

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.

Taiwan is facing growing political discord and uncertainty amid high-profile quarrels between the two most prominent political parties. Petitions to recall members of the Legislative Yuan (LY) have gained significant traction in recent months. These recall efforts, which have targeted fifty-eight legislators, were in response to a coalition of lawmakers led by the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) approving highly controversial legislation, including sweeping budget cuts. The mass recalls primarily targeted KMT and KMT-aligned legislators but expanded to also target some members of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Fifty recall petitions have advanced to the second stage of the legal process in recent days. These petitions target 34 KMT legislators, 15 DPP legislators, and one KMT-aligned independent legislator.[1] Many of these recall petitions will likely fail in the second stage, especially those targeting DPP members, since advancing further requires a petition to get signatures from 10 percent of a district’s constituents. Petitions targeting the DPP have gained far fewer signatures than those targeting the KMT, meaning that the KMT faces a greater risk of recalls.[2] The Central Election Commission is, moreover, investigating over 30 cases of fraudulent signatures, most of which KMT-aligned groups submitted.[3] DPP voters are the most likely to sign recall petitions, according to surveys.[4] The recall petitions remain broadly unpopular among Taiwanese voters, however, and have continued gaining disapproval throughout the process—even among DPP voters.

KMT and KMT-aligned politicians are trying to frame the DPP as authoritarian, citing DPP support for the recall petitions and its efforts to reduce People’s Republic of China (PRC) influence in Taiwan.[5] These KMT-sponsored narratives risk undermining the credibility of Taiwanese President William Lai Ching-te and his efforts to resist PRC aggression. Former Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian—the first DPP president—called on the Lai administration to make concessions to the KMT.[6] The KMT could use Chen’s statement to further fuel the narrative that the Lai administration is going too far and acting against the interests of Taiwan and the DPP.[7]

The recall campaigns come as KMT politicians have called for votes of no-confidence against the presidential cabinet over accusations of PRC infiltration, judicial corruption, and the “unlawful arrest” of a Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) senior official.[8] If the LY passes a vote of no-confidence the premier must resign and may request that the president to dissolve the LY. DPP caucus chair Ker Chien-ming said that an LY dissolution would likely result in greater DPP representation in the legislature.[9] The TPP rejected the calls for a no-confidence vote, likely worried that snap elections would risk their minority status within the LY.[10] While it is possible that re-electing the LY could result in increased DPP influence, it would additionally likely increase general feelings of chaos within Taiwanese politics and decrease public confidence in the government overall.

The PRC is continuing to leverage global frustration with US tariffs to try to divide the United States from its partners, including Taiwan. The PRC is trying to portray itself as a reliable economic alternative to the United States, especially to neighboring countries that are heavily affected by US tariffs.

The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) hosted a symposium for Taiwanese businesspeople on April 18, during which TAO Director Song Tao criticized US tariffs and framed Beijing as a responsible and reliable trade partner.[11] The TAO also emphasized the need for greater business cooperation and supply chain integration between the PRC and Taiwan in order to achieve “national reunification.”[12] This symposium is part of the PRC effort to make Taiwan economically dependent on the PRC and to reduce Taiwanese cooperation with the United States. The PRC informational effort to frame the United States as unreliable complements its other informational effort to portray the DPP as an irresponsible servant of the United States.[13]

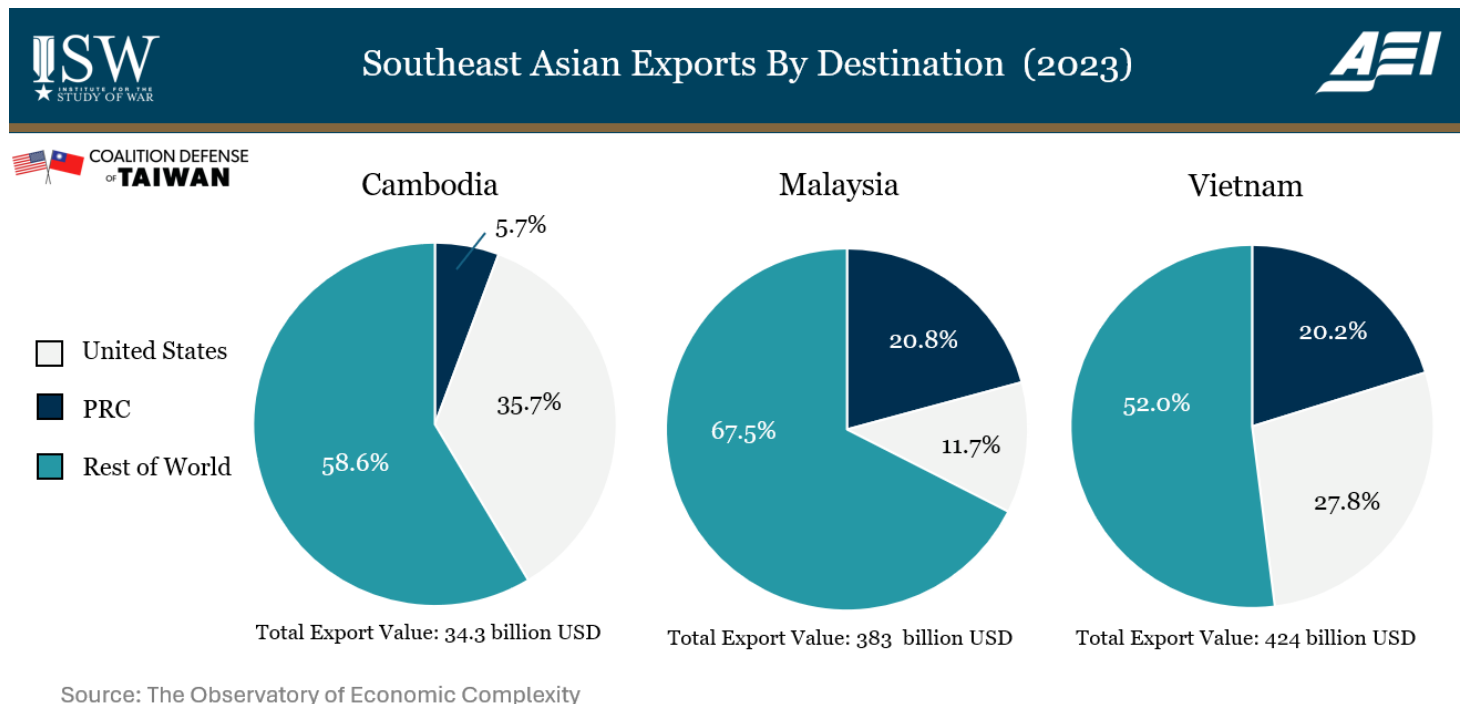
PRC President Xi Jinping paid official visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia on April 14–18, signing agreements with these countries and emphasizing the importance of their deepening strategic partnerships.[14] The timing of the visit highlighted the PRC’s calls for multilateralism and cooperation in contrast to American protectionism through “Liberation Day” tariffs.[15] Xi used the opportunity to call for global cooperation and multilateralism in contrast to US protectionism. Xi also emphasized the need for cooperation across the Indo-Pacific in order to “safeguard the bright prospects of our Asian family.”[16] PRC Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi further framed the PRC as a reliable alternative to the United States in phone calls with his UK and Austrian counterparts on April 22.[17] Yi urged his counterparts to join the PRC in countering tariffs.

The United States is promising to reduce tariffs on countries that reduce trade with the PRC, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. [18] The PRC Ministry of Commerce stated on April 21 that it would act against any country that reaches a trade deal with the United States and runs counter to PRC interests.[19] The Malaysian trade ministry responded to the PRC by publishing a neutral statement reiterating its commitment to all trade partners.[20]

The PRC has separately threatened to sanction South Korean entities that ship rare earth minerals to US defense companies, according to South Korean media.^[21] This came as the PRC has expanded its restrictions on the export of rare earth minerals to the United States in retaliation for US tariffs. The PRC dominates most of the global supply of these resources.

Key Takeaways

- **Taiwan.** Taiwan is facing growing political discord and uncertainty amid high-profile quarrels between the two most prominent political parties. Recall petitions targeting 50 lawmakers have advanced to the second stage. Most target members of the opposition KMT. The KMT faces a significantly greater risk to its legislative influence than the ruling DPP. Though the DPP may gain legislative influence, the recalls risk fueling general feelings of instability in Taiwanese politics and decreasing public confidence in the government overall.
- **PRC.** The PRC is continuing to leverage global frustration with US tariffs to try to divide the United States from its partners. The PRC is trying to portray itself as a reliable economic alternative to the United States, especially to neighboring countries that are heavily affected by US tariffs. The United States has meanwhile promised reportedly to reduce tariffs on countries that reduce trade with the PRC. The PRC stated likely in response that it would act against any country that reaches a trade deal with the United States and runs counter to PRC interests.



Cross-Strait

Relations

Taiwan

Taiwanese counterintelligence operations have highlighted the extensive PRC efforts to subvert the Taiwanese government. Taiwan has launched new counterintelligence measures to protect sensitive information following recent revelations of PRC agents in the government and military. Taiwanese Defense Minister Wellington Koo announced on April 16 that active-duty Taiwanese military personnel were found having PRC residency permits and would be prohibited from handling intelligence.[22] Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) made similar inquiries and revealed that no CGA personnel hold residency permits. Ocean Affairs Council Minister Kuan Bi-ling announced that three CGA personnel without access to classified information had held PRC residency permits before their recruitment and that these permits were canceled or are in the process of cancellation.[23]

The Taiwanese presidential cabinet on April 17 announced efforts to bolster the vetting of civil service employees to “prevent infiltration through every possible means by foreign hostile forces.”[24] Increased security measures may include reviewing the frequency and method of “loyalty checks” used to vet civil servants.[25] President Lai announced that DPP members will need to submit reports before and after visiting the PRC or if they encounter PRC government-affiliated individuals.[26] Lai also called for an increase in national security education within the DPP and said that “Any betrayal of the party's core values for personal gain must be met with strict disciplinary action and the harshest legal consequences.”[27] Lai's statement follows the arrest of a former aide to Taiwan's National Security Council General Secretary Joseph Wu on charges that the aide spied for the PRC while Wu was Taiwan's foreign minister.[28]

TAO spokesperson Zhu Fenglian accused DPP officials of using spy allegations to stoke anti-PRC sentiment.[29] This rhetoric reflects an ongoing PRC attempt to frame the DPP as an authoritarian oppressor and undermine the credibility of the Lai administration's counter-coercion efforts.

Northeast Asia

North Korea

North Korea is deepening ties with the PRC and Russia, which could drive competition for influence between its two largest economic patrons. North Korea resumed construction of the New Yalu River Bridge near its border with the PRC in February 2025 to increase North Korea-PRC overland trade.[30] North Korea's trade with the PRC increased on-year with total trade reaching 222.5 million US dollars in January and nearly 122 million US dollars in February, compared to 190 million and 121 million US dollars, respectively, in 2024.[31]

North Korea is also constructing the first bridge solely dedicated to vehicle traffic on its border with Russia.[32] North Korea and Russia will also begin operating a new passenger train service between Rason, North Korea, and Primorsky Krai, Russia, on May 8.[33] The launch of the new train route

coincides with a surge in cross-border travel since 2024. Russia issued nearly 10,000 visas to North Korean nationals in 2024—up from just 20 in 2023.[34] Russian consular data indicates that around 93 percent of these visas were for education, with none reportedly granted for employment.[35] This contradicts evidence of North Korean laborers working at a construction site in Vladivostok, Russia, which is a violation of the UN sanctions.[36] The Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA)—a South Korean state-funded think tank—estimated that North Korea has earned approximately 20 billion US dollars through military cooperation with Russia since 2022.[37]

A potential ceasefire in Ukraine could pivot North Korea toward greater economic cooperation with the PRC as an alternative economic partner to Russia.[38] The PRC would welcome an opportunity to restore its influence over North Korea by deepening North Korean economic dependence on the PRC. North Korea could seek further economic cooperation with Russia, however, to avoid becoming overly reliant on the PRC—even if the war in Ukraine ends or temporarily stops.

South Korea

Lee Jae-myung—a leading presidential candidate from the Democratic Party (DP)—called for dialogue with North Korea. Lee expressed optimism on April 21 that opportunities for improving inter-Korean relations would “rise again.”[39] Lee observed that the United States is working with Russia to counter the PRC and predicted that US President Donald Trump would seek to improve relations with North Korea as part of an effort to contain the PRC. Lee attributed the strengthening of North Korea-Russia cooperation to the Yoon Suk-yeol administration's hardline stance on North Korea, stating that the relationship significantly threatens South Korea. Lee stated that South Korea needs to play a role in potential dialogue between the United States and North Korea. Lee further emphasized the importance of the United States–South Korea alliance and suggested keeping good relations with Japan while separating historical issues from current economic policy. He blamed the PRC for causing conflict with South Korea through its economic sanctions.

Officials from the previous Moon Jae-in and Roh Moo-hyun administrations are leading North Korea policy in Lee's election campaign. Former Vice Minister of Unification Chun Hae-sung and former floor leader of the DP Hong Ik-pyo are notable figures in the campaign and have advocated for inter-Korean cooperation, dialogue, and peacebuilding. Chun participated in several inter-Korean summits between 2007 and 2018. Chun played a key role in arranging major agreements during the Moon administration, including the “4.27” Panmunjom Declaration and “9.19” Military Agreement, both of which aim to reduce tensions between North and South Korea.[40] He also supported Lee's previous election campaign in 2021, during which he proposed a “step-by-step” approach to denuclearization talks and conditional sanctions relief.[41] Lee is distinguishing himself from Moon by asserting his intention to take “reciprocal actions” in response to North Korean provocations and strengthen military preparedness to counter North Korea's nuclear threat.[42] The Moon administration sought to reduce the scale of the United States-South Korea military exercises in deference to North Korean sensitivities.[43]

Lee's campaign has a tempered version of the Yoon administration's North Korea policy but adopts a less accommodating approach than the Moon administration. He characterizes his policy vision as "pragmatism," emphasizing a focus on national interest over ideology and political factions.[44] Lee's seemingly assertive stance on the PRC underscores his shift from traditional left-leaning policies. Lee said on April 21 that the PRC is partially responsible for the current poor relations with South Korea.[45] This stance may reflect growing anti-PRC and anti-North Korean sentiment among South Korean voters, as well as dissatisfaction with the Moon administration's North Korea policy.[46] Lee's North Korean policy during the presidential race is likely to maintain a stance of strengthening the alliance with the United States, pursuing dialogue with North Korea while enhancing military readiness, and distancing itself from the PRC.

The PRC completed the installation of a stationary oil rig-style platform and two movable maritime structures within the South Korea-PRC Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ)[47] The PRC could use these structures to justify future claims to authority over the area.

Newsweek released satellite images of the site and reported that the stationary platform is fixed to the seabed with three steel legs, each approximately 54-meters tall. The platform measures about 100 by 80 meters, roughly the size of a soccer field, and includes antennas and a helipad, with a reported capacity to accommodate up to 100 personnel.[48] The platform is adjacent to two mobile fishery structures that the PRC installed in 2018 and 2024.[49] The PRC claims that the former oil rig, which was decommissioned in 2016, serves as a management facility for mobile fishery structures.[50] The PRC maintains that these platforms are for fishing purposes.[51] The PRC designated the surrounding waters as a 'national deep and far sea green culture experimental zone.' The city of Qingdao announced plans to install 10 more similar platforms in the area.[52]

The PRC blocked a South Korean research vessel from approaching the area in March during the latter's attempt to monitor water quality.[53] South Korean Foreign Affairs Minister Cho Tae-yul raised the issue of the structure's installation to PRC Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi during a meeting in Tokyo in March.[54] The PRC Embassy in South Korea insisted that the platform was merely an aquaculture facility and did not violate the bilateral agreement.[55] PRC Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun reiterated on April 20 that the structures did not breach any agreements with South Korea. Guo urged South Korea to approach the issue "objectively and rationally." [56] South Korean Oceans and Fisheries Minister Kang Do-hyung said that the government is reviewing proportional countermeasures alongside diplomatic consultations, not ruling out the installation of South Korean counter-structures. South Korea announced on March 26 that it had installed a buoy in the area as a reciprocal measure. [57] South Korea and PRC agreed to a subcommittee to address this issue at the 3rd Korea-PRC Maritime Cooperation Dialogue in Seoul on April 23.[58] The PRC proposed South Korean officials to visit to the structures but rejected dismantlement.[59]

South Korea and PRC established the PMZ in a 2000 agreement that restricted activities in overlapping areas of both countries' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) to fishing.[60] The PRC's unilateral

installation of new facilities without prior notification could support future efforts to assert sovereignty over the Yellow Sea.

North Korean cyber hackers recently conducted a mass online phishing operation targeting South Koreans in the sectors of national security, diplomacy, and unification.

North Korean cyber actors sent 126,266 phishing emails to South Korean nationals, targeting 17,744 individuals in the fields of diplomacy, national security, and unification sectors. Hackers attached a malware-infected file under the subject line “Disclosure of Defense Counterintelligence Command Martial Law Documents” to steal personal data.[61] The cyberattack used IP addresses originating from Liaoning, PRC, near the North Korea-PRC border, and the email text contained vocabulary unique to North Korea.[62]

The South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) stated on April 17 that the PRC public relations company *Quanmeishe* operates seven fake websites mimicking major South Korean media outlets.[63]

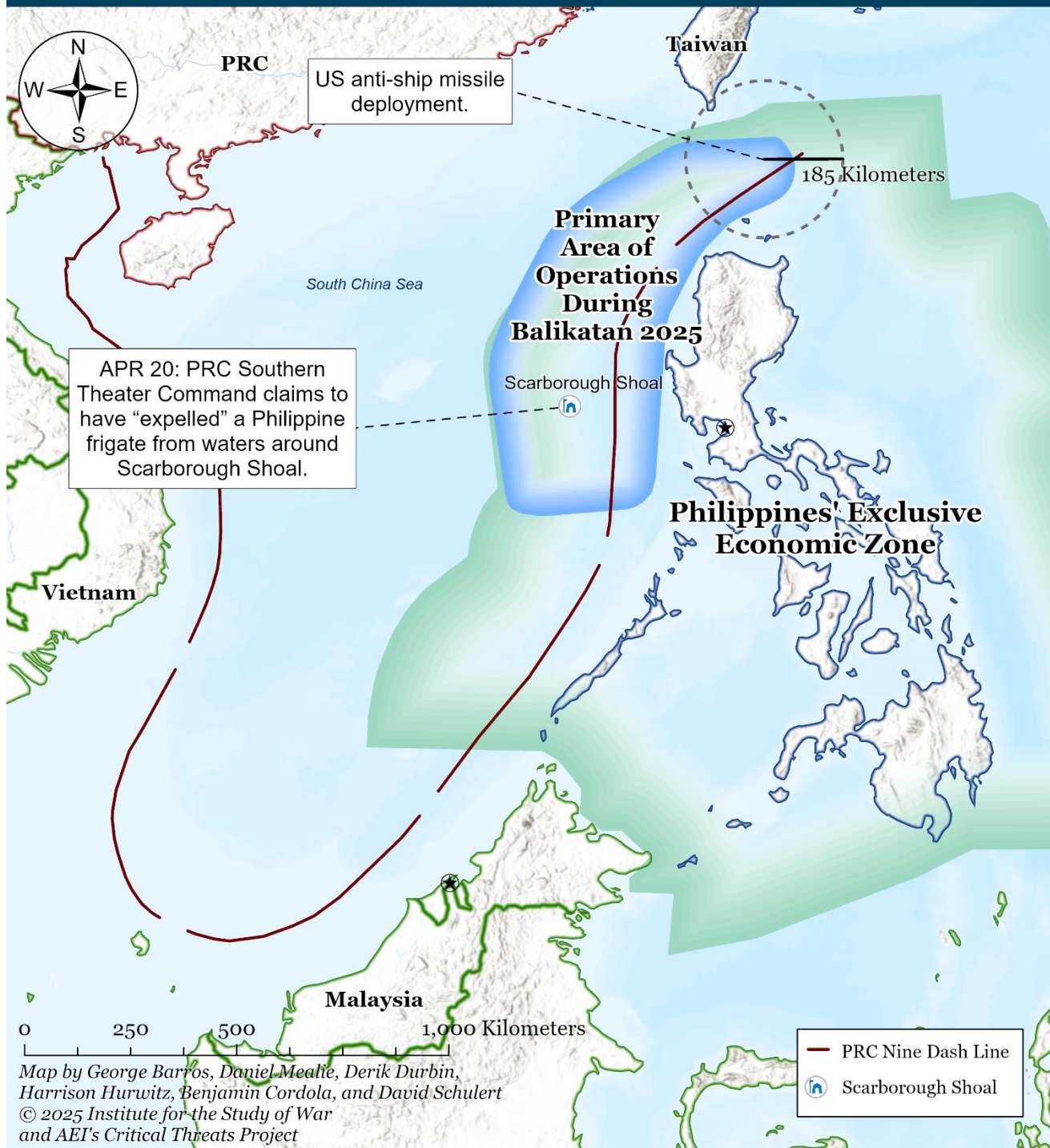
The Shaanxi-based company illegally copied actual South Korean media articles and embedded CCP-aligned content to deceive readers.[64] The NIS reported that multiple PRC companies created nearly 200 fake South Korean media websites in 2023 prior to the *Quanmeishe*’s seven new fake websites. These fake outlets simultaneously promoted the PRC and criticized the United States.[65]

The inauthentic websites are likely part of a PRC effort to manipulate South Korean public opinion via an ostensibly private firm. Canadian information environment research organization Citizen Lab assessed in February 2024 that illegitimate PRC-based public relations companies posing as local news outlets, including those that NIS identified in 2023, were likely an influence operation to promote PRC political interests. The involvement of ostensibly private firms reflects the PRC tendency to use proxies to conduct digital influence operations and maintain plausible deniability.

Southeast Asia

Philippines

US-Philippines Joint Military Exercises Begin in South China Sea, April 21



The PRC likely perceives the US deployment of anti-ship missiles to the Batanes Islands as a threat to its anti-access/area-denial concept around Taiwan. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Guo Jiakun condemned on April 21 the Philippines' participation in annual joint military exercises with the United States.[66] Guo accused the Philippines of undermining regional stability with the deployment of tactical and strategic weapons, referring to the United States' transfer of the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) to the northern Philippine Batanes Islands for the annual Balikatan exercises.

The Batanes Islands are situated in strategically important maritime chokepoints, known as the Bashi Channel and Luzon Strait, between Taiwan and the main Philippine Island of Luzon. PRC military strategy emphasizes establishing a robust A2/AD system around Taiwan to prevent US intervention during an amphibious invasion or blockade of the island. NMESIS has an approximate range of 115 miles, which covers the entirety of the 100-mile wide Bashi Channel.[67] The PRC likely perceives the placement of anti-ship missile batteries in the Batanes Islands as a threat to the effectiveness of its A2/AD concept. The US Marine Corps 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment (3rd MLR) stated on April 16 that NMESIS enhances its sea denial capability, deepens naval integration, strengthens deterrence, and supports the Philippines' coastal defense strategy.[68]

The United States deployed the mid-range Typhon missile system to northern Luzon for combined operations as part of the Balikatan Exercise in April 2024.[69] PRC Ministry of Defense spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang condemned the Philippines in December 2024 for permanently acquiring the system and accused it of instigating an arms race.[70]

The three-week long Balikatan exercises will be the largest iteration of the exercises series to date and will focus on anti-ship, anti-air, and coastal defense drills.[71] Japan and Australia are set to participate, with this being the first time Japan has directly engaged the exercise.[72] The PRC views expanding multilateral military cooperation as undermining its long-term objective of achieving regional hegemony and solidifying control over its territorial claims, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.

The PRC Southern Theater Command claimed on April 20—the eve of the Balikatan exercise—to have expelled a Philippine frigate from the waters around the contested Scarborough Shoal, which the Philippines denied.[73] The PRC has exhibited aggressive military posturing toward the Philippines in South China Sea in response to past military cooperation with the United States.[74]

Russia

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused the PRC of supplying weapons to Russia, which the PRC denied. Zelensky said on April 17 that the PRC supplied gunpowder and weapons, including artillery, to Russia and that Ukraine had intelligence that the PRC was producing

weapons on Russian territory.[75] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Lin Jian denied Zelensky's accusations on April 18.[76] Zelensky's April 17 allegations followed similar accusations that the PRC government knew of Russian efforts to recruit PRC fighters and that PRC military officers had traveled near the frontlines to learn operational lessons.[77]

Ukraine sanctioned three PRC companies—Beijing Aviation And Aerospace Xianghui Technology Co. Ltd, Zhongfu Shenying Carbon Fiber Xining Co. Ltd, and Rui Jin Machinery Co. Ltd—on April 18, including them on a list with sanctioned Russian entities. The sanctions prohibit the three PRC firms from operating in Ukraine.[78] Zelensky announced on X (Twitter) on April 18 that Ukraine had expanded its sanctions to include nearly one hundred additional entities, “most of whom are involved in the production of, among other things, missiles. . . like those that hit our Kharkiv.”[79]

The PRC is drawing tactical and operational lessons from the Ukraine war to form its own wartime planning, demonstrated by the recent development of an anti-drone system that is likely inspired by drone warfare in Ukraine. The PRC provides economic support, including dual-use goods, to Russia despite claiming to be an impartial mediator throughout its war in Ukraine. PRC support to the Russian defense industry may provide the PRC opportunities to learn about wartime production, including about the types of technologies that Russia is fielding in the war.[80]

Iran

A PRC government-linked satellite company provided intelligence to the Houthis, according to unnamed US officials.[81] This intelligence could support Houthi attacks against US vessels and commercial shipping. The United States raised concerns to the PRC government about Chang Guang Satellite Technology Co., Ltd. (CGSTL) providing satellite intelligence to the Houthis, which the PRC ignored. The state-run Chinese Academy of Sciences and the provincial government of Jilin established CGSTL in 2014.[82] The PLA's Strategic Support Force has provided CGSTL with access to its facilities.[83] A Jilin provincial official praised the construction of Jilin-1—CGSTL's flagship satellite system—as an achievement for military-civil fusion.[84]

CGSTL's provision of satellite intelligence to the Houthis is part of ongoing PRC, Russian, and Iranian support to the Houthis. Houthi-owned military communications and domestic surveillance companies have reportedly imported Chinese-made communications equipment.[85] The Yemeni coast guard and Omani customs have previously seized shipments of Chinese-made military equipment to the Houthis, such as hydrogen fuel cells for powering missiles and drone propellers.[86] The Houthis reportedly told the PRC and Russia in March 2024 that they would not target PRC and Russian-flagged vessels transiting the Red Sea, according to several sources with knowledge on Houthi leadership discussions.

Cryptocurrency fraud investigation company TRM Labs reported on April 17 that the Houthis are also part of a cryptocurrency network that includes Russian and PRC military equipment manufacturers.[87]TRM Labs reported that eight Houthi cryptocurrency addresses sent over 900 million US dollars to addresses connected to a Russian broker that sells drones and other military equipment on behalf of PRC manufacturers.[88] The Houthi addresses sent transactions through an intermediary address, which has conducted several transactions on behalf of financial facilitators linked to Hezbollah.



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