan highlighted the risks of co-optation of military personnel and organized crime elements as part of the PRC's lines of effort to weaken Taiwan's will and capacity to defend itself.[8]

Lai has urged increased vigilance against the PRC's infiltration of Taiwan's religious community since taking office.[9] The PRC exploits cross-strait religious engagements as one of the less regulated forms of exchange to establish contact between its intelligence officers and Taiwanese targets that have potential to further recruit and develop agents within

Taiwan. This tactic reflects the extent to which United Front and intelligence activities permeate PRC civil society and pervade superficially innocent cross-strait exchanges.

An October 2024 espionage case aptly illustrates the PRC's process of exploiting certain segments of Taiwanese society to access military personnel and recruit agents. Taiwan's High Prosecutor's Office charged member of the Sun Alliance criminal gang Lee Huei-hsin, who also managed a temple in New Taipei City, with spying for the PRC after PRC intelligence officers established contact with Lee during a religious exchange in Macau a year prior. Lee allegedly used her connections in the underworld and religious community to recruit military officers with financial problems, whom she persuaded to exchange information for money.[10]

The number of yearly PRC espionage related prosecutions in Taiwan has increased sharply from 16 in 2021 to 64 in 2024. Retired and active duty military personnel accounted for 23% and 43% of all PRC espionage prosecution cases in 2024, respectively. PRC efforts to recruit military personnel for espionage have affected senior ranks of the ROC military.[11] The trend is already continuing into 2025 after Taiwanese authorities detained retired ROC Lieutenant General Kao An-kuo on January 10 on suspicion of taking money from the CCP to recruit active duty and other retired ROC military officers to spy for the PRC.[12]

The increase in prosecutions of PRC agents signals the Lai administration's strong counterintelligence focus and is a likely indicator of the PRC's intensifying campaign of subversion against Taiwan. This trend is consistent with the PRC's escalating efforts in other aspects of its strategy to exert pressure on Taiwan after the election of President Lai Ching-te, including coercive military activity and intimidation by threatening punishment for Taiwanese "separatists."

Lai's administration, meanwhile, has taken greater steps to restrict the PRC's infiltration channels. The ROC Ministry of Interior announced on November 6 that it would pursue the dissolution of the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) for its involvement in organized crime and intelligence activities on behalf of the PRC.[13] The CUPP is a minor political party established in 2005 whose platform is based on support for unification with the PRC and the One China Principle, which recognizes the PRC as the legitimate representative of China and Taiwan as a part of that China.

The Taiwan People's Party (TPP) reported that 50,000 people attended its protest against the detention of TPP founder Ko Wen-je on corruption charges, which the TPP claims to be politically motivated. The content of these protests and the amount of support they have received have been the focus of PRC coverage, aligning with previous anti-DPP narratives within PRC-backed media. The Taipei District Prosecutors Office announced on December 26 that Ko had been indicted on charges of bribery, profiteering, embezzlement, and breach of public trust, which could carry a sentence of 28 and a half years in prison. The charges are connected to his actions while mayor of Taipei and while running for president in 2023-2024.[14] The TPP has maintained its support for Ko following the indictment, accusing the DPP of persecuting a political rival without sufficient evidence.

Acting TPP Chairman and Legislator Huang Kuo-chang stated that the January 11 protest was organized to oppose DPP authoritarianism and "Green Terror," a reference to the DPP's official color, green, and the 1949-1987 "White Terror" period, when tens of thousands of Taiwanese were murdered and imprisoned by the state.[15] The protest received support from the opposition Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), with several KMT lawmakers in attendance. Former DPP politicians Hsu Kuo-tai and Lin Cheng-chieh also spoke at the protest, criticizing current DPP lawmakers for "undemocratic behavior." [16] Lin was one of the founders of the DPP but left the party 1991 and began supporting the opposition Pan-Blue (KMT-aligned) Coalition. Hsu served as a DPP representative to the LY from 1987-1996. Both Lin and Hsu have previously criticized the DPP's actions, and while neither of them represents the modern DPP movement. Their characterization as DPP founding members within Blue leaning Taiwanese media outlets could be intended to convey the idea that the current DPP is going against its founding principles. [17] The differing political affiliations of speakers and

attendees indicate the extent of political disunity within Taiwan. The level of disunity could potentially have a significant impact on the ability of the DPP to effectively govern and may indicate a decrease in public support for the Lai administration.

PRC state media also covered narratives surrounding “Green authoritarianism” in reporting on the protests and strongly criticized the DPP for manipulating the Taiwanese judicial system and acting against the interests of the Taiwanese people.[18] The PRC reporting extended this criticism of DPP policy to the DPP stance on cross-Strait relations, calling on the Taiwanese people to unite against the DPP and pursue political reform and cross-Strait peace. Political disunity within Taiwan provides an opportunity for the PRC to exploit anti-DPP sentiments within the Taiwanese populace, instilling doubt over the legitimacy of the DPP government in accordance with PRC political and cognitive warfare campaigns.

The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) denied accusations of undersea cable-cutting off the coast of Taiwan. Cable-cutting offers the PRC one means by which to isolate Taiwan. TAO spokesman Chen Binhua called cable-cutting a “common maritime accident.” He said that “DPP authorities, without clarifying the basic facts and the responsibility for the accident, made up their own imaginations and deliberately hyped up the submarine cable accident as a so-called ‘gray zone threat’ from the mainland.”[19] Chen’s comments came as Taiwan began investigating a January 3 cable-cutting incident by a ship with a Chinese crew. Taiwan’s Ministry of Digital Affairs (MODA) reported that the “Department of Digital Communications will work with the Coast Guard, the Ministry of Justice, the Communications Commission and judicial authorities to strengthen law enforcement against violations of relevant provisions of the Telecommunications Management Act” to protect undersea cables.[20] Taiwan’s Coast Guard Administration (CGA) said it convened an inter-agency meeting to “comprehensively review future measures” to protect undersea cables following the incident.[21] Taiwan’s National Security Bureau also said it would bolster surveillance of ships with flags of convenience that approach undersea cables within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan’s coast.[22]

ISW-AEI research has identified cable cutting as a short-of-war technique that could isolate Taiwan from its outlying islands as well as from international partners.[23] The PRC may have attempted to develop new technologies capable of isolating Taiwan via cable cutting in recent years. Newsweek found that PRC researchers from Lishui University in Zhejiang Province across from Taiwan developed a design for a “dragging type submarine cable device” in 2020. These designs built on a 2009 patent application for an “ocean towing type cutting device” ostensibly meant to destroy illegal cables off the PRC’s coast.[24] The authors of the 2020 design specified that undersea cables sometimes required cutting in “emergency situations” and that the “traditional cutting method needs first to detect the position of the cables, then excavate and salvage them for cutting. The process is complex, a lot of expensive equipment is needed, and the cost is too high.”[25] Newsweek’s link to the patent application no longer functioned at time of writing; Google Patent maintains a record detailing the design of the device, which would be pulled by a tugboat.[26] Newsweek stated that both the 2009 and 2020 patents were dropped and cited an unnamed undersea cable expert who said that “that the reasoning that the devices were necessary to remove illegal cables was absurd because the method was random and could also lead to damage to useful cables.”[27] The actual efficacy of such a device remains unclear but signals PRC intent to develop technologies with cable-cutting applications.

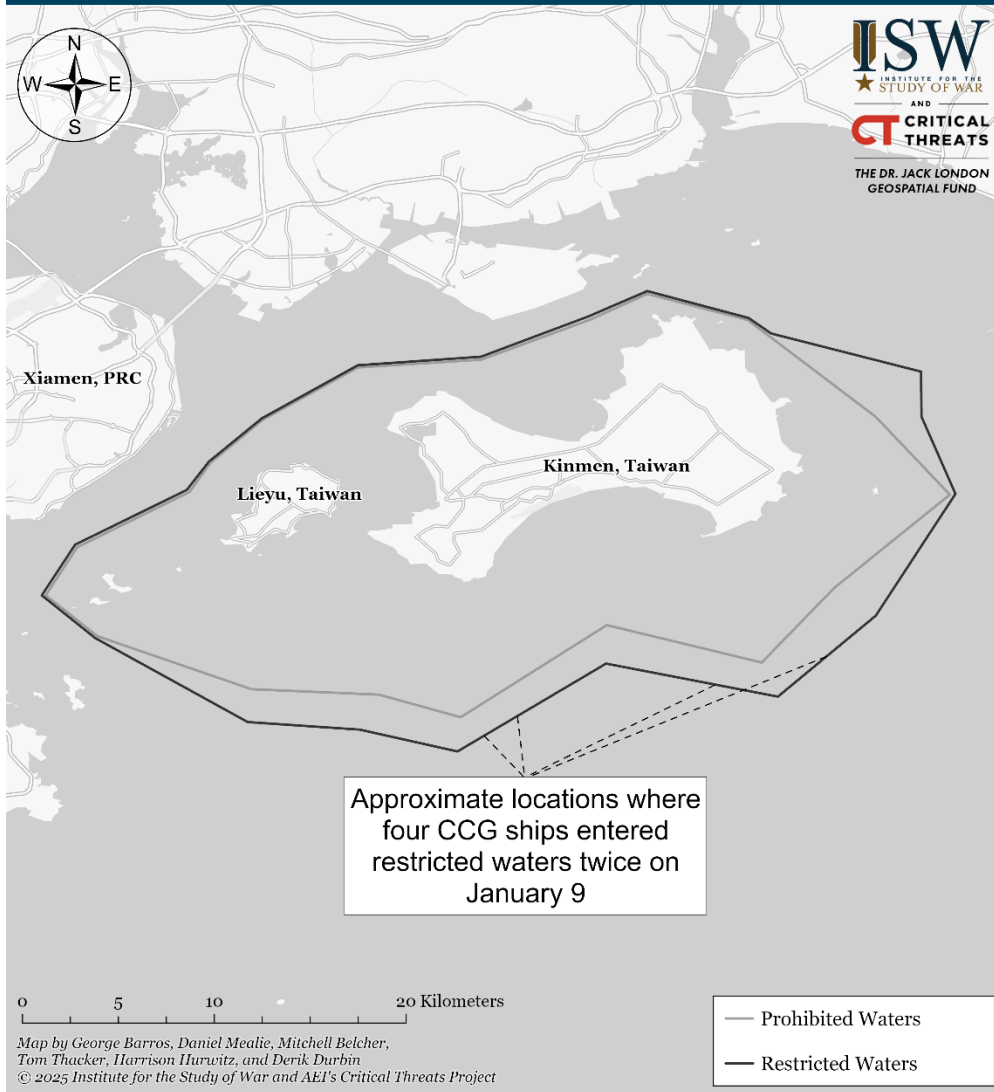
Taiwan has taken steps to reduce its digital vulnerability amid manmade and natural threats to its undersea cables. MODA’s statement outlined that Taiwan has improved its information resilience by “subsidizing the establishment of new international submarine cable stations and backup equipment rooms, improving the resilience of existing international submarine cable landing stations, and using multiple heterogeneous communication systems such as microwaves and satellites to back up important communication circuits of interrupted submarine cables.”[28] Diversification of its information space has protected Taiwan’s resilience following past cable-cutting incidents. Taiwan experienced widespread disruption to its internet connectivity with outlying Matsu islands following a cable-cutting incident in 2023.

A MODA press release stated that MODA used low-earth orbit (LEO) satellites to create disaster relief networks following this incident.[29]

Four China Coast Guard (CCG) ships entered ROC restricted waters at four places south of Kinmen two times on January 9, the first such incursions of the calendar year. The four ships entered restricted waters at approximately 7:30 AM, sailed in two-boat formations, and left at 9:30 AM.[30] The same four ships returned at 10:00 AM into restricted waters and left at 12:00 PM. This incident occurred much earlier in the day than is typical, following a recent trend of varying CCG entry times into restricted waters, forcing the Taiwanese to remain alert at all times. Kinmen is an ROC archipelago located just two miles from the PRC mainland. Taiwan does not claim territorial waters or a contiguous zone around its outlying Kinmen and Matsu Islands due to the island chains' proximity to the PRC but maintains concentric prohibited and restricted zones around the islands that are roughly equivalent.

The PRC normalized CCG incursions into the restricted waters around Kinmen in 2024 to assert its law enforcement jurisdiction in the waters and force the Taiwanese Coast Guard to expend resources. The PRC began these incursions after two PRC fishermen died when their speedboat capsized while fleeing a CGA ship in Kinmen's prohibited waters in February 2024. The PRC has since established a regular pattern in which groups of four CCG ships have carried out "law enforcement patrols" three or four times each month in restricted waters for two hours at a time. The January 9 incident was not the first time the CCG has carried out two incursions in one day, though it was the shortest gap between incursions yet observed.

China Coast Guard Violations of Kinmen's Restricted Waters (January 9)



The PRC's Fujian province established county-level Taiwan Affairs Offices (TAOs) to advance cross-Strait integration in the province. The PRC is doubling down on using Fujian as its key testing ground for “peaceful reunification” policies and to build political support in Taiwan for unification. Zhou Qingsong, director of the organization office of the Fujian provincial committee of the CCP, said that Fujian has established separate Taiwan Affairs Offices (TAOs) “in all counties with significant Taiwan-related responsibilities.” It is unusual for county-level governments and below to have their own TAOs, though some provincial governments do. Zhou said in an article in the state-owned magazine China Institutional Organization that the move was part of an institutional reform to strengthen the cross-strait affairs system.[31] He also said Fujian will introduce more supportive policies for Taiwanese people who seek to study or work in Fujian: vocational schools will recruit Taiwanese teachers, Fujian will make it easier for universities and public schools to enroll Taiwanese students, and Fujian will create a more attractive business environment for Taiwanese companies and businesspeople.

The new offices are part of a broader initiative to develop Fujian into a test zone for cross-strait “integrated development,” which the PRC announced in 2023.[32]

Zhou’s announcement coincided with the anniversary of the PRC’s previous round of measures to aid “cross-strait integration” in Fujian and indicates that the PRC intends to double down on this effort to set conditions for “peaceful unification.” The state-owned tabloid Global Times quoted Li Zhenguang, deputy director at the Institute of Taiwan Studies at Beijing Union University, who said the establishment of county-level TAOs means that Fujian is devoting more manpower and resources to “give full play to their own local strengths at the county level.”[33] The county-level TAOs could also free up resources for the provincial-level TAO to focus on more far-reaching cross-strait integration efforts. The new measures Zhou previewed are in addition to several batches of measures such as the Fuzhou-Matsu City Pass, Fuzhou-Matsu industrial cooperation park, PRC residency and identification cards for Taiwanese to access services in the PRC, recruiting Taiwanese for local government positions, and other initiatives to make it easier for residents of Taiwan’s outlying islands and Taiwan in general to live and work in Fujian. [34]

The PRC’s attempts to facilitate the integration of Taiwanese into Fujian society serve to create the impression that Taiwan and mainland China are one country. The PRC can also point to any measures Taipei uses to discourage Taiwanese nationals from integrating with the PRC to argue that Taiwan’s government is unfairly persecuting “Taiwan compatriots” who want peaceful integration. Taiwanese law prohibits Taiwanese citizens from holding PRC government or military positions and from obtaining household registrations in the PRC.[35] A recent expose of the PRC’s “United Front” tactics by a Taiwanese YouTuber claimed that 200,000 Taiwanese had obtained identification cards in Fujian over the past decade. Taiwan Mainland Affairs Council Minister Chiu Chui-cheng did not confirm whether the number is accurate but warned that the PRC’s push for Taiwanese to apply for official PRC documents is part of its broader United Front strategy to undermine Taiwan’s sovereignty. He said that the Taiwanese government has invalidated the household registration papers, ID cards, and passports of 679 Taiwanese in the last 10 years after they obtained a PRC household registration or passport.[36] Spokesperson for the central TAO Chen Binhua claimed on January 15 that 359,000 Taiwanese people applied for Taiwan Compatriot Certificates in Fujian in 2024, which is up 25% year-on-year and exceeded pre-pandemic levels.[37] DPP China Affairs Director Wu Jun-zhi said that it is possible that the PRC aims to turn Taiwanese into PRC nationals to use this as an excuse to wage war on Taiwan in the future, a tactic similar to one Russia has employed in its war on Ukraine.[38]

The PRC’s continued emphasis on cross-strait integration in Fujian may explain why the PRC’s escalating military coercion against Taiwan in 2024 did not seriously impact Taiwan’s offshore islands in recent months. Taiwan’s Kinmen and Matsu islands are located just a few miles from the PRC’s shores and their residents hold relatively China-friendly views, often making trips to the PRC for business or family visits. The PRC’s December 9-11 military exercise around Taiwan and in the East China Sea did not include activities around the Kinmen or Matsu islands, in contrast to the exercises in May and October 2024. The Fujian CCG has normalized carrying out around four “law enforcement patrols” in Kinmen’s restricted waters each month, but these incursions have not entered Kinmen’s prohibited waters (roughly equivalent to territorial waters) since May. The Fujian CCG also has not attempted to detain Taiwanese nationals near these waters since July. Such escalations are precedented and would be relatively easy for the PRC to undertake, so the PRC’s relative restraint in recent months could be linked to renewed attempts to advance the Fujian cross-strait integration zone and avoid sending a hostile message to the Taiwanese who live closest to Fujian.

China

A PRC state-sponsored cyber threat actor breached the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS) as part of a larger operation that targeted the US Department of Treasury.[39] Three unnamed US officials disclosed the incursion to CNN but did not specify when it occurred. CFIUS is an interagency committee that reviews foreign investments for

national security risks. CFIUS expanded its authorities in December to scrutinize real estate sales in proximity to US military installations, an expansion intended to mitigate national security risks stemming from foreign surveillance and intelligence-gathering activities.[40] Theft of sensitive data from CFIUS could undermine US counterintelligence efforts. It is unclear what information the threat actor was able to exfiltrate from CFIUS, if any.

The U.S. Treasury disclosed to the Senate on December 30 that it was the target of a PRC cyber operation earlier in the month, which gained control of Treasury Department workstations and accessed unclassified documents on them.[41] Unnamed US officials told the *Washington Post* that the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and the Office of the Treasury Secretary were targets of the operation, which was espionage focused.[42] The PRC's targeting of OFAC reflects its efforts to gather intelligence on US decision making regarding sanctions, possibly including OFAC's evidence collection methods, its designation criteria, or entities that the United States is scrutinizing. The revelations about the CFIUS breach appear to be separate from these compromised devices but may be part of the same operation.

The recent spate of discoveries of malicious PRC cyber operations demonstrates how aggressively the PRC is using cyber tools to undermine the United States and advance its own interests, especially intelligence collection. The hack comes amid the United States' ongoing investigation into a separate extensive cyber espionage operation attributed to a PRC state-sponsored APT, which breached at least eight US telecommunications firms and affected dozens of countries.[43] The operation targeted the private communications of 100 known individuals, including former President Donald Trump, members of his family, his running mate JD Vance, members of the Kamala Harris campaign, and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.[44] Investigators also confirmed that Salt Typhoon compromised systems that contain court orders for wiretapping requests, which could potentially subvert US counterintelligence efforts.[45]

The US Commerce Department issued new rules governing how artificial intelligence (AI) chip manufacturing can be shared with countries around the world, which could limit PRC access to AI chip technology. The new policy, The Interim Final Policy on Artificial Intelligence Diffusion, divides the world into three categories: partner countries that receive no restrictions on AI chips; countries that are banned from transferring AI technology from the United States; and all other countries that will be subject to caps on AI imports and must enter into special agreements with the United States to be able to produce US-patented chip technology.[46] The White House stated that these regulations are intended to “bolster US AI leadership,” give allies access to US made AI, and “ensure that adversaries cannot easily abuse advanced AI technology.”[47] Other countries not granted partner status under the new rules, such as Israel, Mexico, and Poland have the ability to dispute the regulations.[48] The PRC has not been named as an adversarial country under the new rules, but PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Guo Jiakun criticized the United States for overextending “the concept of national security” and for weaponizing trade and tech issues.[49]

The US Department of Defense added five PRC tech firms to a list of PLA-affiliated companies operating in the United States. Their inclusion on the DoD list could result in sanctions against these firms. The five firms added to the DOD's Section 1260H list are Tencent, PRC multimedia giant and WeChat's parent company; Contemporary Amperex Technology Co. Limited (CATL), a battery manufacturer specializing in electric vehicle technology; Changxin Memory Technology, a semiconductor company; Quectel Wireless, which specializes in antennas and wireless modules; and Autel Robotics, a company producing drones, quadcopters, and UAVs.[50] The US Secretary of Defense is required to identify and publish an annual list of companies affiliated with the PRC military under Section 1260H of the National Defense Authorization Act.[51] Being placed on this list does not result in a ban or the imposition of sanctions but does carry reputational costs that could inhibit commercial progress in the United States. The DoD describes the 1260H list as an “important continuing effort in highlighting and countering the PRC's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy.”[52] The Military-Civil Fusion strategy is an element of PLA modernization that eliminates the divisions between PRC civilian research and commercial sectors with their military and defense industry. This allows the PLA to take advantage of all technological developments within the

PRC in the service of achieving the PLA's goal of becoming a "world-class military by 2049." [53] Publicizing the 1260H list serves to increase awareness of Military-Civil Fusion within US markets and to communicate the potential national security risks of economic and technological cooperation with identified companies.

The PRC is building a fleet of barges with extendable piers that are likely designed to facilitate amphibious landings.

The barges have long road bridges that extend from the bow of each vessel, which appear suitable for offloading tanks, trucks, and other military vehicles. The barges also have what appear to be large columns, whose purpose is likely to drop to the seabed to stabilize the vessels in choppy shallow waters, according to the analysts at defense website Naval News that who discovered the barges. [54] Satellite imagery of Guangzhou Shipyard International (GSI) shows what is likely five of the special barges under construction. [55] Naval News also noted the presence of a "self-supporting" stern ramp on the barges that would facilitate the docking of roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ferries. The PRC's civilian RORO ferries are designed to carry military vehicles and have participated in the PRC's naval and amphibious assault exercises since 2019. [56]

Taiwan has a limited number of beaches that are suitable for an amphibious landing, which would constrain the PRC's options when attempting an amphibious landing. The long length of the ramps, which reach up to 393 feet, can possibly extend beyond a beach and connect directly with a coastal road. Long ramps could help the PRC bypass Taiwan's beach defenses, including mines and barricades, which could save the PRC military precious time in a landing operation. [57]

The PRC's state-owned tabloid Global Times emphasized the possibility that the barges could be used for civilian purposes, including disaster relief. The large size of the barges, however, along with the fact that GSI has a history of advancing the PRC's naval expansion through the construction of special vessels, supports the notion that they are intended for military use.

The discovery of the barges follows the PRC's recent launch of a new class of amphibious assault ship, highlighting the PRC's continued pursuit of strengthening its navy's capabilities to conduct amphibious operations. The PRC's construction of the likely military-oriented barges signals its intent to achieve the military capabilities that it needs to annex Taiwan by force.

Northeast Asia

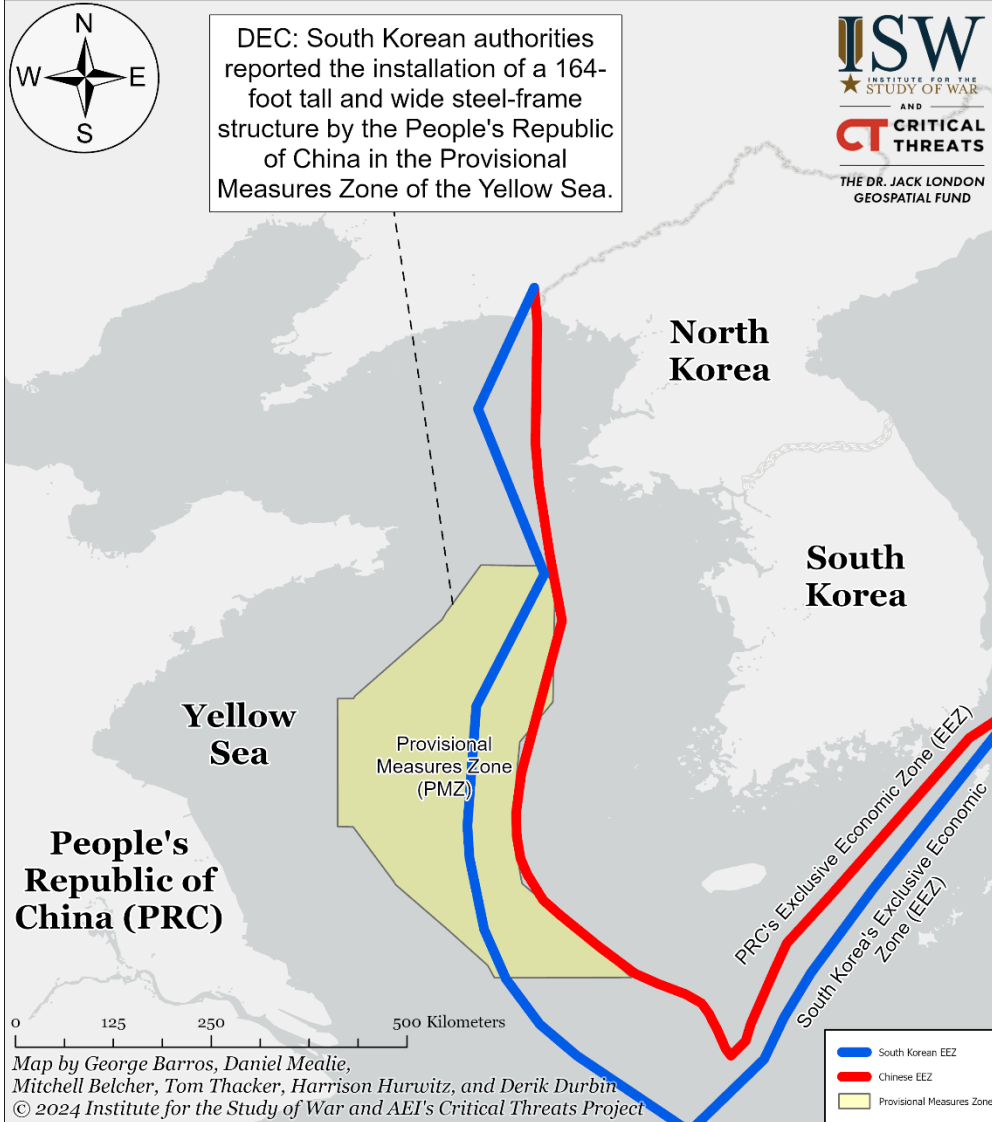
South Korea

South Korean authorities discovered a 164-foot tall and wide steel framework installed by the PRC within the Provisional Measures Zones (PMZ) of the Yellow Sea in December 2024. This installation is part of the PRC's ongoing efforts to assert territorial control over the disputed waters, taking advantage of the leadership vacuum in South Korea amid its internal political turmoil following President Yoon Suk-yeol's martial law declaration on December 3, 2024. South Korean intelligence authorities detected through reconnaissance satellites that the PRC had installed a 164-ft tall and wide steel framework within the Provisional Measures Zones (PMZ) in December 2024. [58] South Korea and the PRC agreed to establish the PMZ in the overlapping area of both countries' exclusive economic zones (EEZs) on August 3, 2000 to resolve disputes over fishing rights and oil exploration in the Yellow Sea. [59] The two governments have not agreed on maritime boundaries, and the PMZ regime prohibits the installations of facilities other than those for fishing activities. [60] The PRC has installed at least 10 buoys in and around the waters of the PMZ since the first such installation was reported in 2014. The PRC constructed its first steel framework in 2018 and built similar structures in April and May 2024 but halted further installations following protests from the South Korean government. The installation reported in December comes after a pause in official protests. The PRC has reportedly stated that the structure is a "fishing support facility," and South Korean authorities believe that the PRC plans to install a total of 12 structures in the area. [61]

The PRC is likely preparing to territorialize the Yellow Sea by limiting South Korea's use of the waters and seeking control over its sea and airspace, capitalizing on South Korea's political turmoil following President Yoon Suk-yeol's martial law declaration on December 3, 2024. The PRC officially justifies the installation of buoys and other structures as being for the purpose of maritime data collection and fishing activities, but its previous behavior in the South China Sea suggests this installation may be part of its larger effort to assert control in the Yellow Sea.[62] The Yellow Sea is situated within the PRC-claimed First Island Chain and provides direct access to Beijing and Shanghai.[63] The PRC has used similar tactics in the South China Sea, building island bases that were eventually militarized.[64] The PRC can expand its physical presence and achieve similar strategic objectives in the Yellow Sea by gradually encroaching on the PMZ.

The PRC's continued installations come amid South Korea's political unrest following President Yoon's martial law declaration on December 3. This timing suggests that South Korea's political instability provides the PRC an opportunity to continue activities in the PMZ without significant opposition. Key military positions, including the defense minister, army counterintelligence commander, army chief of staff, capital defense command chief, defense intelligence commander, and army special warfare commander, remain vacant due to resignations and investigations related to President Yoon's impeachment trials.[65] The 43-day vacancy of the defense minister as of January 16, the longest since the Korean War, has likely weakened South Korea's ability to respond to the PRC's actions. South Korean authorities have condemned similar installations in the past, but no official response has been reported so far.

The Provisional Measures Zone and the Exclusive Economic Zones of the People's Republic of China and South Korea



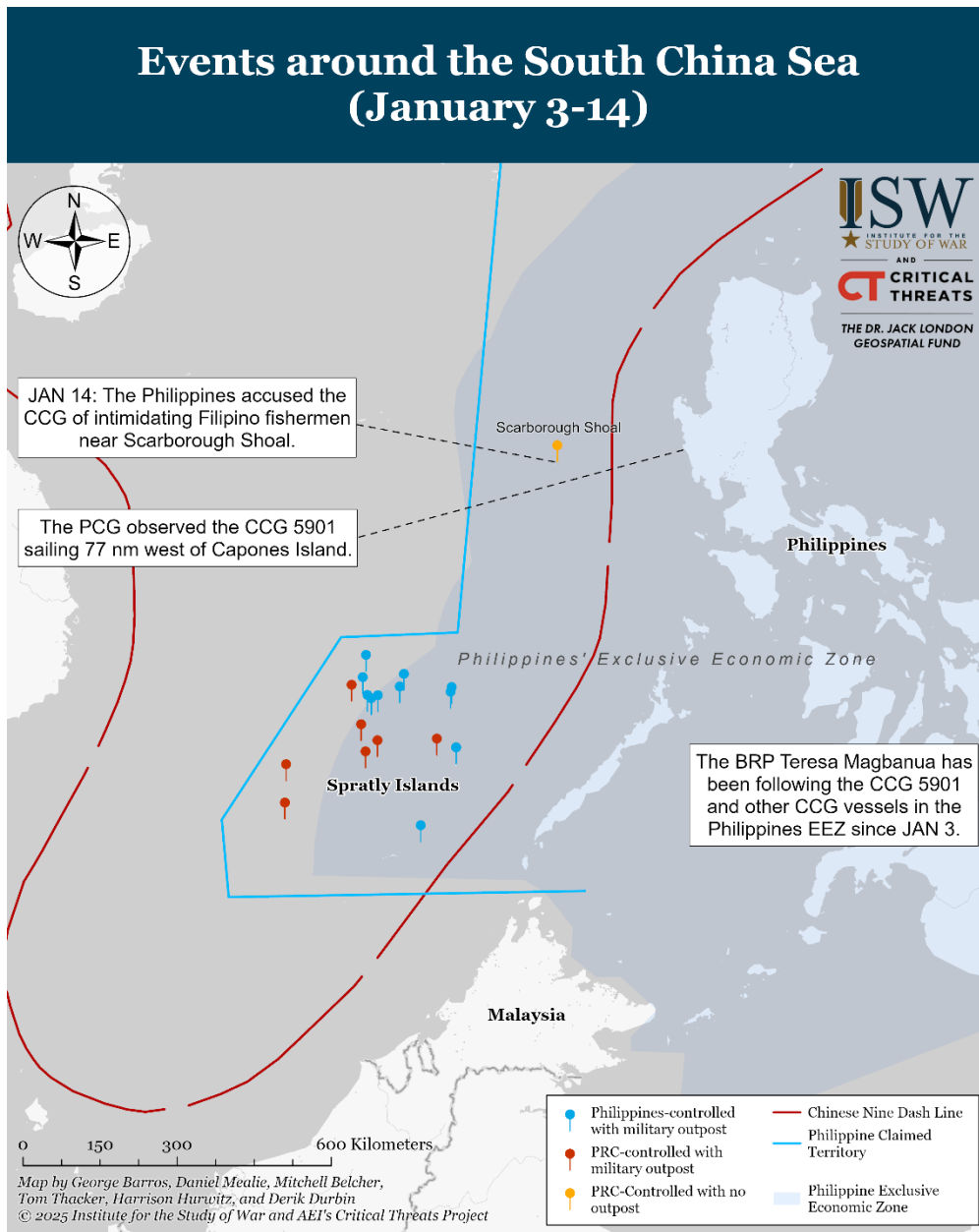
Southeast Asia

Philippines

The Philippines accused the PRC of intimidating Philippine fishermen near Scarborough Shoal and off the coast of Zambales, Luzon. The CCG has maintained a constant presence around Scarborough Shoal since the beginning of January, which reinforces PRC territorial claims in the region. Assistant Director General of the Philippine National Security Council Jonathan Malaya reiterated official requests on January 14 for the CCG to withdraw its vessels, including the CCG 5901, one of the largest coast guard vessels in the world, from Scarborough Shoal.[66] The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has been monitoring the CCG 5901's movements within Philippine maritime territory since January 3, deploying the *BRP Teresa Magbanua* to follow the CCG vessel's transit within the Philippines EEZ.[67] The PCG observed the CCG 5901

77 nautical miles from Zambales, Luzon in the Philippines' northwestern coast. Malaya stated that the presence of the CCG within Philippine waters was "unacceptable." PCG Spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela reiterated that the PCG would maintain its presence in the South China Sea to challenge PRC attempts to normalize CCG presence in Philippine maritime territory.[68]

PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Guo Jiakun stated on January 13 that the CCG's presence in Scarborough Shoal was for law enforcement activities within PRC rights under international law.[69] The PRC accused the Philippines of distorting facts and conducting a smear campaign against peaceful PRC activity.[70] The PRC has used similar rhetoric in the past, placing the blame for tensions in the South China Sea on other claimant states. The PCG's continued deployment of its vessels and constant monitoring of CCG presence within Philippine waters is significant, communicating to the PRC that it will not permit the PRC to remain in its waters unchallenged.



Europe

Germany charged three individuals with spying for the PRC following a string of espionage-related arrests in 2024. A January 9 statement from the German Federal Prosecutor’s Office stated German nationals Herwig F., Ina F., and Thomas R. collaborated to provide the PRC with information on technologies with military and naval applications from 2017 until their arrest in April 2024. Thomas R. reportedly “acted as an agent for an employee of the Chinese intelligence service MSS”; Herwig and Ina F., a married couple, allegedly used their business contacts to collect information relevant to “expanding China’s maritime combat power.”[71] The office reported that the information collected included “findings on boat engines, sonar systems, aircraft protection systems, drives for armored vehicles and drones that could be used for military purposes.”[72] The accused also reportedly “purchased a total of three special lasers from Germany on behalf of and with payment from the MSS and exported them to China without authorization, even though the lasers are subject to the European Union (EU) Dual-Use Regulation.”[73] PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun accused Germany of “hyping up the so-called ‘Chinese espionage risk’” in a regular press conference on January 10.[74]

This instance follows several PRC espionage investigations in Germany within the past year. Spying within Germany – an EU hub and a key PRC trading partner – offers a window into European weapons exports as well as EU decision making that could affect the PRC. Some incidents of spying have followed patterns of PRC tradecraft seen elsewhere. Germany arrested a PRC citizen accused of photographing the Kiel-Wik naval base on the Baltic Sea on December 9, 2024.[75] This suspected incident of “gate crashing” resembles those seen in the United States: the Wall Street Journal reported up to 100 incidents of trespassing onto US military property in recent years.[76] The PRC Foreign Ministry’s response was consistent with its other reactions to espionage accusations. Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian accused Germany of “manipulating and smearing with the so-called ‘spy case’” during a regular press conference on December 20.[77]

Other PRC espionage efforts in Germany have encompassed a wider range of targets across both the public and private sector. German authorities arrested a PRC national accused of using her job in airport logistics to send “information on flights, cargo and passengers at the airport to an employee of a Chinese secret service” in October 2024. This included “information on the transport of military and persons with connections to a German arms company.”[78] Germany arrested a US citizen accused of attempting to use his position in the US Army to pass information to the PRC in November 2024.[79] German authorities also arrested the aide of an EU lawmaker accused of passing information on European Parliament decision making to the PRC and monitoring the activity of PRC dissidents in Germany in April 2024.[80] The breadth of these espionage incidents highlights the PRC’s interest in monitoring a wide range of activity in Germany and the EU, as well as its willingness to employ a variety of sources, collectors, and methods.

German authorities have sought to combat the risks of PRC spying amid these incidents. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the situation “very concerning” following the April 2024 arrests.[81] Germany’s Interior Ministry drafted legislation in October to improve security checks for employees in nationally sensitive infrastructure and engineering fields, the country’s Chancellery, government ministries and Office of the Federal President.[82] Germany’s security measures aim to address suspected espionage threats from Russia, which have increased since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, as well as from the PRC.[83]

Russia

The PRC’s Shandong Port Group has banned US-sanctioned tankers from docking, unloading, or receiving ship services at its ports following the US Department of State’s January 10 sanctions against the Russian energy sector. The US State Department enacted these sanctions to “curtail the Kremlin’s ability to exploit the international financial system and generate revenue in furtherance of its war against Ukraine.” [84] Major Russian oil producers Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas are sanctioned alongside 183 vessels in Russia’s so-called “shadow fleet,” which are old vessels that

purposely obfuscate their origins and often lack insurance.[85] The shadow fleet helps Russia bypass Western sanctions that cap the price of Russian oil at \$60.00 per barrel.[86] Morgan Stanley estimates the tankers carried roughly 1.5 million barrels of crude oil per day, or 1.4% of global oil demand, in 2024.[87] One hundred forty-three of the sanctioned ships are oil tankers that handle 42% of Russia's total seaborne crude exports, and 300 million of the 530 million barrels were shipped to China.[88] Three tankers containing over two million barrels of Russian oil were docked off the Chinese coast on January 13, and ship data showed that at least 65 oil tankers have halted activities in various locations ranging from Iranian ports to waters near Russia.[89]

Independent refiners in Shandong are the main buyers of discounted sanctioned crude oil from Russia, Venezuela, and Iran. Shandong's imports from these three countries amount to about 17% of China's total oil imports.[90] Shandong Port Group controls many major Chinese ports, including Yantai, Rizhao, and Qingdao (which hosts the headquarters of the PLA Navy's North Sea Fleet).[91] The sanctions will push Chinese oil refineries to seek alternative sources elsewhere in the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas and curb Chinese access to cheap oil resources.[92] The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs has responded to these measures, stating the country opposes such "illegal unilateral sanctions" that supposedly have no basis in international law nor authorization by the Security Council.[93]

Syria

PRC Representative to the United Nations (UN) Fu Cong expressed concern over Syria's appointment to defense positions of Uyghurs associated with the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). The Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-controlled interim government appointed Uyghur militants to top defense positions – including one promoted to brigadier-general –in December 2024.[94] The UN Security Council convened to discuss humanitarian and security concerns in Syria on January 8.[95] Fu expressed concern that "the Syrian army has recently granted senior positions to a number of foreign terrorist fighters, including the leader of the terrorist organization 'Turkic Islamic Party' or 'East Turkestan Islamic Movement' listed by the Security Council." Fu called on Syria to "fulfill its anti-terrorism obligations and prevent any terrorist forces from using Syrian territory to threaten the security of other countries." [96] Fu also pointed to Syria's humanitarian concerns and said that "Long-term illegal unilateral sanctions have further aggravated the suffering of the Syrian people." [97] These sanctions remain in place as the HTS-led government consolidates power with the goal of projecting the appearance of moderate governance.

The containment of ETIM, TIP, and associated Uyghur militant activity will likely continue to shape the PRC's Syria policy. Uyghur militants have been active in Syria since at least the mid-2010s; the PRC has sought to suppress this activity, shape Syrians' views on Uyghur militancy, and promote favorable views of PRC policy in Xinjiang.[98] The website of the PRC embassy in Syria contains many inactive or outdated links from the early 2000s to Xinhua articles on Xinjiang and a Xinjiang tourism website.[99] The PRC maintained a strategic partnership with Syria under ousted former president Bashar al-Assad and used its ties to Syria to advance counterterrorism goals. The two sides agreed in 2023 to "continue to strengthen anti-terrorism and security cooperation and work together to combat terrorism." [100] The PRC likely views the installation establishment of an HTS-controlled government in Syria as a disruption to these established counterterrorism channels.[101]

Syrian policy towards the PRC will likely seek to balance PRC interests and demands with HTS' interest in granting the coalition's Uyghur fighters a "token of recognition" through government appointments.[102] The presence of TIP members in the new Syrian government creates conflicting interests for the new Syrian government, which may require the PRC's support as it seeks to lift international sanctions. ISW assessed that extremist elements within HTS could create friction within the coalition as al Qaeda-affiliated groups such as TIP clash with HTS leader Ahmed al Shara's stated moderate approach to governance.[103]

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