

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update

April 5, 2024



China-Taiwan Weekly Update, April 5, 2024

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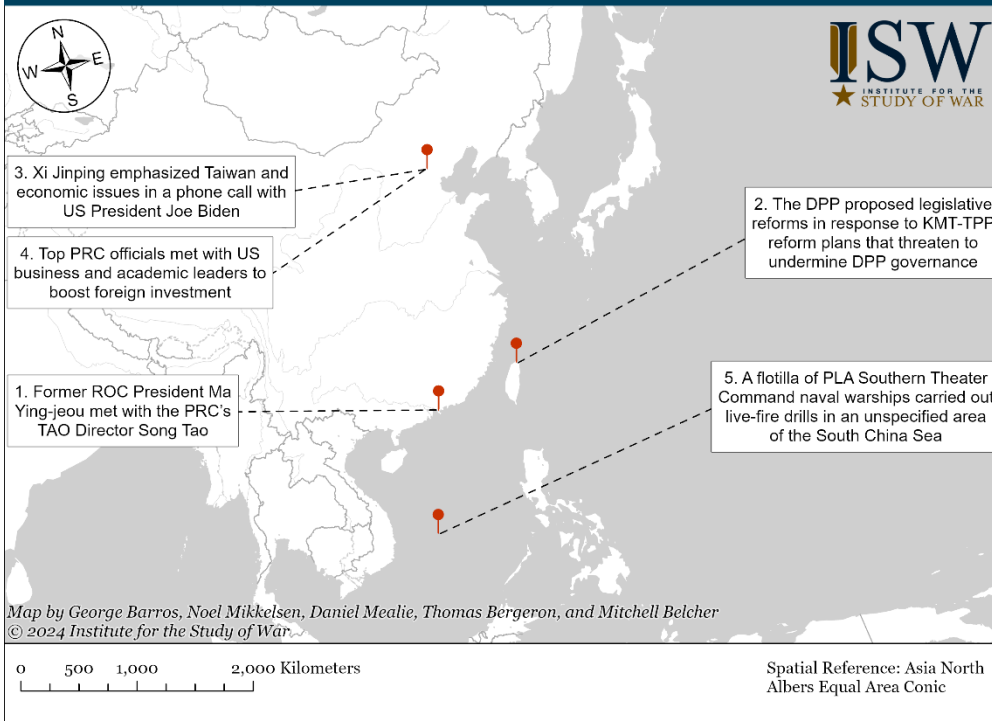
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The China–Taiwan Weekly Update is a joint product of the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute. The update supports the ISW–AEI Coalition Defense of Taiwan project, which assesses Chinese campaigns against Taiwan, examines 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

- Former Republic of China (ROC) President Ma Ying-jeou met with the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Taiwan Affairs Office Director Song Tao in Shenzhen.
 - The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) proposed legislative reforms in response to the Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People’s Party's (TPP) reforms that threaten to undermine the DPP's governance.
 - CCP Secretary General Xi Jinping emphasized Taiwan and economic issues in a phone call with US President Joe Biden. The PRC readout of the call did not mention the US key security concerns.
 - Top PRC officials met with US business and academic leaders to boost foreign investment.
 - A flotilla of PLA Southern Theater Command naval warships carried out live-fire drills in an unspecified area of the South China Sea on the weekend of March 30.
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China-Taiwan Update Political-Military Events (March 27 - April 2, 2024)



Cross-Strait Relations

Former ROC President Ma Ying-jeou met with the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office Director Song Tao on April 1 in Shenzhen. Song repeated standard rhetoric expressing the PRC’s cross-strait policy, including urging adherence to the “1992 Consensus” and opposing Taiwanese independence and foreign interference. Ma echoed Song’s statements and advocated for stronger cross-strait cooperation and exchanges in all areas, especially between the youth.[1] Ma’s meeting with Song occurred on the first day of his trip to the PRC and did not appear on his public itinerary.[2] The stated purpose of Ma’s visit to the PRC is to lead a delegation of Taiwanese students to participate in exchanges with mainland youth and promote cross-strait stability from April 1-11.[3]

The CCP insists that all cross-strait negotiations must be on the mutual basis of the “1992 consensus,” which Ma and the Kuomintang (KMT) recognize but the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) does not. The 1992 Consensus is an alleged verbal agreement between semi-official representatives of the PRC and the then KMT-ruled ROC following negotiations in 1992. It states that both sides agree there is only one China and that Taiwan is part of China. The CCP interprets this “one China” to be the People’s Republic of China, however, while the KMT interprets it to be the Republic of China. The CCP does not acknowledge that the KMT’s interpretation of the 1992 Consensus does not align with its own. The PRC severed official cross-strait contact in 2016 based on the DPP’s refusal to accept the 1992 Consensus.[4]

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CEO of the Ma Ying-jeou Foundation and former Ma aide Hsiao Hsu-tsen mentioned the possibility that Ma will meet with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping on April 8.[5] Ma last met Xi in Singapore in 2015, when Ma was ROC president. The 2015 meeting was the first between the leaders of the PRC and Taiwan. Ma became the first former Taiwanese president to visit the PRC in March 2023 during a visit that overlapped with sitting president Tsai Ing-wen’s trip to the United States. Ma did not meet Xi on that visit, however. PRC officials have repeatedly lauded the period during Ma’s presidency as a high point in cross-strait relations to portray relations as having failed under the DPP. The PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) spokesperson Chen Binhua stated on March 13 that Taiwan should aim to relive the prosperity and peaceful development that cross-strait relations enjoyed from 2008 to 2016.[6]

Several senior KMT officials reacted positively to Ma’s trip. KMT Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia, who has held numerous meetings with CCP officials since assuming his role in 2021, expressed confidence that Ma’s trip will have a placatory and stabilizing effect on cross-strait relations.[7] Legislative Yuan Deputy Speaker Johnny Chiang urged respect for Ma’s itinerary and advocated for “diverse and multi-level” cross-strait exchanges.[8] DPP members have been critical of Ma’s trip, however. DPP Caucus Whip Rosalia Wu expressed disapproval of Ma’s gracious attitude despite the CCP’s failure to acknowledge Ma as the former president. Wu warned Ma to be cautious with his words and actions during his trip.[9] Premier Chen Chien-jen called on Ma to assert that “Taiwan is a sovereign and independent country” in front of Xi Jinping if the two of them meet.[10]

Taiwan

The DPP proposed legislative reforms on April 3 in response to KMT-TPP reform plans that threaten to undermine the DPP’s governance.[11] The KMT proposed a series of legislative reforms to increase the Legislative Yuan’s (LY) oversight of the government on March 6. The reforms call for the establishment of inquiry committees and hearing procedures to compel individuals— including the president— to testify before the LY, assert penalties for perceived non-compliance or dishonesty in responses, and empower the LY to confirm political appointments.[12] The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) released a similar draft on February 16.[13] The DPP’s recommended reforms do not include core elements of the opposition’s proposals, including the creation of special inquiry committees and the ability to hold testifiers in contempt.

The TPP and KMT have consistently stated that establishing a legislative investigative task force to intensify supervision of the executive branch is at the top of their agenda.[14] TPP Caucus Whip Huang Kuo-chang stated the TPP and KMT align in their reform direction, and the TPP’s support for the KMT in the LY will be aimed at achieving reform.[15]

The KMT has largely dismissed the DPP’s proposal as an attempt to water down necessary reforms and pledged to continue pursuing the reforms that it proposed. KMT legislator Luo Chih-chiang stated that the KMT would persist in defending the LY’s dignity and legislative reform.[16] KMT Caucus Secretary-General Hung Mong-kai claimed the DPP’s version would not achieve the goal of strengthening legislative oversight to increase the representation of public opinion in the LY.[17] KMT Caucus Whip Fu Kun-chi, a leader of the reforms, has consistently urged for the need to impose checks and balances on the government to limit its power and expose corruption.[18]

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DPP Caucus Whip Ker Chien-ming emphasized the constitutionality of the DPP’s proposed reforms and stated that they would never sow chaos in politics, unlike the reforms that the opposition parties put forth.[19] The DPP has consistently criticized the opposition’s dogged determination to pursue the legislative reforms. Ker stated that “the evil forces of Blue and White,” referring to the KMT and TPP, are taking advantage of their collective majority in the LY to expand their power and wage a new “White Terror” against the executive branch.[20] DPP General Secretary Rosalia Wu emphasized the unconstitutionality of the opposition’s proposals and stressed that the LY cannot directly interfere with the executive branch by subjecting the president to legislative oversight.[21]

The opposition’s plan to impose checks and balances on the DPP could significantly hamper the government’s ability to pass policy by miring it in defensive actions against accusations of overstepping authority or corruption. KMT Caucus Deputy Secretary-General Lin Tzu-ming earlier referred to the proposed reforms as a “great weapon” that the LY must use to supervise the government.[22] The KMT’s outspoken rejection of the DPP’s reform proposal indicates the two largest parties will not compromise on the DPP’s revised version. Collaboration between the KMT and the TPP to advance their reforms suggests their version will pass with a majority in the LY, as the TPP’s eight seats constitute a crucial swing vote. The opposition’s determination to derail the DPP government is favorable to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests, especially if it hinders the government’s ability to implement its foreign and defense policy.

The LY’s Judiciary and Organic Laws and Statutes Committee will review the DPP’s proposal under the KMT’s rotating chairmanship of the committee next week.[23]

China

CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized cross-strait relations and economic issues in the US-PRC relationship during a phone call with US President Joe Biden on April 2. The PRC readout of the call did not address the US security concerns, including the PRC’s support for Russia and heightened tensions in the South China Sea. Xi and Biden spoke by phone on April 2, in their first direct conversation since their meeting in San Francisco on November 15, 2023. According to the PRC readout of the call, Xi warned that the PRC considers the “Taiwan question” a “red line” and will act to counter Taiwanese “separatists” and external support for them. He also objected to US sanctions measures on PRC companies which he claimed are “suppress[ing] China’s trade and technology development,” saying the PRC welcomes mutually beneficial trade with the United States but will not “sit back and watch” if the United States seeks to “deprive China of its legitimate right to development.” Xi also said the three underlying principles of US-PRC relations in 2024 should be to value peace, to prioritize stability, and to uphold the credibility of commitments to each other.[24]

The PRC readout did not elaborate on many other issues the two discussed according to the White House readout, including freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, PRC support for Russia’s defense industrial base, and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.[25] The Xi-Biden call followed a call between US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and PRC Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu on March 27, which discussed similar issues.[26] The focus of the PRC readout shows the CCP is trying to portray trade issues and US support for Taiwan as the core disputes in an otherwise stable

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US-PRC relationship while downplaying US concerns about the PRC's threats to regional and US national security.

The PRC used a series of high-profile meetings with US political, business, and academic leaders to boost foreign investment. The PRC invited top US business, academic, and strategic leaders to the PRC for the China Development Forum on March 25-26 and a meeting with Xi Jinping on March 27. Nearly all top PRC officials for economic affairs, including Premier Li Qiang, Vice Premiers Ding Xuexiang and He Lifeng, Vice President Han Zheng, and Xi Jinping's Chief of Staff Cai Qi held high-level meetings with foreign business executives including Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman, Qualcomm CEO Cristiano Amon, and US-China Business Council president Craig Allen.[27] Academics, such as former Harvard Kennedy School dean Graham Allison, also attended meetings with Xi and other top officials, as did National Committee on US-China Relations (NCUSCR) Chairman Evan Greenberg.[28] The meetings and PRC state media reporting about them sought to boost foreign investor confidence in the PRC economy and signal “win-win opportunities” for investors.

Xi used the occasion to reiterate that US-China “incorrect perceptions” from the US side are a key cause of tensions in the US-China relationship.[29] PRC state media Xinhua ran a series of commentary articles promoting the development of healthy US-PRC relations.[30] Global Times published an interview with Allison in which he said the United States and PRC were “inseparable, conjoined Siamese twins” and praised PRC leaders for seeking to escape the “Thucydides Trap,” a term Allison coined to describe the historical tendency of rising powers and established great powers to go to war.[31] CCP meetings with US business leaders, academics, and PRC-friendly groups like NCUSCR and the US-China Business Council may offer avenues for the CCP to influence US policy and lend credence to CCP narratives, such as the narrative that problems in US-PRC relations are caused by “incorrect perceptions” in the United States and the promotion of investment opportunities in the PRC.

The PRC also promoted stabilizing relations and boosting investment in meetings with European officials, including Premier Li Qiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's meetings with French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné on April 1.[32]

PRC officials expressed opposition to the expansion of the AUKUS security partnership. New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters said New Zealand expects the PRC to respect its right to explore joining AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. MFA spokesperson Lin Jian responded by expressing the PRC's “strong concerns” about AUKUS and noting that the PRC opposes “camp confrontation” and forming “exclusive small circles.”[33] PRC Ministry of Defense (MOD) spokesperson Wu Qian criticized the expansion and upgrading of AUKUS as a “dangerous step in a more dangerous direction.” Wu was referring to an AU\$4.6 billion agreement for the UK to build nuclear submarines for Australia and US plans to discuss Japan's technical cooperation with AUKUS when Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida meets with US President Joe Biden in April.[34] CCP opposition to AUKUS is consistent with the CCP view that all US alliance structures are in alignment against the PRC. The MOD also expressed concerns about NATO's “eastward march into the Asia-Pacific and the Taiwan issue” during the 8th China-NATO security policy dialogue held in mid-March.[35]

Northeast Asia

North Korea

The PRC abstained from voting for a United Nations Security Council resolution about extending a monitoring panel that tracks adherence to UN sanctions against North Korea. Russia vetoed the UNSC resolution on March 28.[36] The UN Security Council has unanimously adopted the annual renewal of the North Korean sanctions monitoring panel’s mandate since its inception in 2009.[37] The PRC Permanent Mission to the UN stated that the “sanctions should not be set in stone, nor should it be indefinite.” It instead called for “adjust[ing] the sanctions against the DPRK in the humanitarian and livelihood field.”[38] The PRC MFA Spokesman Lin Jian claimed on March 29 that there was “still time for consultations” when the UNSC “rushed” the resolution for a vote.[39]

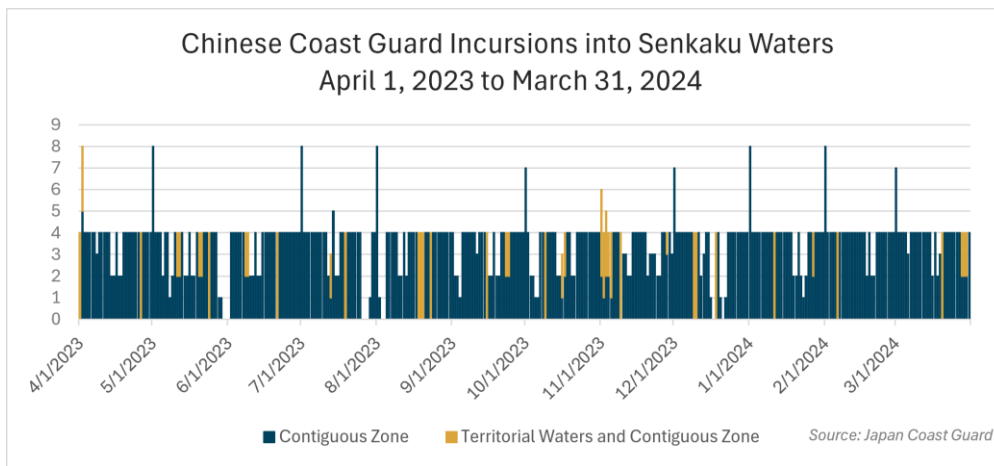
Japan

Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessels entered disputed waters around the Senkaku islands 101 days in a row as of April 1 in an ongoing effort to assert PRC sovereignty over the islands. The Senkaku Islands, called the Diaoyu Islands in Chinese, are an uninhabited archipelago about 120 miles northeast of Taiwan and 200 miles southwest of Japan's Okinawa Prefecture. Japan administers the islands, but the PRC and Taiwan also claim the islands.[40] The CCG has normalized daily incursions into the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands, which is between 12 and 24 nautical miles from the islands. The current string of consecutive daily CCG incursions into the islands’ adjacent waters began on December 22, 2023, the same day Japan’s Cabinet approved a record-high defense budget of 7.95 trillion yen (\$48 billion) for 2024.[41] The PRC has repeatedly expressed opposition to Japan increasing its defense budget or taking a more active military role in the region.[42]

The CCG began near-daily incursions into the Senkaku Islands’ adjacent waters in 2012 and significantly increased the volume of these incursions in 2019. It has made 90-110 incursions in most months since April 2019 into the Senkaku Islands’ contiguous zone, as well as 4-12 incursions into the territorial waters within 12 nautical miles of the islands. CCG ships entered 121 times into the archipelago’s contiguous zone and 10 times into its territorial waters in March 2024.[43] There were only 10 days since April 1, 2023, without CCG incursions into the contiguous waters.

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Source: Japan Coast Guard

The PRC is framing growing US-Japan military cooperation as a threat to the PRC. The Japanese Parliament passed its record \$48 billion defense budget on March 28 for the fiscal year beginning April 1. This is the same budget the Cabinet approved in December. MFA spokesperson Lin Jian said Japan’s annually increasing defense budget, relaxation of restrictions on arms exports, and breakthrough military developments raise “strong doubts” about whether Japan is sincerely focused on defense and peaceful development. He urged Japan to respect the security concerns of its neighbors, “deeply reflect on its history of aggression,” and avoid “further breaking the trust of its Asian neighbors.”^[44] MOD spokesperson Wu Qian framed the possibility of Japanese technical cooperation with AUKUS as a “dangerous step in a more dangerous direction.”^[45] Foreign Minister Wang Yi met former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and urged Japan to “do more things conducive to regional peace and stability, rather than the opposite.”^[46] PRC state-owned tabloid Global Times claimed the US-Japan alliance is evolving into an “axis of evil” that threatens regional stability and cited scholars who claimed the US recruitment of Japan to participate in trilateral US-Philippines-Japan patrols in the South China Sea was part of a US attempt to “consume allies’ resources and weaken China.”^[47] US President Joe Biden will host Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on April 10 to discuss enhanced military cooperation.^[48]

Southeast Asia

Philippines

A flotilla of PLA Southern Theater Command naval warships carried out live-fire drills in an unspecified area of the South China Sea on the weekend of March 30. The drills included fire targeting an armed militia fishing boat and an enemy jet. The drills followed separate daytime and nighttime exercises in the South China Sea that the PLAN carried out on an unspecified date in early spring.^[49] State-owned tabloid Global Times quoted PRC analysts who said the drills signaled that the PRC will be on “high alert” regardless of US, Philippine, or Japanese activities in the region.^[50]

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