

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



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The China–Taiwan Weekly Update is a joint product from the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute. The update supports the ISW–AEI Coalition Defense of Taiwan project, which assesses Chinese campaigns against Taiwan, examines alternative strategies for the United States and its allies to deter the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) aggression, and—if necessary—defeat the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The update focuses on the Chinese Communist Party’s paths to controlling Taiwan and cross–Taiwan Strait developments.

Key Takeaways

- **The People's Republic of China (PRC) warned against Republic of China - Taiwan (ROC) President William Lai’s upcoming transit through United States territory on his trip through the Pacific.**
- **ROC former president Tsai Ing-wen urged US support for Ukraine at the Halifax International Security Forum on November 23.**
- **Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported sighting PRC balloons in Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) for the first time since April 2024.**
- **PRC Defense Minister Dong Jun declined to meet with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on the sidelines of a security forum in Laos in protest against US arms sales to Taiwan. The snub came days after the US-PRC leaders’ meeting in Lima, Peru, highlighted the resumption of bilateral defense talks.**
- **The PRC suspended Director of the Central Military Commission (CMC)’s Political Work Department Admiral Miao Hua on suspicion of corruption. It dismissed allegations from anonymous US officials that Defense Minister Dong Jun is under investigation, however.**
- **The PRC decried the US plans to deploy medium and long-range missile systems to Japan and the Philippines in case of a Taiwan emergency. The US HIMARS and Typhon missile launchers increase the survivability and mobility of missiles based in Japan and the Philippines.**

- **European authorities are investigating a PRC cargo vessel that likely cut two undersea cables in the Baltic Sea on November 17-18.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

The People's Republic of China (PRC) warned against Republic of China - Taiwan (ROC) President William Lai's upcoming transit through United States territory on his trip through the Pacific. Lai transited through Hawaii on November 30 and plans to visit Guam while en route to the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau, which are Taiwan's three remaining diplomatic allies in the Pacific.[1] Lai stayed in Hawaii for two nights; Hawaii governor Josh Green presented him with a gift in Honolulu.[2] Lai also had a phone call with US Representative Nancy Pelosi, who expressed well-wishes for Lai's travels through the Pacific.[3] The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Lin Jian warned the United States on November 29 not to permit Lai's transit and cited the PRC's one-China principle, which states that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and the PRC is the sole legitimate government of that China.[4] The United States does not recognize the one China principle but instead maintains a "one China policy" of maintaining diplomatic relations only with the PRC and not with Taiwan. The US policy acknowledges the PRC's position but remains ambiguous about its own stance on the status of Taiwan. The PRC conflates international agreements that recognize the PRC as the government of China with its own one-China principle to claim falsely the existence an international consensus that the PRC is the rightful government of Taiwan and further Taiwan's diplomatic isolation.[5]

PRC MFA spokeswoman Mao Ning said that the PRC "resolutely opposes any form of official exchanges between the United States and Taiwan." [6] MFA spokesman Lin Jian gave a statement expressing opposition to Lai's visit in a regular press conference on December 2 and said that the PRC "firmly opposes the United States' connivance and support for 'Taiwan independence' separatists and their separatist activities in any form." [7] Such statements are consistent with ongoing PRC efforts to paint Lai as a dangerous separatist and to discredit US support for the ROC.

Reuters cited unnamed Taiwanese officials who speculated that the PRC could hold drills, possibly including another Joint Sword-series exercise, in response to Lai's transit.[8] Beijing has responded to past US visits by Taiwanese leadership by staging military drills around the ROC. When Lai visited New York and San Francisco as Taiwan's vice president in August 2023, the PRC responded by holding drills around the island.[9] The PRC also held its inaugural Joint Sword drills around Taiwan in April 2023 after then-ROC President Tsai Ing-wen met with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California.[10] The PRC accused Lai of professing independence sentiments in his inaugural speech in May to justify launching the two day-long Joint Sword 2024A exercises around the island.[11] The PRC staged its Joint Sword 2024B exercises on October 14 in response to Lai's National Day speech, which the PRC claimed was escalatory for promoting Taiwanese independence." [12] The PRC has established a precedent of using harsher rhetoric and bolder military actions against Lai than it used against past DPP presidents. ISW analysis of the October 14 exercises noted that the PRC's response to Lai's speech did not acknowledge any de-escalation in Lai's rhetoric; it instead framed the speech as a serious and deliberate provocation of Beijing.[13]

ROC former president Tsai Ing-wen urged US support for Ukraine at the Halifax International Security Forum on November 23. Tsai called upon democracies to continue supporting Ukraine as a means of deterring future authoritarian aggression.[14] Tsai stated, “We still have time to prepare ourselves, with the rest of the world” and that the United States should focus on arming Ukraine.[15] Tsai also thanked for the nations that support freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait, highlighted Taiwan’s resilience, and announced that next year’s Halifax Forum will take place in Taiwan.[16] This year’s Halifax forum featured discussions on European, Middle Eastern, and Asian security topics, including an informal off-the-record session entitled “Taiwan’s Friends: What to Do?”[17] US INDOPACOM commander Admiral Samuel Paparo attended the forum.[18]

PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian said that the PRC opposes “any ‘Taiwan independence’ separatists visiting countries with diplomatic ties to China under any pretext” and called upon Canada to adhere to the one-China principle.[19] Canada’s policy towards the PRC neither endorses nor challenges the one-China principle, like the United States’ policy.[20]

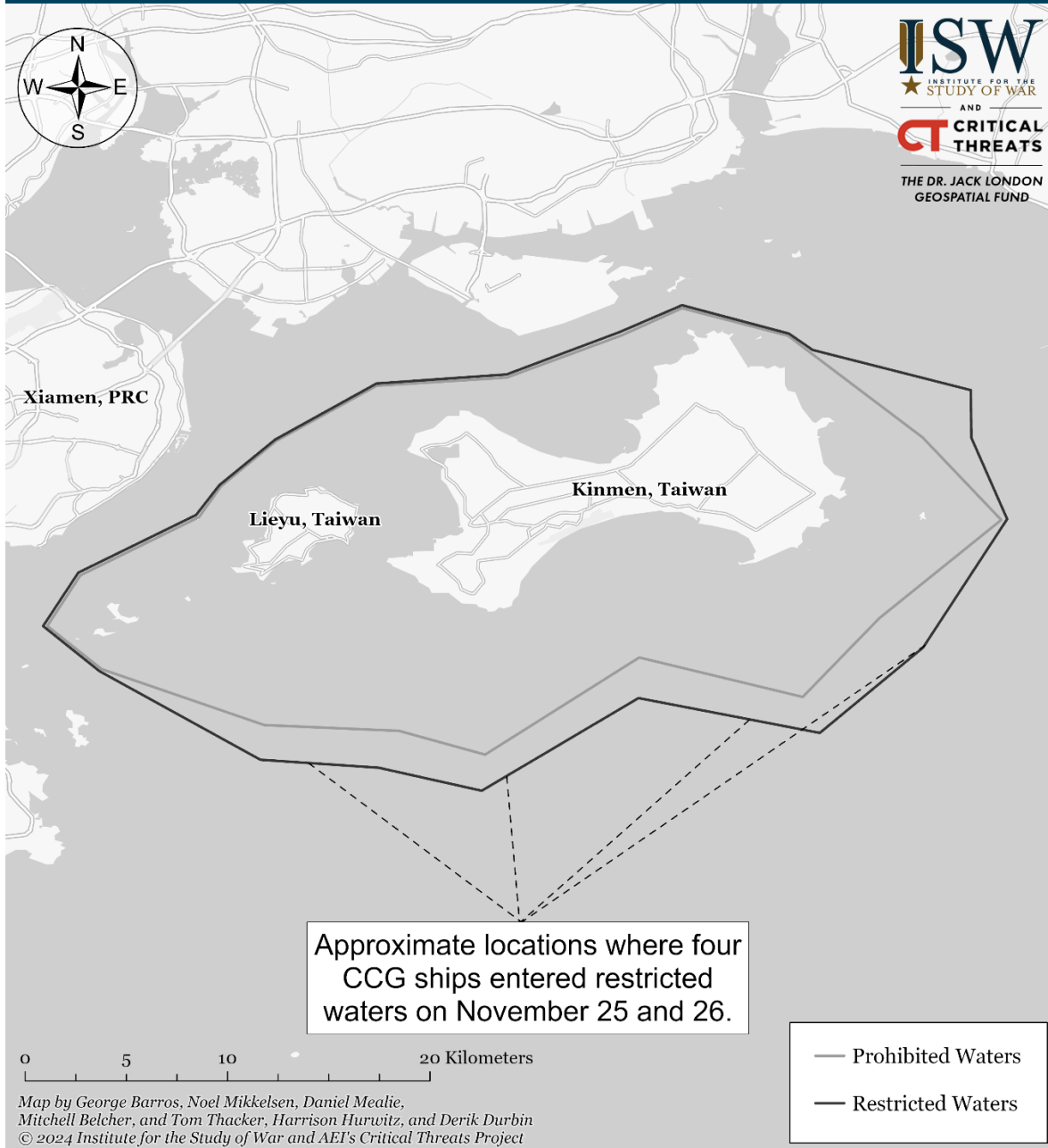
Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported six PRC balloons in Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) for the first time since April 2024. Taiwan’s MND observed the first balloon entering Taiwan’s ADIZ at an altitude of 33,000 feet on November 24.[21] PRC Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning declined to comment on the issue.[22] Taiwan’s MND reported sighting two more balloons on November 27, another on November 28, and two more on November 29. MND reported the location of each balloon’s detection or ADIZ crossing relative to Keelung City in Taiwan’s north; all balloons were detected or entered Taiwan’s ADIZ within 104 nautical miles of Keelung.[23]

The balloons did not pass close enough to the ROC for officials to determine their purpose or intelligence-gathering potential. Taiwan accused the PRC of using balloons in “cognitive warfare” in January 2024, when frequent balloon overflights coincided with the Taiwanese elections. Taiwan’s MND first noted the balloons as ADIZ incursions on December 8, 2023. The balloons passed directly over the island of Taiwan for the first time on January 1. ISW has assessed that these balloon overflights 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.[24]

Four China Coast Guard (CCG) ships entered restricted waters around Taiwan’s Kinmen islands on November 25th and 26th. Kinmen is a Taiwanese island group located three kilometers (1.9 miles) from the PRC’s coast.[25] Four CCG ships entered Kinmen’s southern restricted waters at four different locations on November 25 for approximately two hours.[26] The same four ships returned the next morning on the November 26 to the same locations.[27] CCG ships intrude into Kinmen’s restricted waters in an effort to assert PRC law enforcement control, desensitize Taiwan to incursions in its restricted waters, and expend Taiwanese Coast Guard resources. Regular CCG patrols in Kinmen’s restricted waters began in response to the February 14 capsizing incident this year, and they occur in areas where the PRC may station ships in the event of a quarantine or blockade of Kinmen.[28] Taiwan does not claim any territorial waters around Kinmen partly due to its proximity to the PRC, but it designates “prohibited” and “restricted” waters around Kinmen which it treats as equivalent to territorial waters and a contiguous zone.

The CCG's intrusions into the waters south of Kinmen resemble a rehearsal for an operation to cut Kinmen off from resupply or intervention by sea, which would require PRC ships to position themselves to the south of the island. The CCG's tactic of performing simultaneous entries into the restricted waters around Kinmen in different locations by multiple ships provides the CCG with experience in choreographing the initial actions that would be required for a real blockade operation to seal Kinmen off from the Taiwan Strait. Conducting the incursions also enables the PRC to gauge the Taiwanese coast guard's response and the resources that it can deploy to challenge the stronger CCG. The high frequency of CCG incursions risks desensitizing Taiwan and its partners to them, which could grant the CCG an advantage in solidifying a blockade or quarantine if the PRC feigned the CCG activity as routine harassment of the Kinmen coast guard.

Chinese Coast Guard Violations of Kinmen's Restricted Waters (November 25 and 26)

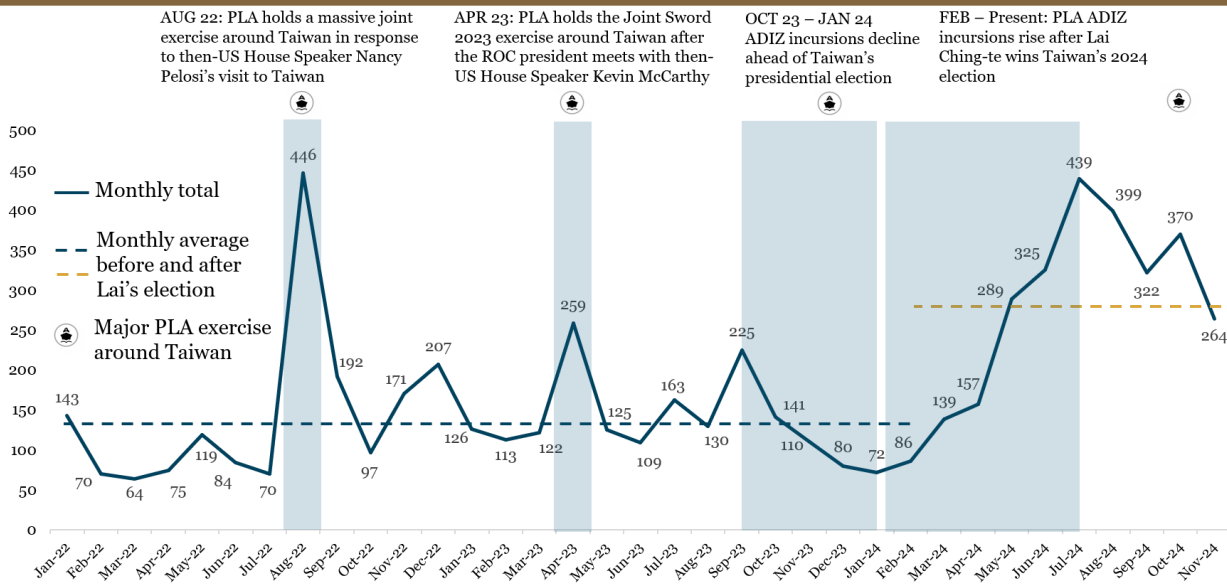


The ROC MND's lowered threshold for air raid alerts shows how the PLA's increased air incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ have degraded Taiwan's threat awareness and response capability. Taiwan's RW News reported that the ROC Ministry of National Defense issued a confidential document at the end of 2022 that reduced its air raid warning threshold, shortening the warning distance from 70 to 24 nautical miles. This change means Taiwan will only activate air raid

alerts if PLA aircraft fly past Taiwan's contiguous zone boundary, 24 nautical miles from its territorial baseline. The shortened threshold would give some citizens just three minutes to seek shelter in an air raid.[29] ROC Defense Minister Wellington Koo said the change reflected growing threats of PLA activities.[30] The PLA increased its aerial incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ in 2022 to nearly daily frequency. It increased them again in 2024, with aircraft crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait an average of eight times per day in 2024. The old warning threshold thus would have required Taiwan to trigger air alerts several times per day.

The lowering of Taiwan's air raid warning threshold is a concrete example of how the PLA's ADIZ incursion campaign has weakened Taiwan's threat response capability. The PRC's normalization of a high volume of incursions drains Taiwan's resources, exhausts its military personnel, and degrades its threat awareness. Taiwan does not scramble aircraft in response to all PRC ADIZ incursions, but it does put military personnel on standby to respond quickly if needed and now has even less time to respond to a real attack.

The PLA's monthly total air incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ in November dropped below 300 for the first time since April but remained much higher than pre-2024 averages. Taiwan's MND reported that 264 PLA aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait and entered Taiwan's ADIZ in November, 106 fewer than the 370 incursions in October. The November rate of incursions is comparable to October's numbers when excluding the Joint Sword-2024B exercise on October 14, however, as the exercise contributed a record 111 incursions in one day. The PRC dramatically escalated incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ following the election of Lai Ching-te in January 2024 and especially after Lai's inauguration in May, with every month from May to October seeing over 300 incursions. Monthly ADIZ incursions surpassed 300 only once prior to 2024, when the PRC responded to then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 by launching record-scale military exercises around Taiwan.[31] ADIZ incursion numbers do not include aerial activity around the Taiwanese archipelagos of Kinmen and Matsu, which are west of the median line in the Taiwan Strait.



Source: Taiwan Ministry of National Defense; CSIS China Power Project

China

PRC Defense Minister Dong Jun's refusal to meet with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at the ASEAN Defense Ministers' meeting highlights the PRC's continued willingness to use defense talks as a bargaining chip rather than as a mechanism for managing tensions. Dong and Austin both attended the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus in Vientiane, Laos from November 20-21. Dong declined to meet with Austin on the sidelines of the forum, a refusal Austin called "a setback for the whole region."^[32] PRC Ministry of National Defense (MOD) spokesperson Wu Qian stated that the United States is "fully responsible" for the meeting not happening. Wu said that the United States "cannot damage China's core interests on the Taiwan issue while conducting exchanges with the Chinese military as if nothing had happened," and urged the United States to "create favorable conditions" for high-level exchanges to take place.^[33] An unspecified senior US defense official said that the PRC's refusal to hold the meeting was a response to the proposed US sale to Taiwan of three medium-range National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) and 123 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) (Extended Range).^[34]

Dong's refusal to meet Austin demonstrate the PRC's use of high-level defense talks as a bargaining chip to shape US policy on Taiwan, despite the fact that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden highlighted the resumption of such talks during their meeting at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit in Lima, Peru, days earlier.^[35] The PRC suspended high-level military exchanges with the United States following then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Xi and Biden agreed to resume such talks during their meeting in San Francisco in November 2023. US and PRC military officers met for

this year's second session of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) on November 6-8, after the United States announced the NASAMS sale to Taiwan.[36] A Pentagon spokesperson said that US-PRC dialogue is continuing despite the PRC's refusal to hold a bilateral defense ministers' meeting at the ASEAN event.[37]

The PRC suspended Director of the Central Military Commission (CMC)'s Political Work Department Admiral Miao Hua on suspicion of corruption. It dismissed allegations from anonymous US officials that Defense Minister Dong Jun is under investigation, however. MOD spokesperson Wu Qian confirmed that Miao is “suspected of serious violations of discipline” and has been suspended from his duties.[38] Wu did not specify the allegations against Miao, but the CCP has used “serious violations of discipline” in the past to describe both corruption and perceived political disloyalty to the Party. Admiral Miao's position as the PLA's top political commissar, which he had held since 2017, made him the top official in charge of political discipline in the PLA and therefore one of the most powerful members of the PRC military's leadership. The PLA is officially the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party and has a dual command structure to ensure the military's political loyalty, with a political commissar in each unit holding authority roughly equal to that of the unit's commander.[39]

MFA spokesperson Mao Ning denied a *Financial Times* report citing unspecified US officials that the CCP is investigating Defense Minister Dong Jun for unspecified corruption allegations, however. Mao said the report was “chasing shadows.”[40] Her comment was not included in the transcript of that day's MFA press conference. Dong's two immediate predecessors, Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe, were both expelled from the CCP following corruption investigations.[41]

The investigation into Admiral Miao is part of a continuing anti-corruption crackdown on the PLA and shows that CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping continues to distrust the political loyalty of the military. Li and Wei were both expelled from the CCP on June 27, 2024, months after being removed from their posts and after largely disappearing from the public eye. Li and Wei were previously the heads of the PLA procurement department and the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), respectively, both of which have borne the brunt of the CCP's anti-corruption campaign in recent years. [42] Bloomberg reported in January 2024 that US intelligence assessed that graft in the PLA hindered military effectiveness and was a reason behind PLARF purges, including a case in which investigators discovered some missiles that were filled with water instead of fuel.[43] The CCP took measures to strengthen political discipline in the military following its expulsion of Li and Wei. Miao was the top official in charge of this effort to instill political discipline, second to Xi himself.

Dong Jun's position is relatively weaker than that of his predecessors, which is also a sign of Xi's lack of trust in the PLA leadership. Dong was not appointed to the Central Military Commission (CMC) and was not made a State Councilor, unlike previous defense ministers. He therefore does not play the same role in PLA decision-making as his predecessors: the CMC is the PLA's top decision-making body, while the Ministry of Defense is not part of the chain of command and is mainly responsible for military diplomacy.

Northeast Asia

Japan

The PRC criticized the United States' plans to deploy medium- and long-range missile systems to Japan and the Philippines in case of a Taiwan emergency. The US HIMARS and Typhon missile launcher would increase the survivability and mobility of missiles based in Japan and the Philippines. Japan's Kyodo News cited unspecified sources who said the United States has drawn up plans to deploy a Marine Littoral Regiment equipped with High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) at temporary bases along the Ryukyu Island chain, Japan's islands closest to Taiwan, in the event of a conflict over Taiwan.[44] The US Army's Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) will also station its long-range fires units in the Philippines, a deployment that would follow the stationing of US Typhon medium-range missile systems in the northernmost part of the country in April 2024.[45] These plans are part of a coordinated effort by the United States to leverage regional allies in the Indo-Pacific to aid the defense of Taiwan. PRC MFA spokesperson Mao Ning said the US-Japan contingency plans are "an excuse to strengthen regional military deployment, provoke tension and confrontation, and undermine regional peace and stability." [46] The United States also stationed Typhon medium-range missile systems in northern Luzon in the Philippines, separately from the MDTF units it would deploy in the contingency plan. The Typhon systems can launch Tomahawk missiles with a range of over 1000 miles.[47] The MOD also urged the Philippines to withdraw the Typhon missile systems, claiming they are an "offensive weapon" contributing to regional instability.[48]

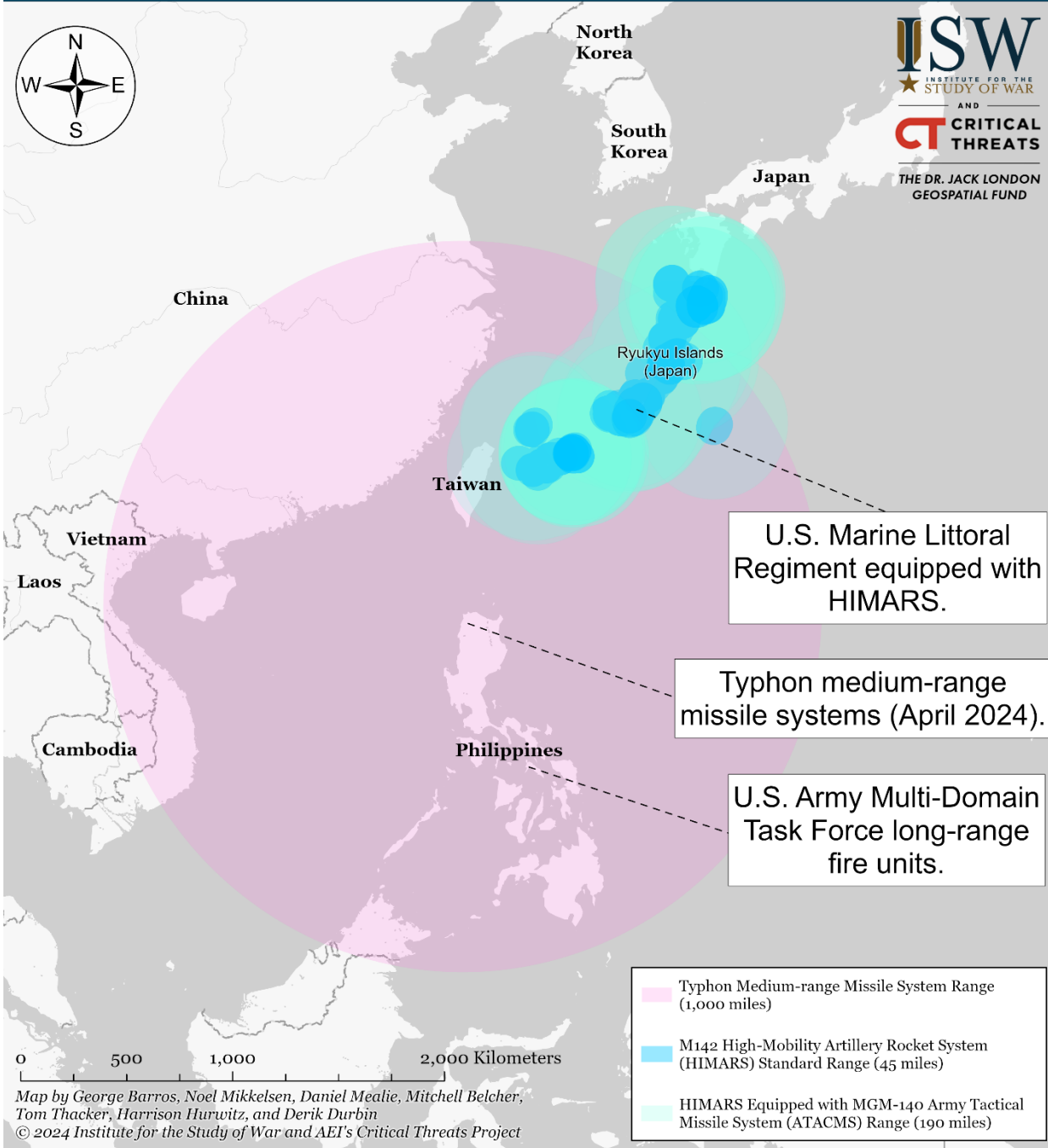
The United States is legally obligated to defend both Japan and the Philippines. Articles 5 and 6 of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan commits the US to defending Japan if attacked by a third party and provides an administrative agreement for the US to base troops in Japan respectively.[49] The Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and Philippines requires the two countries to act together in the event of an attack on either.[50] The US missile deployments can improve the security and military preparedness of US allies in the first island chain, deter the PRC, and enable a more effective response to PRC military operations in the region. Major PRC cities such as Shenzhen, Fuzhou, and Shanghai are within the Typhon missile system's range, although the US is extraordinarily unlikely to use these systems against cities themselves. The deployment of the system between the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea would offer long-range support in many of the anticipated conflict zones in a war over Taiwan. The Ryukyu Islands provide many positions from which HIMARS could help defend Taiwan as well, particularly to protect Taiwan's eastern coastline, block the PLA's entry into the Western Pacific, and safeguard crucial routes for Western reinforcements to reach Taiwan. Standard HIMARS Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System rockets have a range of around 45 miles or 72 kilometers.[51] HIMARS can also launch the MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), which has a range of 190 miles or 300 kilometers.[52]

The missile systems deployed to Japan and the Philippines will increase the survivability of missile forces based in those countries. The PLA Rocket Force, a major focus of the PRC's military modernization, may launch missiles at US military bases in the Pacific during an invasion of Taiwan to reduce the speed and effectiveness of a US-led defense of Taiwan.[53] All US bases in the Pacific are within range of Chinese missiles.[54] The HIMARS and the Typhon missile systems are highly mobile, which allows them to be repositioned quickly to evade destruction by enemy strikes.

Russia also objected to the planned deployment of US missiles to Japan, which demonstrates the growing PRC-Russia military alignment. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova

said that a deployment of US medium-range missiles to Japan would threaten Russian security.[55] Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov added that Russia may respond with its own deployments of short and intermediate range missiles in Asia if the US follows through on its plans.[56] Russia and the PRC held joint air exercises near Japan on November 29, part of a trend of growing bilateral military cooperation in the Pacific.[57] Russia and the PRC's military cooperation may indicate the US military deployments will impact geopolitics beyond the immediate Pacific theater.

U.S. Plan for Missile and Troop Deployment to Japan and the Philippines



Southeast Asia

Philippines

The United States’ establishment of a military task force to provide ISR support to Philippine operations in the South China Sea is part of a trend of coalition-building among US-aligned nations in the First Island Chain. The US Department of Defense revealed the existence of Task Force Ayungin, a special forward-deployed task force to support Philippine operations in the South China Sea. The task force is named using the Tagalog name for Second Thomas Shoal, a Philippines-occupied shoal in the disputed Spratly Islands, which fall within the PRC’s territorial claims delineated by its in ten-dash line around the South China Sea.[58] Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Año said that the task force will provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support to Philippine forces but will not conduct any operations. According to the Pentagon, Task Force Ayungin will assist in planning and training for the Armed Forces of the Philippines Western Command and the integration of four MANTAS T-12 and at least one T-38 Devil Ray unmanned surface vessels recently transferred to the Philippines.[59] PRC MOD Spokesman Wu Qian criticized the task force, together with a US-Philippine intelligence sharing agreement signed earlier in November. Wu said that “defense and security cooperation between countries should be conducive to regional peace and stability,” and called the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty “a product of the Cold War.” Wu accused the United States of undermining China’s territorial sovereignty and accused the Philippines of escalating the South China Sea dispute by violating the PRC’s sovereignty and its own commitments, provoking “trouble at sea,” and trying to pull in external forces. He said the PRC will “take all necessary measures to counter infringement and provocation.”[60]

The revelation of Task Force Ayungin is the latest development in a trend of strengthening defense relationships in the region as the United States and its allies form a counterbalancing coalition against the PRC. The Philippines also signed a reciprocal access agreement with Japan earlier in the year, which Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. said would allow Japanese forces to participate in joint military exercises within Philippine territory. Teodoro reported that details of military exercises with Japan are still to be determined. He also assured senators that Japanese troops would be on standby to help the Philippines with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) during calamities.[61]

The PLA carried out military exercises the day after a joint United States-Philippines air exercise. This exercise marks the third occurrence of a symmetrical PLA response to joint United States-Philippine military exercises within Philippine maritime territory. On November 26 the United States and Philippine Air Forces carried out a joint exercise over the Western Pacific Ocean.[62] A statement from the US Air Force reported that this exercise was focused on improving force interoperability. The PLA Southern Theater Command carried out air and naval combat readiness patrols over Scarborough Shoal on November 28. The Southern Theater Command stated that this exercise was for the purpose of strengthening control and preserving national sovereignty over PRC territory.[63] This is the third time that the PLA has carried out military exercises in Scarborough Shoal following a joint exercise between the Philippines and its allies in Philippine maritime territory.[64] The PRC has established a precedent for responding in kind to joint military exercises in the South China Sea by the Philippines, which the PRC has repeatedly accused of acting provocatively and escalating tensions over disputed maritime territory. The CCG also conducted a patrol around Scarborough Shoal on November 30.[65]

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) deployed two patrol vessels in response to the PRC harassment of Philippine fishermen in Iroquois Reef. This event marks the first deployment of PCG vessels against PRC forces since the withdrawal of the *BRP Teresa Magbanua* from Sabina Shoal in September 2024. On November 28 the PCG reported that Philippine fishing boats were harassed by a PLA Navy Z-9 helicopter near Iroquois Reef.[66] Fishermen also reported the presence of CCG vessels, which shined lasers at the fishermen and stood by as two Philippine boats sank due to severe weather.[67] CCG spokesperson Liu Dejun characterized the incident as a law enforcement measure intended to halt “illegal fishing” activities.[68] The PCG responded by deploying two patrol vessels, the *BRP Melchora Aquino* and *BRP Cape Engaño* to Iroquois Reef.[69] PCG Spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela stated that the deployment is intended to show the PCG’s commitment to protecting fishing rights in the West Philippine Sea and the commitment of the Philippine government to not “surrender a square inch of our territory to any foreign power.”[70]

Iroquois Reef is located with Reed Bank near the Spratly Islands. The reef falls within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone according to the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, but the PRC continues to claim the territory and economic rights within it. Reed Bank contains many oil and gas deposits, but the Philippines suspended exploitation of these resources in 2015 due to territorial disputes.[71]

Territorial disputes between the PRC and the Philippines have resulted in multiple instances of harassment and military deployments throughout the South China Sea. The last PCG deployment against PRC forces occurred in September 2024, when the PCG withdrew the *BRP Teresa Magbanua* from Sabina Shoal following a five-month long standoff.[72] Tensions between the two states seemingly plateaued since September, but a renewal of military deployments to features within the South China Sea may be on the horizon.

Events Around the South China Sea (November 26-30)



28-30 NOV: The PLA and China Coast Guard consecutively conduct patrols around Scarborough Shoal.

Scarborough Shoal

Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone

28 NOV: China Coast Guard and PLA Navy Helicopter harass Philippine fishing boats at Iroquois Reef.

Iroquois Reef

26 NOV: US and Philippine air forces hold joint air drill over Philippine Sea.

Spratly Islands

Second Thomas Shoal

0 125 250 500 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, and Derik Durbin © 2024 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Philippines-controlled with military outpost
- PRC-controlled with military outpost
- PRC-Controlled with no outpost
- Chinese Nine Dash Line
- Philippine Claimed Territory
- Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone

Myanmar

The PRC is trying to protect its interests in Myanmar by brokering peace between the military junta and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and advocating against the ICC prosecution of junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing for crimes against humanity. The ethnic minority Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) announced its willingness to hold talks with the Myanmar military junta on November 25.[73] MFA spokesperson Mao Ning stated that the PRC will continue to actively promote peace and dialogue in the process.[74] The PRC has previously brokered a peace agreement with the TNLA in January 2024, but the deal fell through in June.[75] The International Criminal Court (ICC) accused junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing of crimes against humanity for the treatment of the Muslim Rohingya just two days later on November 27, prompting the PRC Foreign Ministry to say the ICC has no jurisdiction according to the Rome Statute over acts committed by nationals of non-member states on their territories.[76] The PRC has not directly intervened militarily to support the junta or the rebels. It only involves itself when the civil war threatens its interests, particularly with access to natural resources and preventing negative spillover effects from conflict.

The PRC has important interests in Myanmar and has worked to protect its own investments. Myanmar has the highest level of transportation integration with Chinese networks out of all the countries on the PRC's southwest border.[77] The PRC exported \$13.5 billion USD of goods to Myanmar in 2022, while Myanmar exported \$9.62 billion USD to the PRC the same year.[78] Myanmar is also critical to the PRC's geopolitical security by providing an alternative shipping route through the Bay of Bengal, thereby reducing reliance on the Strait of Malacca.[79] The PRC has invested \$7.3 billion USD into the Kyaukphyu deep-water port in western Myanmar that will provide access to the Indian Ocean.[80] The PRC has also invested heavily in oil and gas pipelines that run from Kyaukphyu into Kunming in mainland China.[81] Precious stones account for 42% of exports from Myanmar to China and other natural resources make up a significant proportion of the rest of the exports.[82] The PRC also claimed to have wiped out all large-scale telecom scam centers in northern Myanmar, arresting 763 Chinese suspects in Tangyan on November 21.[83] Eliminating these scam centers was one of the PRC's major interests in the Myanmar civil war because many of these scam centers targeted Chinese victims and entrapped Chinese nationals to work for them.

The PRC appears to be trying to minimize political instability, crime, and violence in Myanmar that could threaten its interests. The negative spillover effects from the civil war disrupt Chinese economic activities in the region and jeopardizes the viability of investments.

Europe

European authorities are investigating a PRC cargo vessel that likely cut two undersea cables in the Baltic Sea on November 17-18. [84] The Yi Peng 3 cargo ship departed from Ust-Luga, Russia on November 15, and sailed westward through the Baltic Sea.[85] Investigators determined that the ship dropped its anchor on November 17, severed the first cable, and continued to drag the anchor over 100 miles. The ship then turned off its transponder and cut the second cable at 3am the next day.[86] It was ultimately forced to stop in the Kattegat Strait between Denmark and Sweden after Danish naval ships intercepted it. Unnamed individuals close to the investigation said that the ship's hull and anchor showed damage consistent with the cutting of the cables.[87] Sweden

launched an investigation on suspicion of possible sabotage, which occurred in Sweden’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[88] Publicly available ship tracking data from Marine Traffic showed NATO ships from Denmark, Germany, and Sweden surrounding the Yi Peng 3 on December 2 as investigations continue.[89] The PRC MFA said that the PRC is maintaining open channels of communication with Sweden and “other relevant parties.”[90]

European authorities are investigating whether Russian intelligence induced the Yi Peng 3 to cut the cables. The ship had just left a Russian port, whose port records indicate that the ship had a Russian captain. Russia has denied its involvement, however.[91] Russian ships have also been known to turn off their transponders – also known as “going dark” – to evade sanctions.[92] Research from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration into illegal fishing found that fishing vessels also switch off their transponders to evade competitors or pirates and may go dark “adjacent to Exclusive Economic Zones and the high seas.”[93] The International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) has stated that no “conclusive evidence” has yet proven the PRC’s intentional involvement in the cutting of the Baltic Sea cables.[94]

One of the severed cables ran between Finland and Germany, while the other ran between Sweden and Lithuania. Lithuania expelled three PRC diplomats on November 29, declared them *personae non gratae*, and ordered them to leave Lithuania within a week.[95] Lithuania accused the expelled parties of violating the Vienna Convention and domestic law; it is unclear whether the cable cutting incident prompted the expulsion. The PRC condemned Lithuania’s decision. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian called on Lithuania to “adhere to the one-China principle, and push bilateral relations back on track” in a press conference on December 2.[96] The PRC and Lithuania have experienced an ongoing diplomatic spat over Taiwan; the PRC downgraded its ties with Lithuania in 2021 after Vilnius allowed Taiwan to open a representative office there.[97]

This incident was not the first in which PRC ships damaged European undersea infrastructure. Finland launched an investigation into possible sabotage after PRC-flagged ship called New Polar Bear cut the Balticonnector gas line and a communication cable between Estonia and Finland in 2023.[98] The PRC admitted the ship’s role in causing the damage but claimed that the incident was unintentional.[99] Taiwan also accused the PRC of cutting undersea cables between Taiwan and its outlying Matsu Islands in 2023, which resulted in widespread internet slowdowns across the islands for over a month. The ROC National Communications Commission accused two PRC ships of damaging the cables, but Taiwan’s government refrained from accusing the PRC orchestrating an intentional sabotage.[100]

Russia

PRC-Russia Joint Exercises 2018



The PRC and Russia conducted their ninth joint strategic air patrol on November 29 in the Sea of Japan.[101] The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) stated that the air patrols

aim to “test and enhance joint training and operational capabilities of the two air forces.”[102] The PRC and Russia have conducted the joint air patrols since 2019 under what the PRC referred to as an “annual cooperation plan.” This event marks the second such joint air patrol in 2024. The eighth joint air patrol took place over the Bering Sea in July.[103]

The PRC and Russia are conducting increasingly frequent joint military exercises in recent years, especially in the Pacific Ocean, and expanding the scope of their cooperation. The two countries have now held joint exercises in at least five different parts of the world since July, including naval exercises in the South China Sea, Gulf of Finland, Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk, and Northern Pacific.[104]

Recent joint military exercises between the PRC and Russia have encroached on the air and sea space around the United States and its allies. The South Korean military confirmed on November 29 that six Russian and five PRC military aircraft, which included fighters and nuclear-capable bombers, entered South Korea’s ADIZ without prior notice.[105] South Korea responded by scrambling fighter jets in preparation for “contingencies.”[106] PRC and Russian bombers entered the US ADIZ near Alaska for the first time together on July 24 during the two countries’ eighth joint air patrol, prompting the US and Canada to scramble fighter jets to intercept them.[107] PRC and Russian naval vessels sailed together in the United States’ EEZ in international waters near Alaska in September 2022 and August 2023.[108]

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