

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

- **ROC President William Lai completed his tour of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies in the Pacific, which included transits through Hawaii and Guam. The PRC strongly condemned the transits and launched a military exercise after Lai returned.**
- **The PRC deployed its largest naval fleet in decades in waters near Taiwan following Lai’s Pacific trip and conducted unannounced air and naval drills. The exercise covered a significantly larger geographic area than previous exercises and simulated blocking foreign intervention throughout the First Island Chain and east of Taiwan. Beijing is very likely escalating its “punishment” of Lai to intimidate his administration and cause the Taiwanese public to associate “separatist” behavior with military escalation.**
- **A PRC educational delegation visited Taiwan on a rare trip organized by the Ma Ying-jeou Foundation. The trip caused controversy and a negative backlash in Taiwan that could hamper future cross-strait exchanges.**
- **Paraguay, one of the ROC’s formal diplomatic allies, expelled the PRC’s envoy to Latin America Xu Wei after he approached its congress and called for Paraguay to cut ties with Taiwan.**
- **The China Coast Guard (CCG) used water cannons and sideswiped a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel sailing near the Scarborough Shoal, the latest action in a period of renewed tensions between the two states.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

ROC President William Lai completed his tour of Taiwan’s diplomatic allies in the Pacific, which included transits through Hawaii and Guam. The PRC strongly condemned the transits and launched a military exercise after Lai returned. ROC President William Lai concluded his tour of the Pacific and affirmed ROC ties with its Pacific Island diplomatic allies: the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau. Lai stopped over in Guam, a US territory, on December 4 after visiting Tuvalu the same day.[1] Lai reported on his X account that he had calls with US House Speaker Mike Johnson, US House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, and US Senator Roger Wicker while in Guam.[2] Lai stated during his tour that “Taiwan is confident that we can continue to deepen cooperation with the new US government and resist the expansion of authoritarianism.”[3] Lai made the final stop of his tour in Palau on December 5 and stayed for two days before returning to Taiwan.[4]

Lai and Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr. observed a joint coast guard exercise during Lai’s stay. ISW research has noted recently-re-elected president Whipps’ support for both Taiwan and United States military involvement in the region.[5] ISW research has also tracked longstanding tensions between Palau, one of the three Pacific island states that recognize the ROC, and the PRC.[6] The PRC seeks to expand its own influence and access in the Pacific and curtail diplomatic recognition of Taiwan among Pacific islands. Whipps accused the PRC of “weaponizing tourism” over Palau’s support for Taiwan in August 2024 and accused PRC vessels of trespassing in Palau’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in November 2024.[7]

The PRC condemned Lai’s transits through US territory, including Hawaii and Guam, and launched a large-scale military exercise near Taiwan after Lai returned. TAO spokesman Zhu Fenglian denounced Lai’s visit to US territory on December 6 and called on the United States to halt official exchanges with Taiwan in accordance with the one-China principle, which portrays the PRC as the one legitimate Chinese state and Taiwan as part of the PRC. She framed Lai’s transits as an excuse to “rely on the United States to seek independence.”[8] Zhu’s condemnation is consistent with past PRC attempts to delegitimize US interactions with Taiwan, assert control over Taiwan rhetorically, and isolate Taiwan diplomatically. The PRC launched unannounced large-scale maritime exercises near Taiwan after Lai returned, following weeks of speculation by Taiwanese officials that it would do so. Lai called on the PRC to maintain peace on the final day of his tour in Palau. He told reporters, “It is better to open your hands than to clench your fists. Only by doing so can China win respect from the international community.” Lai also stated, “No matter how many military drills China stages and how many ships and aircraft they dispatch to intimidate regional countries, China will not win the respect from any country.”[9]

The PRC deployed its largest naval fleet in decades in waters near Taiwan following Lai’s Pacific trip and conducted unannounced air and naval drills. The exercise covered a significantly larger geographic area than previous exercises and simulated blocking foreign intervention throughout the First Island Chain and east of Taiwan. ROC Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesperson Sun Li-fang and other officials said on December 10 that the PRC has deployed approximately 90 navy and coast guard vessels near Taiwan and southern Japanese

islands in the East and South China Sea. About two-thirds of these vessels were PLA Navy (PLAN) warships. The deployment is the PRC's largest maritime operation since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, surpassing the scale of this year's Joint Sword-2024A and Joint Sword-2024B exercises and the unnamed military exercise around Taiwan in August 2022 launched in response to then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. The deployment covers a much larger geographic area than past PLA exercises near Taiwan.^[10] The ROC MND said it is tracking military ship formations from the PLA's Eastern, Northern, and Southern Theater Commands and coast guard vessels, which have entered the Taiwan Strait and the Western Pacific Ocean for long-range offshore operations.^[11] It reported 12 PLAN ships, nine "official" (likely coast guard) ships, and 47 PLA aircraft around Taiwan on December 9, then 11 PLAN vessels, 8 "official" ships and 53 PLA aircraft on December 10. None of them entered the waters or airspace of Taiwan's contiguous zone or territorial waters.^[12] The PLA designated seven restricted airspace zones east of the PRC coastal provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian from December 9 to December 11 in preparation for the exercises. The PRC did not announce any PLA exercise during this period, however, and PRC media has not reported on the deployments. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Mao Ning deflected reporters' questions about the deployment.^[13] TAO spokesperson Zhu Fenglian obliquely addressed a similar question without mentioning the military operations directly, saying "we are highly vigilant against the trend of 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces colluding with external forces to seek 'independence' provocations, and we will never let it go."^[14]

Senior Taiwanese MND intelligence officer Hsieh Jih-sheng said on December 10 that the PLA has not carried out any live drills, but did significantly increase activities in the restricted air zones north of Taiwan. An unnamed senior Taiwanese security source told Reuters that the PLA aircraft operating off the PRC coast simulated attacks on foreign naval ships and practiced driving away foreign aircraft as part of a "blockade exercise." Hsieh further said PLAN ships were forming two "walls" east of Taiwan to practice blocking foreign intervention, one on the eastern periphery of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and another farther out in the Pacific.^[15]

The scale, scope, and geographic focal points of the operation are all significantly different from the Joint Sword series of exercises. The Joint Sword exercises and their 2022 precursor all focused on encircling Taiwan, simulating a blockade. Only a minority (up to 21) of the nearly 90 ships involved in the December 2024 operation came close enough to Taiwan each day to be included in the ROC MND's daily announcement of ADIZ incursions, however. The operation involved three of the PLA's Theater Commands, while most Taiwan-targeted operations are directed by the Eastern Theater Command. The MND also did not report PLA or China Coast Guard (CCG) activities around outlying Taiwanese islands like Kinmen and Matsu, which was a feature of most previous exercises. The December 2024 operation was similar to previous exercises in that it drilled anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) around Taiwan, but differed in that it focused on blocking foreign entry within a much larger area. An unnamed Taiwanese official said that the PRC appears to be targeting the entire First Island Chain, including Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The official said the operation is intended as "total military intimidation" and an effort to control waters within the "inner part of the island chain."^[16]

The operation also differed from previous Taiwan-targeted operations in that the PRC did not announce it or comment on it. The PRC was very clear during previous large-scale exercises such as the Joint Sword series that the exercises were meant to punish and send a stern message to what it calls Taiwanese “separatists” and their foreign allies. It published maps of most of these exercises and explained their purpose in state media. The lack of announcement for the December operation makes the operation’s intended message and audience less clear, though the timing shortly after Lai’s Pacific tour is very likely a warning to Taiwan. A scholar at the MND-funded Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), Su Tzu-yun, said the PLA’s decision not to announce its operation was an attempt to play “mind games” to pressure Taiwan.[17]

The CCG played a significant role in the operation, as it has in other recent exercises around Taiwan. Taiwan’s Coast Guard Administration (CGA) dispatched patrol vessels on December 9 to shadow CCG ships that had been sailing “unusually” near Taiwan since December 6, the day Lai returned from his trip. Three CCG vessels including the 12,000-ton *CCG 2901*, one of the CCG’s largest ships, sailed to an area east of Taiwan and 50 to 60 nautical miles east-northeast of Taiwan’s Green Island and loitered there for several days. Four other CCG cutters sailed in a group to an area southwest of Taiwan.[18]

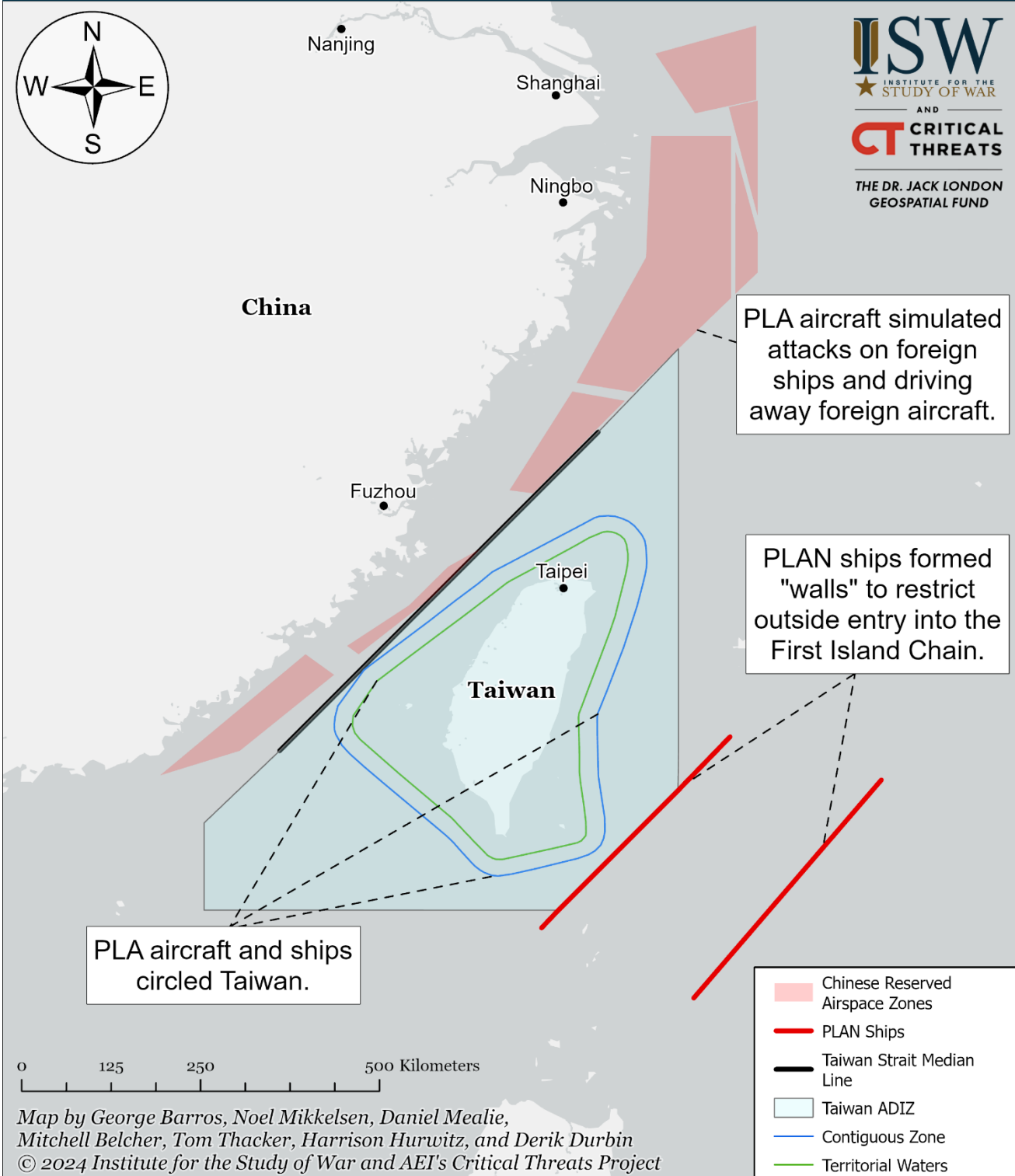
Senior Taiwanese officials speculated in November that the PRC may launch a major military exercise around Taiwan in response to President Lai’s transits through Hawaii and Guam during his state visit to Taiwan’s diplomatic allies in the Pacific. The officials suggested that the PRC may brand this exercise Joint Sword-2024C, making it the third exercise in the Joint Sword series this year.[19] The MND carried out an air defense drill on November 28 in preparation for the anticipated exercise.[20]

The PLA exercise is part of a pattern of increasingly strong PRC reactions to what it considers “provocations” by the Lai administration. Beijing is very likely escalating its “punishment” of Lai to intimidate his administration and cause the Taiwanese public to associate what Beijing calls “separatist” behavior with military escalation. Beijing launched the Joint Sword-2024A exercise days after Lai’s inauguration on May 20 and the 2024B exercise shortly after Lai’s speech on Taiwan’s National Day on October 10. The CCP considers Lai a dangerous separatist. The name “2024A” indicates that the PRC was planning more than one such exercise in 2024 regardless of Lai’s actions. The PRC portrayed Joint Sword 2024B as a deliberate escalation commensurate with Lai’s supposedly “separatist” rhetoric, even though the content of Lai’s National Day speech was notably less critical of the PRC than his inaugural speech. PRC spokespeople and authoritative media commentaries warned at the time that the more Taiwanese “secessionists” “provoke, the faster they will perish.”[21] ISW assessed that the PRC likely planned a strong military response to Lai’s National Day speech in October regardless of the substance of the speech, then

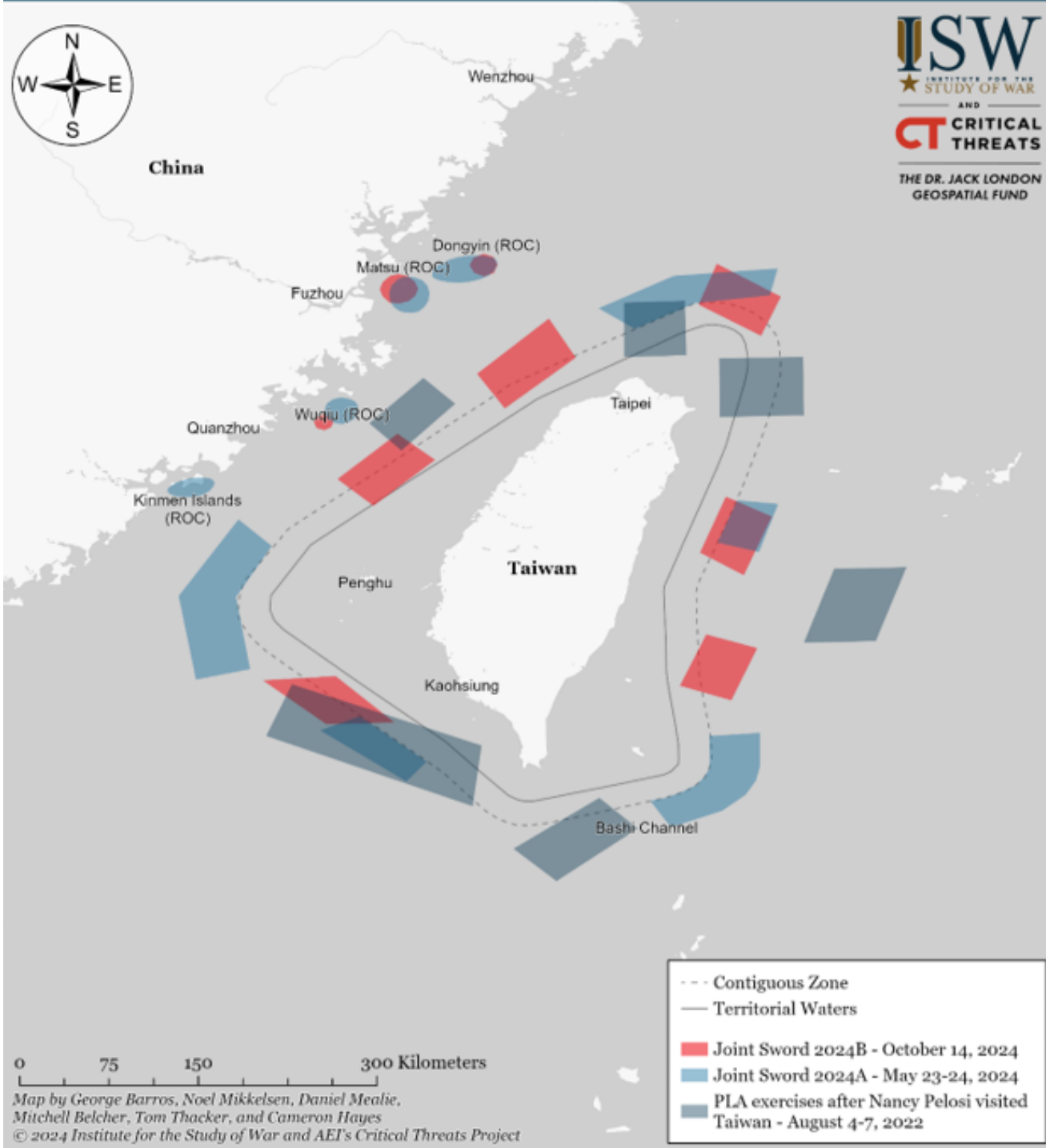
retroactively reframed his speech to justify its strong reaction.^[22] An unspecified senior Taiwanese official said the PRC's sea operations in December took almost 70 days to plan and deploy, meaning planning started well before Taiwan announced that Lai would transit through US territory.^[23] Beijing is thus not truly reacting to Taiwanese statements and actions but rather implementing a deliberate plan of military escalation that uses “provocations” as a pretext. The PRC is attempting to create a strong correlation between any significant Lai government action it deems a “provocation” and military escalation likely to intimidate the Taiwanese people into politically opposing Lai.

The PRC's military response to Lai's Pacific transits is much stronger than its reaction to similar transits by past Taiwanese presidents. The PRC initiated the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–1996 after the United States allowed Taiwan's then-President Lee Teng-hui to visit and speak at Cornell University. It launched a major exercise around Taiwan in August 2022 after then-US House speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan and met with Lai's predecessor Tsai Ing-wen, who is also a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). It launched the first Joint Sword-series exercise in April 2023 after Tsai transited through the United States and met then-US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Lai's transits in Hawaii and Guam did not involve meetings with high-level US officials, however, and resemble past “stopovers” by Tsai and other presidents that did not trigger a PRC military response.^[24]

Unannounced PLA Maritime Operation December 9-11



PRC-announced Areas of Military Exercises around Taiwan (October 14, 2024)



A PRC balloon flew directly over Taipei as balloon incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ continued to escalate. Taiwan's MND reported a PRC balloon in Taiwan's ADIZ on December 6 and four more on December 7. At least two of the balloons on December 7 entered Taiwan's territorial airspace, and one flew directly over Taipei.[25] The overflights are part of a pattern of intermittent balloon flights into Taiwan's ADIZ that began on November 24. The PRC previously sent balloons into Taiwan's ADIZ and territorial airspace from early December 2023 to April 2024. The balloon overflights gradually escalated in frequency and proximity to Taiwan, hitting a peak immediately before Taiwan's election on January 13 and gradually tapering off in subsequent weeks. The first balloon that passed directly over Taiwan in that period did so on January 1. Taiwan initially called them weather balloons and later accused the PRC of using the balloons in "cognitive warfare." [26] The PRC Taiwan Affairs Office (PRC TAO) claimed in January 2024 that the balloons were "mostly" meteorological and "mostly" launched by private enterprises. [27] The balloons flew much lower than most meteorological balloons, however, mostly at altitudes near or below the average cruising altitude of commercial aircraft. The balloons' true purpose and intelligence gathering potential is unclear, but even collecting standard meteorological data over Taiwan can be useful for planning missile strikes. [28] The timing and increasing frequency of balloon overflights in this "round" of incursions resemble the pattern such incursions followed last winter however it is unclear whether the timing is tied to a particular event.

ISW assessed that the balloon overflights last year likely took place as part of a broader effort to wear down Taiwan's resources and response capabilities, consistent with the effect of normalizing ADIZ incursions more generally. [29] Balloon incursions are yet another possible threat that Taiwan must devote time and resources to track in case they pose a national security threat. Balloons can intrude upon Taiwan's national airspace without provoking a military crisis because they are not piloted, can drift accidentally, and often float at much higher altitudes than aircraft can fly.

A PRC educational delegation visited Taiwan on a rare trip organized by the Ma Ying-jeou Foundation. The trip caused controversy and a negative backlash in Taiwan that could hamper future cross-strait exchanges. The Ma Ying-jeou Foundation, a Taiwanese non-governmental organization founded by former Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou of the Nationalist Party (KMT), organized an educational exchange that brought 40 PRC teachers and students to Taiwan from November 28 to December 6. [30] The PRC group consisted of professors and students from seven elite PRC universities, including two Olympic gold medalists, nearly all of whom were affiliated with the CCP or Communist Youth League. [31] The students caused a public controversy when congratulating Taiwan's national baseball team, which had recently won the WBSC Premier12 international championship competing under the name "Chinese Taipei." The ROC is not allowed to use the name "Taiwan" or "Republic of China" when participating in many international organizations including sports events, so in such settings, it instead uses the name "Chinese Taipei" (中華臺北), which leaves ambiguous whether Taiwan belongs to the PRC or the ROC. One of the PRC students incorrectly referred to the team in Mandarin as the "China Taipei" or "Taipei, China" (中國臺北) team, a similar but more politically charged name that carries connotations of affiliation with the PRC. [32] Taiwanese university students staged protests, waving ROC flags and chanting slogans such as "This is not China Taipei" as the PRC students visited their campuses. [33]

Educational exchanges between the PRC and ROC may get rarer in the aftermath of this trip. The ROC Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) urged the PRC on November 28 to lift its ban on PRC nationals studying in Taiwan, which Beijing implemented at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. MAC Spokesperson Liang Wen-chieh noted that the 40-member delegation had been “carefully selected” and urged Beijing to allow free exchanges “free from a United Front agenda.”[34] The “United Front” is a CCP political strategy to unite disparate elements of PRC society in support of CCP rule and to build influence networks abroad in service of CCP goals. The controversy caused by the trip prompted the MAC to threaten punishment against the Ma Ying-jeou Foundation, however, arguing that campaigns for “one China” during cross-strait exchanges in Taiwan may violate Taiwanese law.[35] Unnamed Taiwanese sources said the MAC would likely ban the Foundation from hosting cross-strait exchanges for a period from six months to five years.[36] Ma Ying-jeou Foundation CEO Hsiao Hsu-Tsen argued that such a penalty would have a chilling effect on all cross-strait exchanges, as other organizations would also fear punishment for even relatively innocuous comments made by their PRC guests.[37] MAC Minister Chiu Chui-cheng expressed regret that a cross-strait exchange intended to promote mutual goodwill was marred by political statements that “undermined Taiwan.”[38] The MAC also expressed disappointment that the PRC did not reduce coercive military activities around Taiwan during the academic exchange. It said the CCP’s “exchanges on one hand and intimidation on the other” are a form of “political manipulation” that demonstrates a lack of respect for the Taiwanese interlocutors.[39]

PRC TAO spokesperson Zhu Fenglian accused Taiwan’s ruling DPP of “cyberbullying” students who participated in the exchange and carrying out a “Green Terror” against the trip’s organizers. She said that the administration “maliciously obstructing” cross-strait exchanges shows that it is afraid of “compatriots on both sides of the strait getting closer.”[40] “Green Terror” is a reference to the DPP’s official color, green, and the 40-year period of martial law in Taiwan called the “White Terror,” which was perpetrated by the then-dictatorial KMT government. The CCP uses the term to suggest that the DPP is tyrannically suppressing proponents of cross-strait engagement and unification.

The PRC sanctioned 13 US defense companies and six senior executives on December 5 in a move consistent with past PRC sanctions policy. The United States announced that it had approved a \$385 million sale of spare parts for F-16s and radars on November 29. Reuters reported that the State Department had also approved the possible sale of “improved mobile subscriber equipment and support for an estimated \$65 million” and listed the principal contractor for this sale as General Dynamics.[41]

The PRC announced sanctions in response to this arms sale on December 5. The PRC Foreign Ministry listed Trida Brown Engineering, Synix, Rapid Flight, Red Six Systems, Firestorm Labs, BRINC UAV, Cyberlux, Nyros Technologies, Group W, Domo Tactical Communications, Kratos UAV Systems, Catastrophic AI, and Shield AI as the sanctioned firms. Sanctioned individuals included executives of Raytheon, Bayee Land and Weapon Systems, United Technologies Systems Operations, BRINC Drone, and Data Link Solutions. The PRC Foreign Ministry announced that these entities’ assets would be frozen and that “organizations and individuals within the territory of [the PRC] shall be prohibited from engaging in relevant transactions, cooperation and other activities with them.”[42] ISW research has noted that the PRC frequently uses sanctions as a means of punishing and delegitimizing the United States’ relationship with Taiwan. The PRC sanctioned three US defense contractors in May 2024,

including General Dynamics, following US arms sales to the ROC.[43] These are also not the PRC's first sanctions against Raytheon, which the PRC also sanctioned in 2023 over arms sales to Taiwan.[44]

Many of the sanctions announced on December 5 seemingly target US drone production. The sanctions against Raytheon senior executives notably target individuals involved in the company's Strategic Naval Forces Business Unit. The PRC may perceive US drone firms as a threat to its naval security and may be using these sanctions to block US companies' access to PRC drone technology. ISW research has noted that drones could play a key role in the defense of Taiwan if drone operators used islands belonging to Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan to pilot swarms of drones with limited ranges.[45]

A new online documentary exposed the extent of the CCP's United Front efforts to infiltrate and influence Taiwanese celebrities. Internet celebrity Pa Chiung released an online documentary on December 6 in which Taiwanese rapper Chen Po-yuan (Minnan Wolf PYC) recounted his experience with CCP United Front influence over his career to shape Taiwanese public opinion.[46] The United Front is a whole-of-government and society effort to advance the CCP's ideology and interests by co-opting non-government segments of Chinese society. United Front activities against Taiwan aim to inculcate in the Taiwanese public CCP notions that the PRC is the only legitimate government of China and that Taiwan is a part of that China. [47]

The multi-part documentary focuses on Chen's cooperation with United Front efforts to advance CCP narratives of cross-strait relations and shared nationality, including asking him to recite scripts that profess a Chinese identity and write songs that are critical of Taiwan's governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).[48] Chen revealed the nature of the PRC's United Front influence over his career in live phone conversations and text messages with unwitting CCP officials and other co-opted Taiwanese celebrities on the documentary. Chen stated on December 7 that his Douyin (TikTok) account was shut down following the release of the documentary.[49]

Targeting Taiwanese pop culture figures likely aims to shape the younger generation's perceptions of Taiwan's political status and Chinese identity to conform to CCP cross-strait narratives. President of the Taiwan Professors Association Chen Li-fu warned that the focus of the PRC's United Front work against Taiwan has shifted to young people after the Sunflower Movement in 2014, referring to a primarily student-led wave of political activism that rejected integration policies with the PRC and championed Taiwanese identity. Taiwanese internet celebrities called attention to CCP efforts to recruit them to facilitate United Front work in June.[50] Pa Chiung revealed in June that the CCP sent him a contract that discussed a plan to establish a "Taiwan Support Party," which artists would join as honorary members to shape the future of PRC-Taiwan relations.[51] The terms stated that the CCP would invest millions of dollars to enable Taiwanese artists to put on shows and events that promoted CCP-aligned narratives of cross-strait relations. The contract encouraged Taiwanese artists with verified accounts to publish open invitations to the Taiwan Support Party. Several other YouTubers and online celebrities subsequently confessed to being contacted by the CCP and published the contract letters that outlined goals to influence Taiwanese politics.

Paraguay, one of the ROC's formal diplomatic allies, expelled the PRC's envoy to Latin America, Xu Wei, after he approached its congress and called for Paraguay to cut ties

with Taiwan. Xu had been in the Paraguayan capital of Asuncion for an annual UNESCO meeting, but skipped the meeting in favor of making a visit to Paraguay’s seat of government.[52] Xu announced at the Paraguayan Congress the PRC’s interest in establishing diplomatic ties with Paraguay but insisted that Paraguay must cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan as soon as possible.[53] Xu offered the possibility of increased trade and a myriad of other benefits in exchange for a shift in Paraguay’s diplomatic recognition. Some Paraguayan politicians, pointing to the challenges farmers face in exporting soybeans and beef to China have advocated for the switch.[54] Nevertheless, Paraguay’s foreign ministry subsequently accused Xu of meddling in Paraguay’s internal affairs, revoked his visa, and declared him *persona non grata*—ordering him to leave the country within 24 hours.[55]

PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Lin Jian stated that Paraguay’s accusations were unfounded and violated international practices. He reiterated China’s longstanding position that Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory and invoked UNGA resolution 2758. The resolution, passed in 1971, names the PRC the sole representative of China to the UN. Lin inaccurately claimed that the PRC’s interpretation, which forbids any Taiwanese representation, is the “universal consensus.”[56] Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the other hand, praised Paraguay’s decision to evict Xu as a statement upholding Paraguayan sovereignty and safeguarding the Taiwanese-Paraguayan friendship.[57] Taiwan’s embassy in Paraguay criticized China and called Xu an infiltrator.[58]

This incident is part of a broader trend in PRC-Latin American policy. Since 2017, four countries in the region—Honduras, Panama, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador, have flipped their recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. The value of trade between Latin America and the Caribbean with China has also skyrocketed in the last two decades, adding a material incentive for states to align themselves with the PRC.[59]

China

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) jointly announced that the “Salt Typhoon” breach that infiltrated several telecom providers as well as both the Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns remains unresolved and was greater in scope than officials had previously known. President Biden’s Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said at least eight US telecom providers had been breached, four more than previously known.[60] Moreover, investigators now understand that Salt Typhoon has exploited vulnerabilities and penetrated systems in at least a “couple dozen” countries.[61] The agencies stated that although they had not announced the breach until September this year, Microsoft first detected it in late spring or early summer and likely tipped off the relevant telecom providers.[62] ISW has previously reported that Salt Typhoon could be a campaign by APT40, a highly sophisticated group associated with the Hainan branch of the PRC Ministry of State Security (MSS).[63]

Although officials from the respective agencies have not observed new activity by Salt Typhoon since they last put out an announcement about it on November 13th, they maintained the possibility that the threat group has decided to lie low with the intention to reemerge after the investigation passes.[64] Officials identified three main target types: an unspecified number of victims in the Washington DC area whose call records were taken from telecom companies, a limited group of individuals with political or government connections—each of whom the FBI has notified, and Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement (CALEA) statute program court orders that could contain Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) investigation sources.[65] The official neither confirmed nor denied that Salt Typhoon hackers had uncovered FISA sources, which would pose a dire risk for the latter while helping PRC informants avoid detection.[66] CISA’s Executive Assistant Director Jeff Greene also noted that the extent and method in which each victim was compromised varies significantly, making expulsion of Salt Typhoon all the more complicated.[67] U.S. Senator Mark Warner (D-Virginia) cautioned that eliminating PRC hackers from US networks could necessitate physically replacing thousands of obsolete routers and switches.[68]

CISA and several partnering Five Eyes agencies jointly released an alert warning that PRC threat actors had infiltrated the networks of major telecom providers and a set of guidelines for hardening their infrastructure. Notably, they did not include British agencies, which Greene said operated on “different considerations and timelines.”[69] Greene also recommended that Americans use encrypted messaging apps over SMS to reduce Salt Typhoon’s ability to intercept data in transit.[70]

Telecom providers are among the most valuable targets for a nation state actor interested in espionage to hack. They offer unparalleled visibility into who the providers work with and their customers’ data and metadata, especially where messages are unencrypted.[71] Salt Typhoon has managed to exploit a vast array of outdated network of routers and switches built decades ago by many companies that no longer exist.[72]

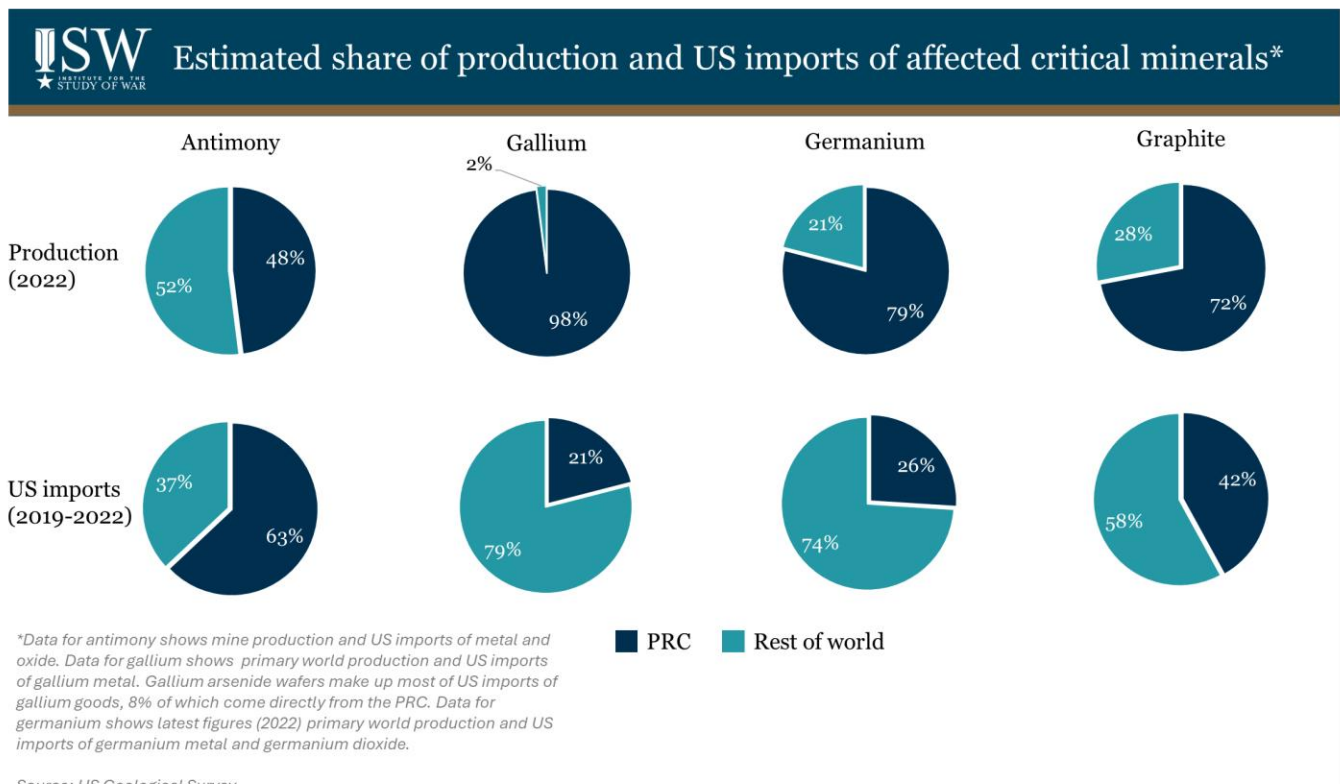
The PRC’s export controls on critical minerals will inhibit the United States’ access to materials that are essential to economic and national security. The PRC prohibited exports to the United States of gallium, germanium, antimony, and superhard materials on December 3.[73] The PRC also implemented stricter controls on exports of graphite to the United States.

The US Department of Interior designated antimony, gallium, germanium, and graphite as critical minerals to the economy and national security in 2018.[74] Antimony has a variety of military applications, including night vision goggles, strengthening shielding materials, explosives, flares, nuclear weapons, and infrared sensors.[75] Gallium and germanium have applications in aerospace, military, and telecommunications due to their use in the manufacture of optoelectronic devices and fundamental inputs such as integrated circuits, semiconductors, and transistors.[76] Graphite has extensive industrial and military applications, including the manufacture of missile guidance systems, artillery components, firearms, and military aircraft.[77] Superhard materials, such as diamond, are used for their hardness and durability for precision manufacturing of goods such as semiconductors and electronics.[78]

The PRC is a top producer and source of imports for all of the critical minerals that are subject to new restrictions. The United States has not mined gallium since 1987, antimony since 2001, graphite since the 1950s, and produces minimal germanium.[79] The United States’ annual demand for some of the minerals, such as antimony, exceeds any other single country’s mine production.[80]

The United States’ stockpile of antimony amounted to 1,100 tons in 2023, compared to its consumption of 23,000 tons, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies.[81] A Department of Defense spokesperson stated in July 2023 that the United States has a strategic stockpile of germanium but did not specify the size. The spokesperson stated that the United States does not have a stockpile of gallium.[82] The United States also does not have a stockpile of graphite.[83]

The export restrictions follow a pattern of the PRC’s increasing securitization of critical minerals. The PRC previously implemented export controls for gallium and germanium in August 2023, high-grade graphite in December 2023, and antimony in September 2024.[84] A PRC Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) spokesperson accused the United States on December 3 of “politicizing and weaponizing economic, trade, and technological issues, abusing export control measures, and arbitrarily restricting the export of relevant products to China.”[85] The PRC announced the measures a day after the United States Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) implemented new export control measures to restrict the PRC’s ability to produce semiconductors.[86]



[87]

Northeast Asia

Japan

Japan will give \$10.6 million, small boats, and radars to the Philippines to strengthen the Philippines' capabilities in the South China Sea and the Luzon Strait. This is the second instance of Japanese defense aid to the Philippines being provided under the recently created Official Security Assistance grant program, an initiative focused on defense-related cooperation and aid provision from Tokyo to its partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific.[88] In the December 5 agreement Japan promised to increase funding for maritime domain awareness radars from \$4 million to \$10.6 million and will provide coastal radar systems and rigid-hulled inflatable boats to the Philippine Navy and air defense radars to the Philippine Air Force.[89]

The Philippines has been working to improve its maritime domain awareness capabilities, particularly in the South China Sea.[90] Japan has been one of the primary providers of military assistance and equipment transfers to the Philippines, particularly the Philippines Coast Guard (PCG). The PCG has received 12 Multi-Role Response Vehicles (MRRV) since 2016 and will receive five more by the end of the year.[91] The PCG frequently deploys MMRVs to the South China Sea, and has used them during previous altercations with the PRC.[92] Japan's recent increases in military assistance to the Philippines suggest the importance of South China Sea security and working with alliance members for Tokyo's overall national security strategy.

Southeast Asia

Philippines

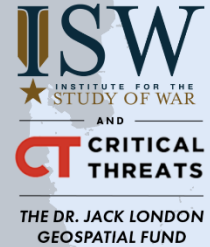
The China Coast Guard (CCG) used water cannons and sideswiped a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessel sailing near the Scarborough Shoal, the latest action in a period of renewed tensions between the two states. Vessels from the PCG and the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries were carrying out a routine patrol near Scarborough Shoal on December 4 when CCG and PLA Navy (PLAN) ships approached them.[93] The PCG accused the CCG and PLAN vessels of carrying out “aggressive actions,” specifically using water cannons and sideswiping one of the Philippines' patrol vessels.[94] The CCG released a statement accusing the Philippines of infringing on its sovereign territory and conducting illegal fishing activities. CCG Spokesperson Liu Dejun released a statement saying that the PRC's actions were appropriate and necessary to enforce laws surrounding its maritime territory.[95] The CCG also accused the PCG of deliberately ramming into the CCG vessel and distorting the facts in order to manipulate international perceptions of the event.[96]

United States Ambassador to Manila MaryKay Carlson condemned PRC actions that disrupted Philippine maritime operations and “put lives at risk.”[97] The United States, Japan, and the Philippines carried out a joint patrol about 40 nm from Scarborough Shoal on December 6.[98] This joint patrol, one of many held between the Philippines and its allies in recent months, was not in response to the confrontation between the CCG and PCG according to Philippine officials. Symmetrical PRC military responses typically follow joint exercises between the Philippines and its allies, seen most recently on November 28th, but so far there has been no reaction by the PLA to these joint exercises. [99]

This is the second reported instance of PLA and CCG harassment of the Philippines after three months of relative inactivity. The PCG reported on November 28 that PLAN helicopters harassed two Philippine

fishing boats near Iroquois Reef.^[100] This second instance of harassment in as many weeks suggests a renewal of tensions between the Philippines and PRC within the South China Sea.

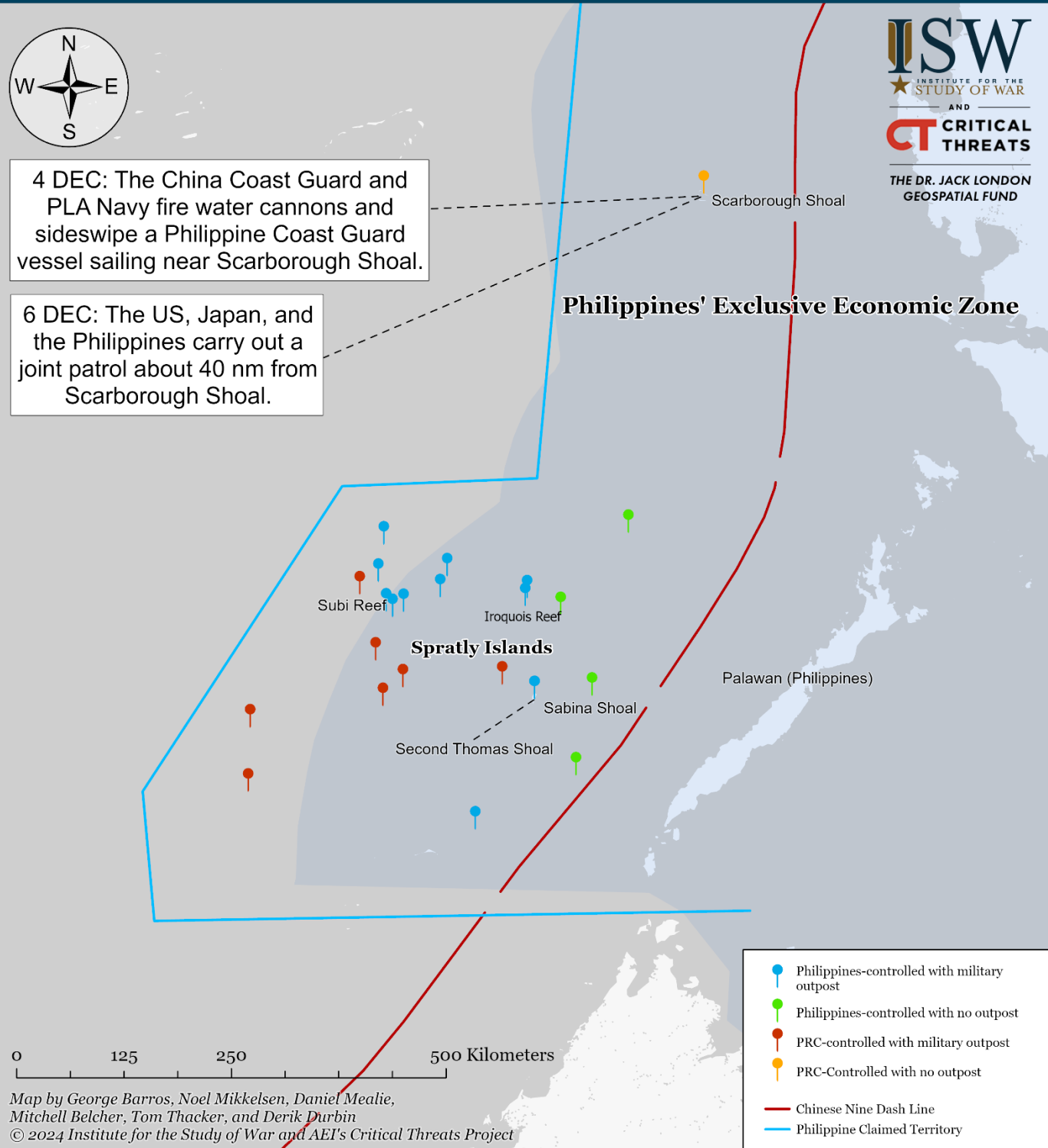
Events Around the South China Sea (December 4-6)



4 DEC: The China Coast Guard and PLA Navy fire water cannons and sideswipe a Philippine Coast Guard vessel sailing near Scarborough Shoal.

6 DEC: The US, Japan, and the Philippines carry out a joint patrol about 40 nm from Scarborough Shoal.

Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone



The PRC submitted baselines of territorial waters around Scarborough Shoal to the United Nations (UN) in order to legitimize its claims over the disputed territory. PRC Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Geng Shuang submitted a statement on the baselines of the Shoal's territorial waters on December 2.[101] The Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN released a statement saying that the submission's purpose is to "strengthen maritime administration in accordance with the law," and added that this action was in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The PRC published the geographic coordinates for its territorial claims around Scarborough Shoal in November 2024 in response to Manila's approval of the Philippine Maritime Zones Bill.[102] This bill defined the Philippines' maritime territorial claims and the legal powers that it can exercise within those boundaries.[103] Manila issued a protest following Beijing's publication, saying that the baselines established by the PRC were an attempt to legitimate the 2012 occupation of Scarborough Shoal, which the Philippines sees as a violation of its territorial sovereignty.

The 2016 Arbitral ruling determined that Scarborough Shoal qualified as a rock, and therefore only entitled to a territorial sea, not an EEZ or continental shelf. A baseline according to UNCLOS is "a line that runs along the coast of a country or an island, from which the extent of the territorial sea and other maritime zones such as the exclusive economic zone and extended continental shelf can be measured." [104] The PRC's submission does not reflect a change in UN policy towards PRC's claims. Article 16 of UNCLOS requests coastal states to publish lists of geographic coordinates for their territorial baselines and submit a copy to the UN.[105] The PRC's actions do not reflect a change in UN policy, but are rather part of a broader PRC strategy of using lawfare to achieve its national objectives.

Iran

PRC Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing visited Tehran to strengthen Sino-Iranian ties and stressed the importance of implementing the 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement. The 2021 agreement would have the PRC invest 400 billion USD in Iran's economy in exchange for discounted Iranian oil. PRC Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing visited Iran on December 3 and 4, his second official visit to Iran this year.[106] Zhang met with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on December 4 where the two pledged to expand cooperation with one another and with Moscow to counter American "unilateralism." [107] Pezeshkian met with PRC President Xi Jinping at the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia; Zhang said that his visit a month and a half later is a follow up on the meeting between the two presidents.[108] Both the PRC and Iran have issued official statements emphasizing their strategic partnership and cooperation.[109]

Zhang and Pezeshkian both expressed their desire to begin implementing the 25-year Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement signed in 2021.[110] The final details of this agreement have not been publicly released, but a draft obtained by the New York Times reportedly revealed that China will invest 400 billion USD in Iran's economy and Iran will provide a reliable and cheap supply of oil in return.[111] Iran currently exports 92% of its oil supply to the PRC at a discounted rate of approximately 30% according to the head of the Research Center at the Iran Chamber of Commerce Hojatollah Mirzaei.[112] The deal was originally proposed in 2016 by PRC President Xi.[113]

Syria

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs has called for Syria's territorial integrity to be “respected” and declined to comment on the Assad regime’s collapse. The PRC has historically maintained good relations with Bashar al-Assad’s regime and provided it support throughout the years.[114] Syria joined the Belt and Road Initiative in January 2022, and, although some analysts view this as the PRC’s long-term commitment to Syria, there have been no significant investments by Chinese firms.[115] Assad also made a visit to China in September 2023, his first since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011.[116] Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning said at the time that the visit would “take bilateral relations to new heights.”[117] The collapse of the pro-Beijing Assad government less than 15 months later sets back the PRC's efforts to expand its influence in the Middle East as it must forge new ties with the Syrian rebel government if it hopes to retain relations with Syria.[118] China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Mao Ning was asked numerous questions about Syria following Assad's exile to Russia in the December 9 press conference. Mao Ning stated that Syria's territorial integrity and sovereignty “should be respected” following Israeli air strikes against the capital city of Damascus. She declined to comment on questions about Assad, such as if the PRC maintained contact with Assad as he entered exile.[119]

exile.

Latin America

The PRC Foreign Ministry and PRC embassy in Cuba spoke out against findings that the PRC is maintaining signals intelligence (SIGINT) facilities in Cuba. The Washington-based think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a report detailing the locations and function of suspected PRC surveillance stations in Cuba in July 2024.[120] The authors of the report used satellite imagery to assess four sites on the island as possible PRC SIGINT facilities. CSIS republished its findings with new updates on December 6.[121] The report lists Bejucal, El Salao, Wajay, and Calabazar as sites with “observable SIGINT instrumentation, clear physical security infrastructure (guard posts, perimeter fencing, military insignia, etc.), and other characteristics that suggested intelligence collection.” El Salao is located near the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, while the other three sites are near Havana.[122]

The PRC embassy in Cuba denounced the report as “fake news” with “no factual basis” in a statement on December 8. The embassy’s statement said that “China and Cuba are good friends, good comrades and good brothers. The cooperation between China and Cuba is upright, aboveboard, mutually beneficial and win-win.”[123] PRC Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning gave a similar statement in a regular press conference on December 11. Mao criticized US policy in Latin America and the Caribbean and said that “the cooperation between China and Cuba is aboveboard and is not directed against any third party.”[124]

The PRC’s comments are consistent with past PRC statements on its relationship with Cuba. PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla on September 27, 2024. The two foreign ministers discussed the PRC and Cuba’s 64 years of diplomatic relations; the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that Cuba’s foreign minister “thanked China for its assistance to Cuba's economic and social development and for firmly safeguarding Cuba's legitimate rights and interests in international occasions.”[125] PRC President Xi Jinping met with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermudez in the PRC in 2022 and again on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in 2023; Xi

expressed the PRC's support for Cuba on both occasions.[126] Cuba relies on the PRC as a key trading partner and received a debt relief agreement from the PRC in 2022.[127]

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