

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

- **The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP) pushed through new requirements on the Constitutional Court that will make it impossible for the court to carry out constitutional review until it fills some of its vacant seats. The KMT rejected all 7 of the ruling DPP’s judicial nominees to fill the vacancies, however, which makes it impossible for Lai to block legislation as long as the seats are unfilled.**
- **The KMT and TPP passed a budget allocation reform that would require Taiwan to reallocate more of its revenue to local governments. The bill would benefit the KMT by redirecting money to KMT constituencies and forcing President Lai to choose between cutting defense spending or cutting funding for other programs.**
- **Taiwan’s Presidential Office conducted its first tabletop wargame simulating PRC warfare against Taiwan. ROC President William Lai presided over the second meeting of the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee on the same day in a move consistent with broader efforts to bolster Taiwan’s civil defense resilience.**
- **The ROC Coast Guard Administration (CGA) intercepted a likely PRC ship suspected of damaging an undersea cable north of Taiwan on January 4. The CGA drove away a different PRC ship as it approached an area with undersea cables on January 6. Cutting undersea cables is a way for the PRC to isolate Taiwan or disrupt Taiwanese society.**

- **Instability in the highest echelons of the PLA’s political commissars likely signals Xi Jinping’s dissatisfaction with their effectiveness in instilling his ideals of political loyalty.**
- **Naturalized US citizen Chen Jinping pled guilty to charges of operating an illegal police station in New York at the behest of the PRC.**
- **Sources close to the Japanese government assess the PLAN and CCG likely conducted a joint maritime blockade drill in the Miyako Strait for the first time on December 22.**
- **Relations between the PRC and North Korea (DPRK) likely deteriorated in 2024 despite the year being dubbed the PRC-DPRK "Year of Friendship" in January 2024.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan (LY) passed three controversial amendments following protests and a brawl among legislators. The amendments will likely restrict the power of the ruling Lai Ching-te administration and politically benefit the opposition Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). The KMT and Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) passed three amendments on December 20 despite opposition from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which holds a minority of seats in the LY. The amendments target the Public Officials Election and Recall Act, the Constitutional Court Procedure Act, and the Act Governing the Allocation of Government Revenues and Expenditures. They will increase the difficulty of recalling public officials, raise the requirements for the Constitutional Court to rule on and strike down laws, and require the government to allocate more of its revenue to local governments. DPP lawmakers physically brawled with opposition lawmakers in the legislative chamber to prevent the passage of the bills. DPP-aligned civic groups including the Taiwan Economic Democracy Union (EDU) and Taiwan Citizen Front organized a rally of over 7,000 people, including some DPP lawmakers, to protest in front of the LY. The EDU argued that the amendments would “take away the people’s right to recall” officials and “paralyze” the Constitutional Court.[1]

All three amendments are likely to politically benefit the KMT. The recall amendments make it more difficult to recall elected officials, which benefits the KMT because the KMT controls most local governments in Taiwan. The KMT mayor of Keelung recently thwarted a recall motion against him.[2] The Constitutional Court amendments combined with the KMT’s rejection of the DPP’s new judicial nominees would paralyze the court in the short term, making it unable to carry out constitutional review of laws that the KMT-dominated legislature passes, and make the review process more difficult in the long term after the court’s vacant seats are filled. The budget reallocation bill will divert government funds to predominantly KMT constituencies and force Lai to make potentially unpopular national budget cuts that may hurt his approval rating.

The power struggles between Taiwan’s legislative, executive, and judicial branches as well as the brawl in the LY are emblematic of an unusually high level of disunity in Taiwanese politics. This partisan

rancor hampers the functioning of the Taiwanese government and has the potential to seriously impact Taiwan's national security.

The KMT and TPP pushed through new requirements on the Constitutional Court that will make it impossible for the court to carry out constitutional review until it fills some of its vacant seats. The KMT rejected all 7 of the ruling DPP's judicial nominees to fill the vacancies, however, which makes it impossible for Lai to block legislation as long as the seats are unfilled. The opposition parties passed amendments in the LY on December 20 that will make it more difficult for Taiwan's Constitutional Court to hear cases and issue rulings on the constitutionality of laws. The amendments include a requirement that a supermajority of 10 justices (out of a total of 15 on the court) be present to hear a case and a provision that at least nine justices must vote to rule a law unconstitutional. The court currently has only eight sitting justices, the fewest since the introduction of constitutional interpretation in 1947, because the eight-year terms of the other seven expired on October 31. The KMT and TPP voted on December 24 to reject all seven of the Lai administration's judicial nominees, along with nominees for president and vice president of the judicial branch.[3] The reforms mean that the court cannot hear any cases until at least two of the vacant seats are filled.

Taiwanese law does not currently specify a minimum number of justices required to hear a case. It simply mandates the presence of two-thirds of sitting justices to hear a case and allows rulings to be determined by a simple majority of those present.[4] The court's current makeup of eight justices means that as few as four justices could decide the constitutionality of a law under current rules, even though there are 15 seats on the court. The ROC Presidential Office expressed regret over the LY's rejection of judicial nominees and said that President Lai would submit new nominations.[5]

The LY's court reforms and rejection of the DPP's judicial nominees could obstruct the DPP's final institutional means of blocking KMT legislation because the president cannot veto laws the LY passes. The KMT and the much smaller TPP jointly hold a majority in the LY, though no one party has a majority by itself. The Lai administration requested that the LY carry out a second review of the amendments to the constitutional court procedure, citing "obstacles and difficulties" in implementing them.[6] This measure will likely only delay and not stop the bill's passage, however, because the LY can pass the bill again unchanged with a simple majority vote. The president must then sign the bill. Submitting a law for constitutional review is the executive branch's final recourse to prevent its implementation.[7] If the law goes into effect following constitutional review, the outcome of which is unclear, then the KMT and TPP will be able to pass any law they want as long as the court remains paralyzed, including further limitations on the executive branch or new cuts to defense programs.

Secretary-General of the DPP legislative caucus Rosalia Wu Szu-yao said that if the LY passes the amendment again on the second vote, the DPP legislative caucus would request a Constitutional interpretation and an injunction to halt the bill's implementation.[8] This effort would be the DPP's last resort to prevent the court from being paralyzed, but the court would have to violate the new amendment simply to hear and adjudicate the case concerning its own powers. The dilemma could trigger a constitutional crisis in Taiwan. It will also increase government dysfunction, creating an opportunity for the PRC to undermine faith in the Lai administration and in Taiwan's political system.

Wu called the opposition-backed amendments "an act of retaliation" to paralyze the Constitutional Court after recent rulings that favored the DPP.[9] The DPP successfully used the constitutional review process to prevent the implementation of a controversial series of legislative reforms that the LY first passed in May, which would have given the opposition-controlled legislature more power over the executive branch.[10]

The KMT and TPP passed a budget allocation reform that would require Taiwan to reallocate more of its revenue to local governments. The bill would benefit the KMT by redirecting money to KMT constituencies and forcing President Lai to choose between cutting defense spending or cutting funding for popular domestic programs. The amendment requires the government to reallocate NT\$375.3 billion of revenue to local governments, accounting for 9% of Taiwan's total government revenue. Director-General of Taiwan's Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DGBAS) Chen Shu-tzu said that NT\$1.81 trillion (about 58%) of the government's NT\$3.13 trillion budget for 2025 cannot be reduced by law, which means that the reallocated funds must come at the expense of discretionary spending items such as defense. Chen estimated that the defense budget may have to be reduced by 28% (about NT\$80 billion or US\$2.45 billion), or else cuts would be made to already approved or ongoing projects.[11]

The KMT dismissed concerns that the budget bill would require large defense cuts, however. It said the purpose of the bill is to make the central government cut wasteful spending and redirect those funds to local governments, and that the budget reallocation would not affect defense spending unless the Lai administration chooses to make cuts to defense over other budget items. It called on the Lai administration not to spread "lies" and "conspiracies." [12] Reallocating more funding to local governments would disproportionately benefit KMT constituencies and help the KMT in future elections, as the KMT controls most local-level governments and retains strong local patronage networks.[13] The new law would also force Lai to make difficult decisions about where to make spending cuts, which may hurt him and his party politically. Lai could choose to cut defense spending, which would constrain the progress of one of the administration's top priorities and expose Taiwan to narratives that it is unserious about defending itself. He could alternatively choose to cut other government programs, which may negatively impact the material well-being of Taiwanese citizens and thus reduce satisfaction with his government, while amplifying opposition narratives that Lai is a warmonger who would choose building up the military over the welfare of his people. The political consequences of this bill will depend not only on Lai's decisions but also on whom voters blame for the spending cuts.

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) and Coast Guard Administration (CGA) both warned that defense budget cuts would have a serious impact on their preparedness and development plans. The MND said major cuts would prevent the military from upgrading major weapons equipment and make it difficult to make payments for purchased items, resulting in delays or cancellations. The ministry said the defense budget for 2025 accounted for approximately 2.4% of Taiwan's GDP, but the possible cut of 28%, as estimated by the budget office, will take it down to below 2%. [14] The CGA estimated it would have to cut over NT\$2.9 billion (US\$88.49 million) of its 2025 budget if the estimated budget cuts are made. It said the cut would significantly affect its ability to counter PRC gray-zone tactics, manage the delivery of newly built vessels, and maintain its fleet.[15]

Taiwan President Lai Ching-te said he would sign the bill into law when it reaches his desk.[16] However, he also said in his New Year's Day Speech that Taiwan must keep expanding its defense budget to ensure Taiwan's security.[17] Lai and his party have very little ability to block the implementation of the legislation.

The Taipei district court indicted TPP founder Ko Wen-je on corruption charges that could carry a sentence of 28 and half years in prison. TPP leadership has accused the prosecution of being politically motivated and lacking substantial evidence. The Taipei District Prosecutors Office announced on December 26 that former TPP chair Ko Wen-je had been indicted on charges of bribery, profiteering, embezzlement, and breach of trust in violation of the Criminal Code and the Anti-Corruption Act.[18] Ko was briefly released on bail on December 30, during which period he resigned as TPP chair and approved TPP legislative caucus whip Huang Kuo-chang as acting chair. The Taiwan High Court revoked Ko's bail on January 3. The prosecution emphasized that Ko's alleged behavior, the mishandling of a real estate project and misreporting of campaign finances, netted him almost NT \$100 million (\$3 million) in illegal proceeds, undermined public trust in the ROC government and suggested that Taiwanese politicians are susceptible to bribery and interference from corporations and other outside actors.[19]

The TPP has stood behind Ko throughout the indictment, characterizing the investigation as being "politically motivated" to serve the interests of the ruling DPP.[20] The TPP accused the DPP of persecuting a political rival and "silencing" the 3.69 million Taiwanese people who voted for Ko in the 2024 presidential election.[21] TPP supporters claimed that Ko's initial arrest was an act of "Green Terror" by the DPP.[22] "Green Terror" is a reference to the DPP's official color, green, and the 1949–1987 "White Terror" period, when tens of thousands of people were murdered and imprisoned by the state. The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) has also used the phrase "Green Terror" on multiple occasions, including after Ko's initial arrest in September 2024.[23] The PRC's use of this phrase is likely intended to sow divisions between Taiwanese political parties and instill doubt in the Taiwanese public over the legitimacy of the DPP government. The TPP's continued use of "Green Terror" rhetoric following Ko's indictment could be repeated by the TAO, giving the PRC another opportunity for political and cognitive warfare against the Taiwanese public.

The Taiwanese Legislative Yuan has no clear majority party, with the DPP holding 51 seats and the KMT holding 54 (including two KMT-aligned independents). 57 seats are needed for a majority. The TPP is the only other party in the LY, with 8 seats. It therefore serves as a swing vote and has significant leverage in Taiwanese legislative politics. The current tensions between the TPP and DPP combined with the TPP's adoption of the KMT "Green Terror" rhetoric will likely lead to a solidification of the TPP-KMT alliance, which will make it even more difficult for DPP-backed legislation to pass.

Taiwan's Presidential Office conducted its first tabletop wargame simulating PRC warfare against Taiwan. ROC President William Lai presided over the second meeting of the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee on the same day in a move consistent with broader efforts to bolster Taiwan's civil defense resilience. ROC Vice President Hsiao Bi-khim and National Security Council Secretary-general Joseph Wu held the three-hour tabletop exercise simulating a PRC attack on Taiwan as well as high-intensity "gray-zone"

scenarios.[24] The exercise featured a PRC adversary cooperating with Iran, North Korea, and Russia.[25] An unnamed Taiwanese security official told *Nikkei Asia* that the wargame included “China’s increasingly clear ambition to control the first island chain, including recent actions in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait.” The official added that “Beijing has also demonstrated its ability to project power at sea. We used this as a hypothetical scenario to test if Taiwan is able to cope with an attack or blockade.”[26] Unnamed defense officials also specified that the exercise explored the possibility of an “internet blackout caused by the severing of undersea cables.”[27] PRC state-owned news outlet *Global Times* decried the tabletop exercise and accused the DPP of trying to undermine cross-strait relations.[28]

ROC President William Lai said that the tabletop exercise illustrated the need for government agencies to establish standard operating procedures for wartime contingencies. He also said that civil society must bolster its resilience and that the ROC government would work to improve interoperability between government ministries.[29] The tabletop exercise incorporated both central and local government officials; the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee brought together government and civil society leaders to discuss bolstering Taiwan’s resilience. Lai said that the committee’s five goals included civilian training, material consolidation, energy and infrastructure maintenance, welfare and medical facilities, and network security.[30]

Lai’s efforts to boost civil society emergency preparedness are part of a broader push for societal resilience amid PRC coercion and harassment campaigns. Lai announced the creation of the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee in June 2024.[31] The committee met for the first time in September 2024. National Security Council Deputy-Secretary General Hsu Szu-chien noted Lai’s focus on “action with real operations in the field” over “theoretical discussions on paper.”[32] Lai also made defense resilience a key component of his National Day speech on October 10 and his New Year’s address. Lai called upon Taiwan on January 1 to “pool every ounce of our strength to improve the defense resilience of the whole society, build capabilities that can respond to large-scale disasters and deter threats and invasions, and strengthen counter-information warfare and counter-cognition.”[33] Lai also announced that Taiwan will combine its two nonmilitary exercises, the Wanan and Minan drills, into an Urban Resilience Drill starting in 2025.[34] Taiwan will reconvene the resilience committee in March and again in June 2025 to coincide with its Han Kuang defense drills.[35]

The Taiwanese Ministry of the Interior (MOI) sent a request to the Constitutional Court to formally dissolve the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP). The CUPP is a minor far-right, pro-PRC political party that has ties to CCP officials and organized crime. 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 MOI request follows months of claims by the ministry that the CUPP is involved in organized crime and that it harbors core members who have repeatedly violated the National Security Act, Anti-Infiltration Act, Cross-Strait Act, and election laws.[36] The MOI first announced on November 6 that it would petition for the disbandment of the CUPP for electoral interference on behalf of the PRC.[37]

The ministry's allegations stem from years of investigations that directly connected CUPP member activity with illegal acts. The High Prosecutor's Office charged three CUPP members in August with "developing a spy network to infiltrate the Taiwanese military."^[38] A Taiwanese couple was charged in November for making "radio and digital propaganda" for the PRC government "in exchange for NT\$74 million (US\$2.32 million)."^[39] Both were members of the CUPP. In total, Taiwanese law enforcement has "linked 134 CUPP members to serious crimes such as murder, robbery, transnational human trafficking, and gang violence."^[40] CUPP founder Chang An-lo is a former mobster nicknamed the White Wolf who previously acknowledged the prevalence of criminals within the organization.^[41] Chang founded the party while in the PRC and has previously called on Taiwan to not resist a possible PRC invasion.^[42] ROC investigations of CUPP activities determined the party to be a PRC proxy organization that is focused on breeding subversive agents within Taiwan's military and political institutions.^[43] The MOI reiterated its support for political speech but stressed that it could not tolerate "repeated national security violations and acts of violence by party members."^[44]

The PRC sanctioned seven firms in response to a new US military aid package and equipment sale for Taiwan in a move consistent with past sanctions. It also added 28 US firms to an export control list. The United States announced a new \$571.3 million drawdown of "defense articles and services" as well as "military education and training" on December 20 to assist Taiwan.^[45] The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DCSA) also said that the State Department approved the possible sale of "Command, Control, Communications, and Computers Modernization and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$265 million" on December 20. The DCSA said that this sale would speed Taiwan's development of the Advanced Tactical Datalink System.^[46] The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded on December 27 by announcing that it would sanction Hudson Technologies, Raytheon Canada, Raytheon Australia, Saronic Technologies, Alcon, Insitu, and International Marine Engineering, as well as senior executives of these entities. These sanctions will freeze the companies' assets within the PRC and prohibit entities within the PRC "prohibited from engaging in transactions, cooperation and other activities" with the sanctioned parties.^[47] The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) and Defense Ministry also condemned the sales as a signal to "Taiwan independence."^[48]

The PRC also added 28 US entities to its export control list on January 2. The PRC Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) added defense contractors including General Dynamics, Anduril Industries, Lockheed Martin Corporation, and Raytheon to an export control list "in order to safeguard national security and interests and fulfill international obligations such as non-proliferation."^[49] MOFCOM stipulated that the "export of dual-use items to the above-mentioned 28 US entities is prohibited; any related export activities currently underway should be stopped immediately." The report added that export operators may apply to MOFCOM for exceptions under "special circumstances."^[50] RAND expert Raymond Kuo told *Voice of America* (VOA) that these export controls will likely have very little economic impact as these US defense contractors had no business with the PRC, however.^[51]

These sanctions and export control listings are consistent with past PRC sanctions against Western firms in response to US support for Taiwan, even if their effect is more symbolic than economic. The PRC frequently uses sanctions to attempt to undermine and delegitimize US aid to the ROC and often targets the same US defense contractors. The PRC sanctioned Raytheon multiple times following announcements of aid to Taiwan in 2024.^[52] The PRC's decision to target Australian and Canadian

branches of Raytheon signals its willingness to act against branches of firms in third countries as part of its punishment of US defense contractors. The sanctions against Raytheon Canada also come shortly after the PRC froze the assets of two Canadian groups, the Uyghur Human Rights Advocacy Project and the Canadian Tibet Committee, on December 21.[53]

The ROC Coast Guard Administration (CGA) intercepted a likely PRC ship suspected of damaging an undersea cable north of Taiwan on January 4. The CGA drove away a different PRC ship as it approached an area with undersea cables on January 6. Cutting undersea cables is a way for the PRC to isolate Taiwan or disrupt Taiwanese society.

Taiwanese telecommunications company Chunghwa Telecom identified the Cameroon-flagged cargo ship *Shun Xing 39*, also listed as the Tanzania-flagged *Xing Shun 39*, as it passed near Yehliu, Taiwan on January 4.[54] Chunghwa accused the ship of damaging an undersea cable but said that the damage had not affected domestic communications. The CGA intercepted the ship and sent it for an investigation near Keelung, Taiwan.[55] Investigators could not board the ship due to weather conditions but collected records, including radar data, to send to prosecutors as the ship continued its planned journey to Busan, South Korea.[56] The ROC has requested help from South Korea in investigating the incident; investigations remain ongoing at time of writing.[57] The CGA found that the ship used two different AIS systems and had an all-Chinese crew of seven.[58] Chunghwa said that the cable damaged on January 4 would likely be repaired by late January.[59] The CGA later drove away the *Bao Shun*, a Mongolian-flagged freighter that had approached the shore while loitering off the coast of Shimen District in New Taipei, on January 6.[60] Taiwan did not report damage to nearby cables following this encounter.[61]

PRC-affiliated ships have severed undersea cables near Taiwan and elsewhere several times in the past few years. Taiwan's National Communications Commission accused two PRC ships of damaging cables connecting Taiwan and its outlying Matsu Islands in 2023, causing internet outages on Matsu for over a month. Taiwan's government refrained from accusing the PRC of orchestrating intentional sabotage at the time, however.[62] European authorities have also suspected PRC ships of damaging cables in the Baltic Sea, including the *Yi Peng 3*, a vessel suspected of cutting two undersea cables in November 2024. Finland investigated a PRC ship suspected of cutting an undersea gas line and a communications cable between Finland and Estonia in 2023.[63]

The PRC is likely setting conditions to isolate Taiwan informationally. ROC deputy digital ministry head Herming Chiueh said that cable-cutting incidents are unlikely to be unintentional, as they would require a ship to drop its anchor on a cable, turn the ship's engine on with the anchor in position, and move until the cable broke.[64] Attempted and successful cable-cutting stretches CGA resources and forces the ROC to expend effort investigating suspicious vessels and repairing damage. Even "unsuccessful" or easily repaired cable cuts inconvenience ROC authorities and contribute to an atmosphere of discontent in Taiwan. Intentional sabotage of undersea cables could provide the PRC with an ostensibly deniable means of isolating Taiwan, including cutting off Taiwan's critical communications during a blockade or invasion. 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.[65] Seemingly isolated incidents of cable cutting in a non-military context illustrate the PRC's capability to isolate Taiwan at will and may represent PRC efforts to "practice" or test means of cutting off Taiwan's communications.

PRC efforts to isolate Taiwan informationally will likely prompt commensurate ROC efforts to protect and diversify its means of information access. The ROC has initiated efforts to shore up its digital resilience amid natural and manmade threats to its cables. ROC National Security Bureau (NSB) Director-General Tsai Ming-yen called upon Taiwan’s legislators to “harden” the ROC’s undersea cables in a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee in May 2024. Tsai said that Taiwan’s undersea cables had been cut 20 times — a higher number than normal — in 2023; he could not definitively attribute these cuts to sabotage, however.[66] Taiwan’s Ministry of Digital Affairs has called the ROC “highly dependent” on submarine internet cables but stated that “We plan to build additional international submarine cable landing stations, strengthen submarine cable safety protection mechanisms and increase backup to ensure the safety of submarine cables and external networks.”[67] Taiwan’s December 2024 civil defense wargame included a cable-cutting scenario and resulting “internet blackout,” according to unnamed defense officials.[68]

Taiwan’s National Security Bureau (NSB) said that the average daily number of cyberattacks against Taiwan’s government network doubled in 2024, with most originating from the PRC. The NSB said in a report that the average daily number of cyber intrusions reached 2.4 million in 2024 compared to 1.2 million in 2023. The NSB said that most of the cyberattacks were detected and blocked. The government service network supports electronic communication between government agencies and provides online government services to the public. Taiwan’s intelligence community reported a total of 906 cyberattack cases in 2024, an increase of more than 20 percent from the 752 cases in 2023. More than 80 percent of the cases in 2024 targeted government agencies. The report said that PRC cyberattacks in the field of communications rose 650 percent in 2024, the highest increase of any field. Cyberattacks on transportation targets increased by 70 percent and attacks on the defense supply chain increased by 57 percent. The PRC also launched denial-of-service attacks on the financial and transportation sectors when conducting military drills.[69] The increase in PRC cyberattacks in 2024 was very likely in part a response to Taiwan’s election of Lai Ching-te as its president. The PRC considers Lai a dangerous separatist. cyberattacks offer the PRC a low-cost means of harassing Lai’s administration and Taiwan as a whole.

A Taiwanese NSB report revealed that the amount of disinformation circulating on Taiwanese social media more than doubled in 2024, with most of it originating in the PRC. Pieces of disinformation that the NSB identified increased by 60% in total.[70] The disinformation appeared to target social media applications that are predominantly used by younger people. In total, the NSB said the PRC spread 2.16 million pieces of disinformation, which were largely geared toward increasing skepticism about the reliability of US assistance to Taiwan, the competence of President Lai Ching-te’s administration, and the efficacy of the Taiwanese military.[71] The increase in disinformation follows a larger trend of PRC attempts to use disinformation and fake accounts to mass-produce pro-PRC sentiment in Taiwan.[72]

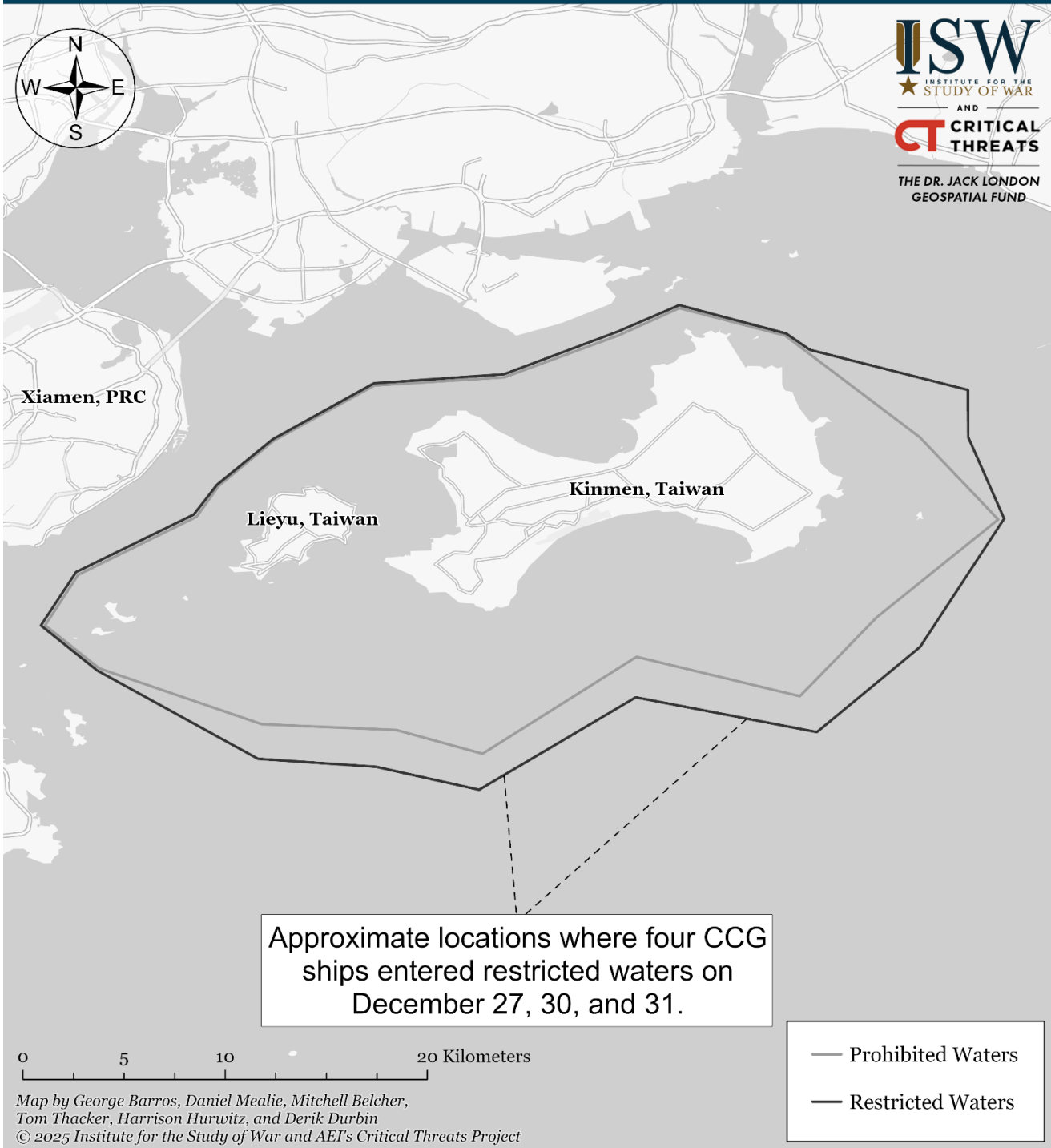
The most common method of disinformation used fake accounts or bots to spread manipulated memes, pictures, and videos.[73] Hacking operations also targeted Taiwanese citizens and military personnel in attempts to disseminate disinformation from their social media accounts. The PRC also used artificial intelligence (AI) to mass-produce fake content and deepfakes of Taiwanese political figures.[74]

The platform most affected by the rise in disinformation was Facebook, experiencing a 40% increase in traffic and over 900,000 pieces of reported disinformation in 2024. Other outlets experienced more substantial jumps, with a 244% increase in Taiwan-targeted disinformation on X and a 664% increase on three popular online forums, though the overall amount of such disinformation was still lower than on Facebook. The NSB also discovered a total of 28,216 fraudulent accounts, more than double the number that were discovered in 2023. [75]

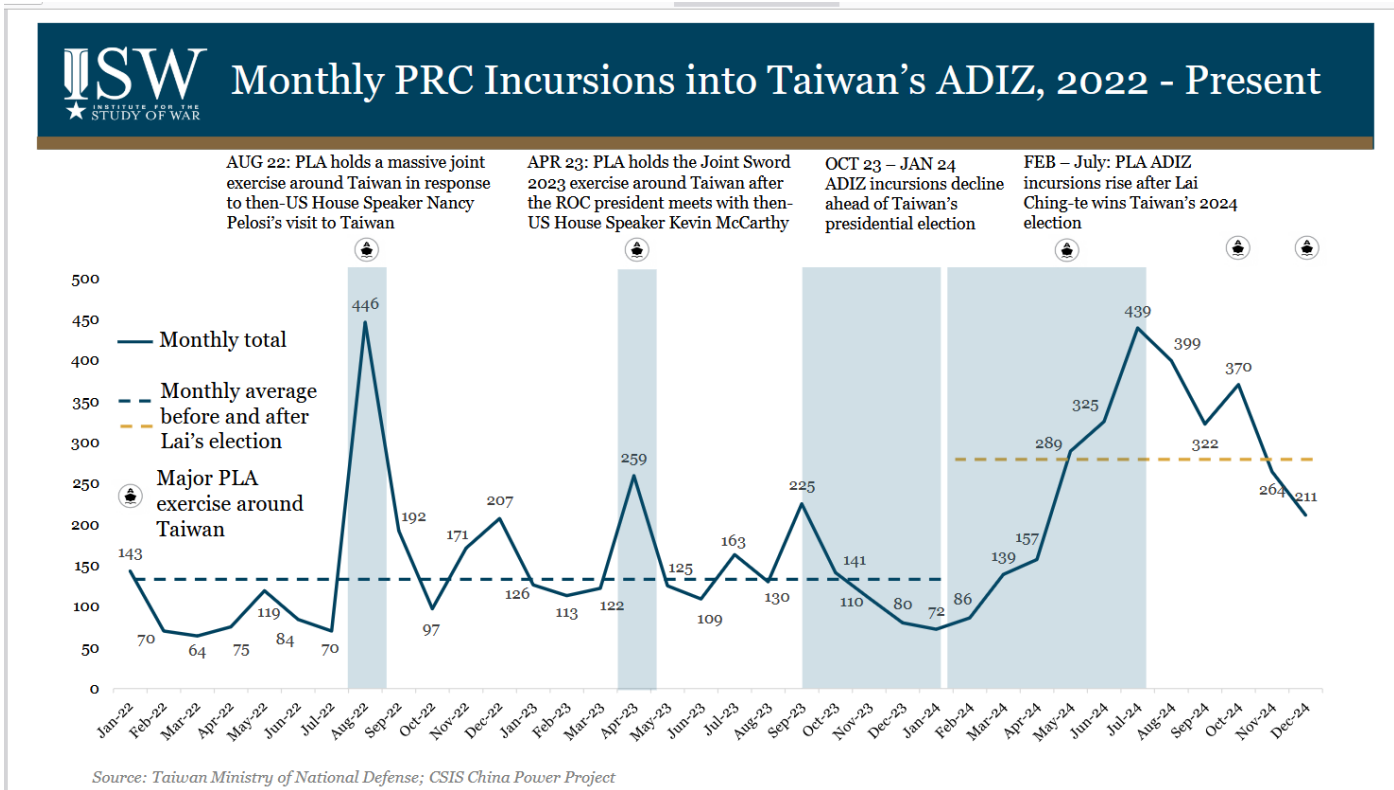
The China Coast Guard (CCG) carried out three incursions into Taiwan’s restricted waters around Kinmen in the final days of 2024. Kinmen is an ROC archipelago located just two miles from the PRC mainland. Four CCG vessels simultaneously sailed into Kinmen’s southern restricted waters on December 27, 30, and 31 and stayed for two hours each time. The ships on December 27 and 31 sailed in two two-ship formations, while the one on December 30 involved the four ships entering at four different locations and patrolling independently.[76] 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 has normalized CCG incursions into the restricted waters around Kinmen in 2024 to assert its law enforcement jurisdiction in the waters. Taiwan’s Coast Guard Administration (CGA) said that the CCG deliberately entered restricted waters around Kinmen 52 times since February.[77] It entered restricted waters around the Matsu Islands at least four times in the same period, all during the Joint Sword 2024-series military exercises.[78] These numbers include only deliberate “law enforcement patrols” in the waters and not “innocent passage” through restricted zones.[79] The PRC began these incursions after two PRC fishermen died when their speedboat capsized while fleeing a CGA ship in Kinmen’s prohibited waters. It increased the number of patrols and varied the patrol patterns around the time of Lai Ching-te’s inauguration in May, likely as a gray-zone tactic to assert PRC jurisdiction and strain Taiwan’s resources. The incursion pattern has become more regular since then: groups of four CCG ships have carried out “law enforcement patrols” three or four times each month for two hours at a time. None of the ships have patrolled in the prohibited waters around Kinmen or Matsu since May.

China Coast Guard Violations of Kinmen's Restricted Waters (December 27, 30, and 31)



The PLA’s monthly total air incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ in December was 211, the lowest since before Taiwan President William Lai Ching-te’s inauguration in May 2024, even though major PLA naval drills occurred around Taiwan in mid-December. The monthly total is still much higher than pre-2024 averages, however. The ADIZ incursion numbers do not include aerial activities near Taiwan’s outlying Kinmen and Matsu Islands, which are west of the median line of the Taiwan Strait. The normalization of PLA incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ wears down Taiwan’s response readiness and forces Taiwan to continually expend resources monitoring and responding to these instances. The ROC Ministry of National Defense also detected four Chinese balloons in Taiwan’s ADIZ: three on December 20 (including two directly over Taiwan) and one on December 25.[80] PRC balloons also flew into Taiwan’s ADIZ last winter in the lead up to the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election, increasing to daily frequency in January 2024 and gradually tapering off in the months after the election. Taiwan’s MND again began to report occasional PRC balloon overflights in its ADIZ reports beginning in November 2024, but the balloon incursions remain much less frequent than they were at the same time the previous year.



China

Instability in the highest echelons of the PLA’s political commissars likely signals Xi Jinping’s dissatisfaction with their effectiveness in instilling his ideals of political loyalty. The Central Military Commission (CMC) confirmed its appointment of General Chen Hui as the new political commissar of the PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) on December 23.[81] Chen’s predecessor, General Qin Shutong, and other PLA generals and admirals were conspicuously absent from the ceremony, including Navy Political Commissar Yuan Huazhi, Army Commander Li Qiaoming, and People’s Armed Police Commander Wang Chunqing—all of whose whereabouts are

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unknown. Qin's replacement follows the PRC Ministry of Defense's (MOD) announcement 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."^[82] The CMC is the PRC's highest military decision-making body. The Political Work Department of the CMC is responsible for instilling ideological discipline and loyalty to the CCP in the PLA by controlling propaganda, political education, and organization.^[83] The Director of the CMC's Political Work Department is the highest-ranking political commissar in the CCP. Miao's suspension and Qin's replacement are likely due to their perceived failure to instill Xi's version of political loyalty in the military, which revolves around upholding Xi's absolute leadership and authority.

The official CCP theoretical journal *Qiushi* publicized a January 2024 speech by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping on December 15 that called for upholding centralized party leadership and "turning the knife inward" to eliminate sources of weakness that degrade the party's integrity. The timing of the speech's release by *Qiushi*, which disseminates high-level CCP policy directives and governing philosophy throughout the CCP's rank and file, points to a re-emphasis on political education amid perceived failures to achieve loyalty.

Recent signals from the PLA military establishment indicate possible resistance to Xi's agenda for governance of the military. The Central Theater Command Political Work Department published an article on December 1 about the 83rd Group Army's "study session" to implement the spirit of the Political Work Conference of the Central Military Commission (CMC), which displayed a political slogan that emphasizes tenets of collective leadership and intra-party democracy.^[84] The political work conference in question was a rare meeting in June that Xi Jinping himself convened, during which he urged strengthening the military's loyalty to the CCP, commitment to a centralized hierarchy, and continued efforts to root out corruption.^[85] *PLA Daily*, the military's official newspaper, published two articles on December 9 and 11 that called for upholding collective leadership and intra-party democracy as the guiding principles of the party's governance of the military.^[86] All three of the articles uncharacteristically omitted mention of Xi, whose name is almost always invoked alongside themes of political education.

One of the *PLA Daily's* articles highlighted the need to pursue "correct" centralization on the basis of democracy.^[87] The article clarified the meaning of so-called democratic centralism as "democracy first and then centralization," and that under the party's organization, a secretary, deputy secretary, and committee members have an equal say in making decisions.^[88] The essence of this definition is divergent from Xi's doctrine, which emphasizes a hierarchical authority structure.^[89]

The principles of collective leadership and intra-party democracy featured prominently in the CCP's ideological messaging in the years before Xi took power and even appear in the PRC's constitution.^[90] The phrases became increasingly rare after Xi assumed leadership of the CCP, however, and were gradually replaced by tenets that affirm Xi's centrality within the party and insist on upholding his centralized leadership over it.^[91] Xi has not explicitly condemned the principles of collective leadership and intra-party democracy as incompatible with his doctrine of centralized hierarchy. These tenets still coexist in party governance parlance alongside Xi's newer dogma but are often minimized or glossed over in comparison. The lack of harmony and the divergent emphasis

between these doctrines possibly signals competing priorities for party-military relations among Xi and certain segments of the military establishment, however.

The US Department of Defense (DoD)’s 2024 China Military Power Report (CMPR) reported that the PLA is continuing to enhance its overall military power, including its nuclear arsenal, but faces widespread corruption and other challenges. The CMPR is an annual report that provides a detailed overview of the structure, capabilities, and strategy of the PLA. Xi Jinping, who is also the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), remains committed to transforming the PLA into a “world-class military” by 2049. Sweeping modernization plans involving all branches of the PLA have resulted in continued growth and technological advancements. The CMPR reported that the PRC spends 40% to 90% more than it announces in its public defense budget, approximately \$330 billion–\$450 billion in 2024. These investments have allowed the PRC to enhance its military power projection, particularly in the nuclear and maritime domains. The DOD reported that the PLA likely possesses over 600 operational nuclear warheads, a stockpile increase of 100 since 2023. The CMPR estimated that the PRC will have the ability to deploy more than 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030.[92]

The PRC’s investments in its nuclear arsenal are likely intended to increase the credibility of the PRC’s nuclear deterrent and send a message to the United States and its allies about the potential risks of engaging in a conflict with the PLA. The CMPR also highlighted developments within the PLA Navy (PLAN), including investments in a new class of amphibious assault ships, nuclear-powered submarines, and advanced auxiliary vehicles, which would greatly enhance the PLA’s ability to carry out an amphibious invasion of Taiwan.

PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Lin Jian accused the DoD of disseminating false information as a way to justify continued American military hegemony. Lin urged the US to stop publishing such “irresponsible” reports and instead focus its efforts on working towards peace and stability.[93]

A PRC state-sponsored cyber threat actor breached US Department of Treasury workstations on December 8 in an espionage operation that targeted the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and the Office of the Treasury Secretary.[94] The incident became public knowledge after Assistant Treasury Secretary Aditi Hardikar informed the Senate Banking Committee on December 30 that an assessed PRC state-sponsored advanced persistent threat actor (APT) gained control of Treasury Department workstations and accessed unclassified documents on them.[95] The Treasury Department has not disclosed the number of workstations accessed or the nature of the documents potentially obtained by the threat actor. It is not yet clear which PRC-based APT is responsible for the operation. Treasury stated that it was working with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), FBI, and other investigators in the intelligence community to determine the impact of the hack. CISA stated on January 6 that there is currently no indication that the breach affected other federal agencies.[96]

Unnamed US officials stated that the incident affected OFAC, which is responsible for administering economic sanctions, according to the *Washington Post*.[97] The PRC’s targeting of OFAC signifies its motivation 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 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.[98] Investigators are calling the unprecedented campaign Salt Typhoon, following the Microsoft naming convention for cyber threat actors attributed to the PRC government.[99] Salt Typhoon 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 Harris campaign, and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.[100] Investigators also confirmed that Salt Typhoon compromised systems that contain court orders for wiretapping requests, which could potentially subvert US counterintelligence efforts.[101] The scale of the PRC's recent malicious cyber activity demonstrates how aggressively the PRC is using cyber tools to undermine the United States and advance its own interests, especially intelligence collection.

Two new Chinese “6th generation” stealth planes from Shenyang Air Corporation and Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group made their first public appearance, signaling that the PRC is claiming to make rapid advancements in aviation technology and Air Force modernization. The Chengdu fighter features a diamond-delta wing planform with five trailing edge flaps to reduce radar signature and increase maneuverability, and it has three engines.[102] The Shenyang Aircraft Corporation's design is a smaller aircraft by comparison and appears to be a twin-engine aircraft design with a sharply-swept wing shape without a vertical stabilizer.[103] *Forbes* noted this plane resembles the Sukhoi Su-27.[104] Tailless aircraft offer many stealth advantages such as reducing radar signature from sight and rear perspectives and improving broadband low-observability against a wider variety of radar types, but the design may reduce maneuverability.[105] Stealth plays a critical role in increasing the odds of aircraft avoiding radar detection and evading radar guided weapons, and this announcement follows the J-35 stealth jet debut in November 2024 and the J-20 stealth jet debut in 2016.[106] The appearance of another two stealth planes in development is a signal from the PRC to the rest of the world on their advancements in aviation technology. The operational capabilities of these stealth planes in practice remain unclear, however.

The PRC launched its Type 076 amphibious assault class ship *Sichuan*, the first of its kind. This “miniature aircraft carrier” could increase the PRC's at-sea power projection capabilities. The *Sichuan* is significantly larger and more technologically advanced than previous generations of PRC amphibious assault ships. The vessel displaces 40,000 tons and is wider than both the preceding Type 075 and its closest U.S. counterpart, the America-class amphibious assault ship. The *Sichuan* hosts an electromagnetic catapult to launch fixed-wing aircraft, the first amphibious assault ship possessing this technology in the world. The ship can accommodate dozens fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, 1,000 marines, and landing craft. [107] A report from CSIS, a US think tank, from August 2024 assessed that the ship could be used as a massive platform to carry the PRC's growing UAV fleet, including the GJ-11 Sharp Sword UCAV, mockups of which CSIS sighted near the *Sichuan*'s construction site.[108] PRC state media reported that the *Sichuan* will significantly increase the PRC's power projection capabilities at sea and support the PRC's goals to possess a capable blue-water navy.

Naturalized US citizen Chen Jinping pled guilty to charges of operating an illegal police station in New York at the behest of the PRC. US authorities arrested Chen for operating the police station in 2023.[109] The US Department of Justice (DOJ) reported that Chen and co-conspirator Lu Jianwang “worked together to establish the first overseas police station in the United States on behalf of the Fuzhou branch of the [PRC Ministry of Public Security (MPS)].”[110] Chen and Lu also destroyed evidence of their involvement with MPS. DOJ reported that the overseas police station occupied an entire floor of an office building in Chinatown, Manhattan and was searched by the FBI in October 2022.[111] Chen pled guilty to acting as an illegal agent of the PRC on December 18.[112]

The charges Chen faces are consistent with past PRC influence and coercion campaigns within the US. US authorities charged three people in two separate cases for operating as unregistered PRC agents to harass Chinese dissidents and fugitives in the United States in July 2023.[113] New York authorities also convicted three men for participating in “Operation Fox Hunt,” a campaign to induce PRC nationals living within the US to return to the PRC, in June 2023.[114] FBI director Christopher Wray gave a statement describing Fox Hunt as “a sweeping bid by General Secretary Xi and the Chinese Communist Party to target Chinese nationals here in the United States and across the world who are viewed as threats to the regime” during a press conference in 2020.[115] Fox Hunt, which the PRC describes as an anti-corruption campaign, has existed since 2014.[116]

US officials have tracked reports of the PRC police stations for several years. Wray expressed concern over the reports of PRC overseas police stations in 2022.[117] European research group Safeguard Defenders reported in 2022 that the PRC maintains a global network of such overseas police stations. Over a dozen countries launched investigations of PRC police stations within their borders following the release of the Safeguard Defenders report.[118]

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) denied reports of overseas police stations in response to Chen’s guilty plea in a regular press conference on December 19.[119] The PRC has regularly denied such accusations. PRC officials have maintained that these stations exist for administrative purposes, are operated by volunteers, and serve no policing function. Former MFA spokesman Wang Wenbin said that the “activities of the relevant institutions are to assist Chinese citizens who are unable to return to China during the COVID-19 pandemic to handle the medical examination services for the renewal of Chinese driver’s licenses” in a May 2023 press conference.[120]

California authorities charged a local government campaign manager with acting as an illegal agent of the PRC. A US Department of Justice (DOJ) report said that Yaoning “Mike” Sun served as the “campaign manager and close personal confidante” of councilwoman Eileen Wang, who ran for the city council of Arcadia, California in 2022 and won.[121] Wang and Sun also served as co-officers of a nonprofit to support Chinese-American businesses.[122] The DOJ reported that Sun had worked with co-conspirator Jun “John” Chen, who acted as a handler and served as an intermediary between Sun and PRC officials, in order to influence politics in the PRC’s favor.[123] Sun prepared reports on Wang’s election and sent them to PRC officials in 2022 and 2023. He also traveled to the PRC with Wang in 2023, communicated with Chen proposing actions against “anti-China forces” in the US and “proposed that the PRC government provide an \$80,000 budget to support his and Chen’s efforts in the United States.”[124]

This incident is not the first in which John Chen attempted to orchestrate actions in the PRC's interests within the United States. New York authorities charged Chen and an accomplice, PRC citizen Lin Feng, with conspiring to bribe a government official to participate in transnational repression of Falun Gong in 2023.[125] Chen was sentenced to 20 months in prison “for acting as unregistered agents of the PRC and bribing an IRS agent in connection with a plot to target U.S.-based practitioners of Falun Gong,” a spiritual practice banned in the PRC, in November 2024.[126]

The FBI investigated Eileen Wang's role in the incident. The City of Arcadia released a statement saying that both Wang and the city government cooperated with the investigation, that Sun has “no affiliation” with the City of Arcadia, and that “Sun had no involvement whatsoever with City of Arcadia business or decision-making.”[127] The City of Arcadia's statement added that Sun made his initial appearance at United States District Court for the Central District of California.[128] Wang has not been charged with any crimes.[129] The *New York Times* reported that “it is not clear from the complaint that Ms. Wang was aware of the conversations Mr. Sun and Mr. Chen were allegedly having between themselves and with Chinese government officials about her candidacy. Nor is it obvious from Ms. Wang's social media posts or the criminal complaint against Mr. Sun that Ms. Wang is pro-Beijing.”[130]

Northeast Asia

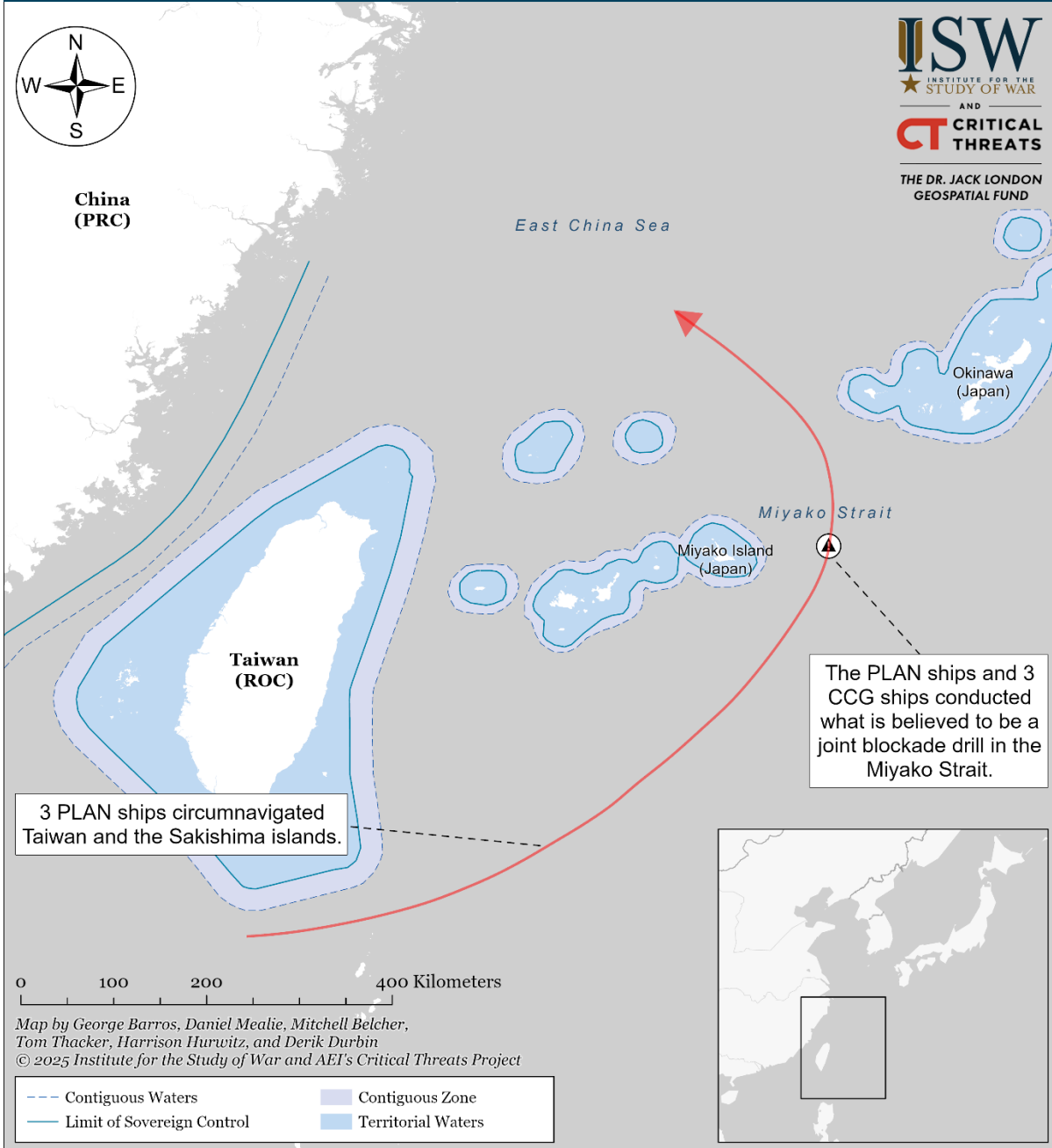
Japan

Sources close to the Japanese government assess that the PLAN and CCG likely conducted a joint maritime blockade drill in the Miyako Strait for the first time on December 22. The drill involved three PLAN vessels and three CCG vessels. The Japanese Joint Staff identified the PLAN vessels to be two Jiangkai II-class frigates and a Jiangkai I-class frigate.[131] The CCG ships included the 2901 vessel, one of the largest law enforcement vessels in the world with a displacement of 12,000 tons. Two CCG ships were equipped with 76mm cannons, which are typically reserved for military vessels.[132] The PLAN ships circumnavigated the southern tip of Taiwan and Japan's Sakishima islands before entering the strait, which is located between the islands of Okinawa and Miyako in Japan's Ryukyu island chain. [133] The ships then sailed through the Miyako Strait toward the East China Sea.[134] The CCG vessels turned off their transponders in the strait according to Automatic Identification System (AIS) data.[135] A PLAN Dongdiao-class intelligence gathering vessel sailed northwest through the same waters between Okinawa and Miyako island toward the East China Sea the following day.[136]

This joint drill between the PLAN and CCG follows a pattern of increasing cooperation and coordination between military and ostensibly law enforcement forces. The PLAN and CCG also operated together in the May 23–24 Joint Sword-2024A drills, October 14 Joint Sword-2024B drills and the December 9-11 naval exercises off the coast of Taiwan.[137] The PRC has heavily armed its coast guard ships, as the 76mm cannons are typically used by navies around the world. The Japanese Coast Guard, by contrast, utilizes 40mm cannons, which only has approximately a third of the firing range of to the 76 millimeter cannons.[138] The joint blockade drill is the first time the PRC has conducted such activities in the Miyako Strait, and it indicates the PRC is making preparations to block the chokepoint between Taiwan and the Japanese archipelago in a variety of situations. The Miyako Strait is strategically important as one of the international waterways connecting the Pacific

Ocean with the East China Sea and one of the widest gaps in the First Island Chain.[139] Okinawa Island is situated on one side of the strait and is home to a major U.S. military base. Cutting off Western and Japanese access to the strait would make it significantly harder for Taiwan to receive aid in the event of an PRC invasion or blockade of Taiwan.

PRC Joint Maritime Blockade Drill in the Miyako Strait (December 22)



North Korea

Relations between the PRC and North Korea (DPRK) likely deteriorated in 2024 despite the fact that the year was supposed to be the PRC-DPRK "Year of Friendship" according to January 2024 statements.

Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jong Un and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping declared in January 2024 that 2024 would be a PRC-DPRK “year of friendship” to mark the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties. Both leaders promised to hold joint celebrations in “all fields” to “inject fresh vitality into the development” of their relationship.[140] Chairman of the PRC National People’s Congress’s Standing Committee Zhao Leji, the PRC’s third-highest ranking official, visited Pyongyang in April to attend the opening ceremony for the friendship year and held high-level talks to discuss promoting bilateral exchange and cooperation.[141] Diplomatic exchanges between the PRC and North Korea, communication between leadership, and bilateral trade all declined in 2024, however, despite earlier commitments to enhance relations in multiple areas.[142]

The 63rd anniversary of the PRC-DPRK Treaty of Friendship on July 11 passed with a minimal ceremony, and neither the North Korean state newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* nor the PRC state-run press covered the event. The PRC embassy in Pyongyang hosted a reception to mark the anniversary which was attended by lower-level officials than in the previous year.[143] PRC representatives appeared to be absent from North Korea’s July 27th "Victory Day" celebration, which marked the end of the Korean War. The PRC Ambassador to North Korea, Wang Yajun, also did not attend the ceremony, the first time the PRC ambassador has ever skipped the event.[144] The celebration in 2023 included a high-profile visit by a Chinese delegation that had high-level talks with Kim Jong Un, by contrast. Kim and Xi exchanged only three leader-to-leader letters in 2024, down from 10 in 2023.[145] North Korean state media reported on January 1 that Kim Jong Un received New Year's greetings from Xi Jinping, including it in a brief mention alongside messages from other friendly nations, in contrast to the more prominent coverage of greetings to and from Russian President Vladimir Putin.[146] There have been 11 delegation visits between the PRC and DPRK since the DPRK border reopened in July 2023. No visits occurred after April 2024, however.[147] North Korea’s trade with the PRC in November reached nearly \$220 million in 2024 but still fell short of the trade levels seen before the pandemic, likely due to the DPRK’s increased trade with Russia.[148]

The decline in DPRK-PRC relations comes as the PRC reaches out to South Korea and seeks to manage its relationship with Japan, while the DPRK dramatically deepens its alliance with Russia. South Korea, Japan, and China held a trilateral summit in May for the first time in five years calling for a “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”[149] Pyongyang protested by stating that “anyone who preaches denuclearization...will be regarded as engaging in the most serious act of sovereignty infringement.”[150] North Korea launched a military reconnaissance satellite on May 28 in protest of the summit. Putin and Kim signed a "comprehensive strategic partnership treaty" in June 2024 that included mutual defense commitments, after which North Korea sent over 10,000 troops to Russia.[151] PRC officials repeatedly declined to comment on the deployment, stating that the PRC "is not involved in the Russia-DPRK development." [152] The PRC historically has been North Korea's strongest ally and economic partner, but this shift in the DPRK's alignment suggests that the PRC may hold less influence over North Korea than it once did.

The DPRK-PRC relationship is likely in decline at least for now. Several factors may contribute to this decline, including the PRC's reluctance to become deeply entangled in the growing Russia-DPRK alliance for fear of alienating Europe and drawing increased pressure from the United States. The PRC is no longer the DPRK's sole economic patron, diminishing its diplomatic leverage, although Russia is unlikely to be able fully to replace the PRC in this role. The PRC has a strategic interest in maintaining control over the Kim regime, and the transactional nature of the Russia-DPRK relationship may prove disruptive to PRC objectives in the long term. The PRC is likely to continue maintaining functioning ties with both nations, however, despite the decline in diplomatic exchanges with North Korea over the past year.

Kim may seek to further reduce economic reliance on China to enhance his diplomatic independence. Kim probably hopes to secure international recognition as a nuclear-armed state by strengthening his position against the United States and its allies.[153] This effort includes expanding the DPRK's weapons portfolio through technology transfers from Russia and increasing North Korea's global influence, enhancing negotiating power with both the United States and PRC on denuclearization and sanctions. [154] Kim is likely to continue realigning toward stronger ties with Russia at the expense of the PRC.

Southeast Asia

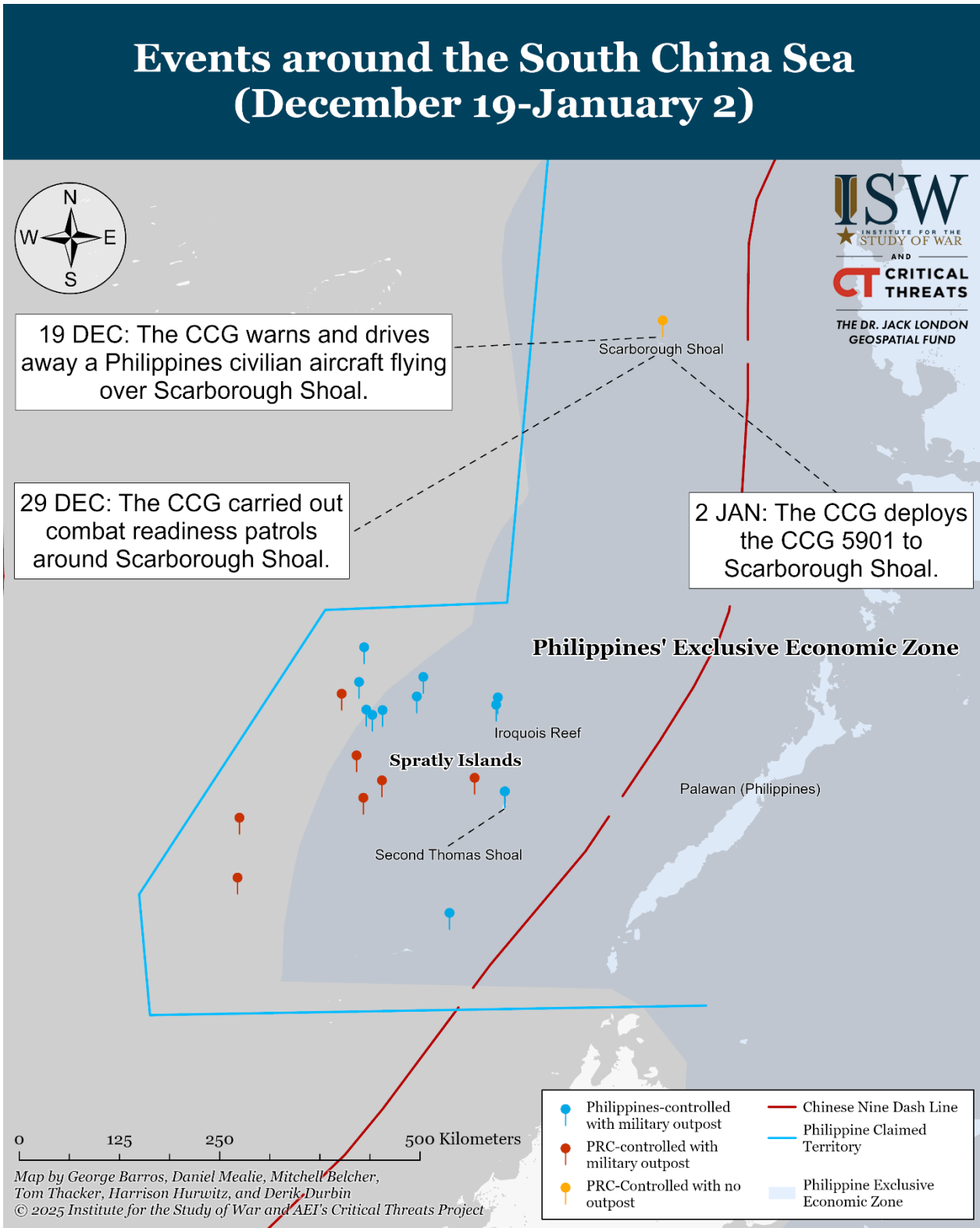
Philippines

The PLA carried out combat readiness patrols around Scarborough Shoal on December 29, a final act of coercion in a year of heightened tensions between the Philippines and PRC in the South China Sea. The PRC Ministry of National Defense reported that these exercises, carried out by the PLA Southern Theater Command, were intended to defend PRC national sovereignty and “continuously strengthen maritime and airspace patrols around China's territorial waters” around Scarborough Shoal.[155] The CCG strengthened its presence around Scarborough Shoal on January 2 by deploying the CCG 5901, the world's largest coastguard vessel, joining at least three other CCG vessels and seven maritime militia ships already present near Scarborough Shoal.[156] This is the first deployment of the CCG 5901 to Scarborough Shoal since May 2024, another period of high tensions between the PRC and the Philippines.

These patrols and deployments follow a December 19 incident in which the China Coast Guard (CCG) warned and “drove away” a Philippines Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources aircraft flying over Scarborough Shoal.[157] CCG spokesperson Liu Dejun said that the CCG vessel warned the civilian plane that it was “illegally intruding” into PRC territorial airspace, monitored the aircraft, and expelled it from PRC territory.[158]

ISW has reported on multiple CCG patrols around Scarborough Shoal over the past five months, noting that these patrols serve the dual purpose of showcasing PLA military capabilities to the Philippines and reinforcing PRC territorial claims over Scarborough Shoal.[159] The Scarborough Shoal has been under PRC control since a standoff between the Philippines and the PRC in 2012, though the PRC has not built infrastructure on the shoal. Scarborough Shoal is one of the disputed areas of the South China Sea that has been the site of significant tensions and aggressive behavior by the PRC throughout 2024. While there have been periods of relative calm between the PRC and the

Philippines, current trends in behavior indicate that tensions in the South China Sea will continue into the new year.



Europe

The PRC did not fully cooperate with a European investigation of a PRC commercial ship that likely severed two subsea cables in the Baltic Sea. The investigation concluded with no arrests. Danish and Swedish ships detained the PRC-flagged cargo ship *Yi Peng 3* for a month in the Kattegat Strait, just outside Danish territorial waters, as European authorities investigated whether the ship deliberately severed two undersea communications cables on November 17–18. Investigators determined that the ship dropped its anchor on November 17, severed the first cable, and continued to drag the anchor over 100 miles. They said the ship then turned off its transponder and cut the second cable at 3 a.m. the next day.[160] Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Finland attempted to carry out an investigation but were unable to board the ship without the PRC’s permission or to make arrests, as the ship was anchored in international waters. The PRC ultimately dispatched its own team to investigate. The PRC team boarded the ship to inspect it on December 19 and allowed European personnel to participate as observers. PRC authorities did not allow Sweden’s chief prosecutor for the case to board, however. The ship was allowed to leave on December 21.[161] Swedish foreign minister Maria Malmer Stenergard criticized the PRC for denying the prosecutor the opportunity to inspect the vessel and question the crew as needed for a criminal investigation.[162] PRC MFA spokesperson Mao Ning portrayed the PRC as cooperative. She said the PRC had invited Germany, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark to participate in the joint investigation, informed them in advance that the ship was leaving “to protect the physical and mental health of the crew,” and is willing to maintain communication to promote the follow-up handling of the incident.[163]

It remains unclear why the ship severed the cables. European investigators and intelligence officials said the PRC government likely wasn’t involved in the incident. The investigation suggested the possibility that Russian agents may have bribed the ship’s crew to carry out the sabotage, however.[164]

Syria

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)’ appointment of Uyghur fighters in Syria to government roles will likely cause friction between the new Syrian government and the PRC. HTS, the ruling coalition that overthrew the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, appointed Uyghur militants of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) to defense ministry positions as a “token of recognition” for their role in ousting Assad.[165] The coalition appointed the commander of TIP in Syria, Abdulaziz Dawood Khudaberdi, to the position of brigadier general. Two other Uyghurs were given the rank of colonel.[166] The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) gave a statement against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur separatist movement the PRC affiliates with TIP, following these appointments. MFA spokeswoman Mao Ning said that the PRC would “resolutely crack down” on ETIM, which she denounced as a “terrorist organization,” in a regular press conference on December 31.[167]

Uyghurs have fled from the PRC to Syria to operate as militants for several years. The Associated Press cited estimates ranging between several hundred and 5,000 Uyghur fighters active in Syria, including via the TIP, since at least the mid-2010s.[168] PRC may interpret HTS’ installation of Uyghur defense officials as tacit approval of the TIP’s cause.[169] TIP has publicly expressed anti-PRC sentiment since HTS came to power in Syria. TIP propaganda released in December 2024 called for a

jihad against the PRC, citing PRC government repression of Uyghur Muslims.[170] ISW has assessed that the PRC will likely continue to push for stability and counteract the influence of ETIM and TIP.[171] The PRC has long sought to contain Uyghur militancy in Syria and worked with the Assad regime in order to do so; PRC officials likely view HTS' rise to power as a disruption to established counterterrorism channels.[172]

High-level PRC officials have called for cooperation with the new Syrian government. PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed concern over the turbulence in Syria in a December 13 press conference. Wang urged Syria to “firmly oppose any form of terrorism and extremist forces.” Wang also called for “the lifting of illegal unilateral sanctions” against Syria.[173]

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