

# 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 Taiwanese Central Election Commission approved recall votes for 19 KMT legislators, which could diminish the influence of the opposition parties in the legislature.
- The Taiwanese executive vetoed legislation that contains drastic budget cuts that risk compromising the ability of Taiwan to resist PRC coercion.
- A PRC-owned commercial vessel likely sabotaged a Taiwanese undersea cable, highlighting the growing PRC willingness to attack Taiwanese infrastructure, especially telecommunications.
- The PRC is exploiting recent US behavior to frame itself as an international leader that upholds multilateralism and international cooperation.
- The PRC reportedly plans to lift a ban on South Korean media products, possibly as part of an effort to strengthen ties ahead of the expected South Korean presidential election.
- The PLA conducted unannounced, live-fire exercises near Australia and New Zealand, likely to intimidate the two countries.

## Cross-Strait Relations

### *Taiwan*

**The Taiwanese Central Election Commission (CEC) approved recall votes for 19 Kuomintang (KMT) legislators, which could diminish the influence of the opposition parties in the Legislative Yuan (LY).** The CEC announced on February 26 that recalls against the 19 legislators will proceed to the second stage, which entails the collection of signatures in the

legislator's respective constituencies over 60 days.[1] A recall vote occurs if at least 10 percent of eligible voters sign. The third stage requires a majority vote with a voter turnout of at least 25 percent of that constituency's eligible voters.[2] Supporters of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are more likely to vote in legislator recall campaigns than supporters of the opposition KMT or Taiwan People's Party (TPP), according to a poll conducted by Taiwanese media outlet Mirror Media.[3] The 19 approved recall cases are all targeting KMT legislators, while the nine cases against DPP legislators failed to reach the threshold to move to the next stage.[4] The CEC announced February 27 that it had received a total of 54 recall motions against legislators.[5] The 19 approved cases consisted of those proposals that were submitted on the earliest possible date of February 3. The CEC will review recall vote proposals for other legislators submitted after February 3 in the coming days.[6]

DPP legislative caucus Chair Ker Chien-ming called for a mass recall campaign against opposition legislators on January 4 amid increasing partisan disunity and the KMT's and TPP's passage of controversial legislation.[7] That legislation included extensive cuts to the central government budget, which threatened to compromise Taiwan's resilience against PRC influence and coercion. The KMT responded to recall efforts against it by launching its own recall campaigns against the DPP.[8]

The LY currently has no majority party with the DPP holding 51 seats, the KMT holding 54 (including two KMT-aligned independents), and the TPP holding eight. The KMT and TPP hold a majority in practice, however, given their recent alignment on key issues. A DPP net gain of six seats would earn them a simple majority, while a net gain of at least 12 seats would give the DPP more seats than the opposition, improving their ability to pass legislation in line with the stated goals of President William Lai Ching-te.

DPP legislators are trying to counter KMT- and TPP-led efforts to enforce amendments to the Recall Act that would raise identification requirements for recall petition signatures. The amendments required that citizens provide photocopies of their national ID cards--instead of their ID numbers and addresses--in order to initiate and sign a recall petition.[9] The DPP requested an injunction and constitutional interpretation from the Constitutional Court on February 20 in order to prevent the recall amendments, which President Lai promulgated as required by the constitution on February 18, from taking effect.[10] Ker stated that such an injunction is necessary to "maintain constitutional order," as Taiwan's constitution gives citizens the right to recall.[11]

**Taiwan's Executive Yuan (EY) vetoed the LY's budget bill, which contains drastic budget cuts that risk compromising Taiwan's ability to resist People's Republic of China (PRC) coercion.** Republic of China (ROC) Premier Cho Jung-tai said on February 27 that the EY will veto the fiscal year 2025 budget and fiscal law amendment bill due to their violating the separation of powers of the different branches of government, undermining Taiwan's constitution, infringing on the people's rights, affecting the operation of Taiwan's democratic government, and weakening the country financially.[12] Cho said that President Lai Ching-te would approve the veto before submitting the controversial budget bill back to the LY.

The budget cuts would be the largest in Taiwan's history and include reductions of up to 40 percent of some ministries' total operating budgets. The DPP-controlled government ordered the LY to review the budget after KMT and TPP legislators passed it on January 21.[13] The LY completed its review of the budget on February 19, leaving it unchanged.[14] The total amounts of budget cuts and freezes are

unclear because legislators made overlapping cuts during different phases of review.<sup>[15]</sup> The government's request for the LY to review the budget was likely primarily aimed at delaying the budget cuts, while recall efforts against KMT legislators progress. President Lai Ching-te convened a meeting on February 10 between the heads of the branches of government, including KMT LY Speaker Han Kuo-yu, in an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile party differences and dissuade the KMT from proceeding with harmful legislation.<sup>[16]</sup>

The veto also applies to a fiscal planning law that was passed on December 20, 2024, and would redirect 40 percent of Taiwan's total taxation and other revenue to local governments--up from 25 percent currently.<sup>[17]</sup> Cho said that the central government is willing to hold another round of discussions on the fiscal planning law with local governments to develop a more suitable means of revenue allocation.<sup>[18]</sup>

The KMT-TPP budget cuts specifically target ROC agencies and efforts central to Taiwan's resilience against ongoing PRC efforts to coerce and isolate Taiwan. Cuts to public affairs budgets undermine the ability of Taiwan to counter PRC information operations. Delays in submarine procurement and cuts to drone development program compromise ROC efforts to deter and defend against potential PRC invasion or blockade scenarios. Cuts to diplomatic programs risk further isolating Taiwan amid ongoing PRC efforts to coerce the international community into accepting the PRC as the legitimate government of Taiwan.<sup>[19]</sup> The KMT's and TPP's explanations for the budget cuts focus on domestic Taiwanese political considerations; KMT officials have framed the budget cuts as an attempt to reduce wasteful government spending, for instance. But they have yet to clarify why the cuts target programs and activities that are central to protecting Taiwan against PRC coercion, malign influence, and deterring and defending against a possible PRC attack.

The LY has 15 days to vote on the bill again. The bill's re-passage requires a majority or at least 57 legislators.<sup>[20]</sup> The KMT and TPP caucuses collectively hold 62 seats, indicating that they will likely vote in support of the bill and thus uphold it.

Department	Cut or frozen funds	Effect
Ministry of National Defense	<p><b>Cut</b></p> <p>3% of military equipment expenditure</p> <p><b>Frozen</b></p> <p>30% of operating expenditure</p> <p>50% of budget for Minxiong aerospace and drone park</p> <p>50% of budget for domestic submarine construction program</p>	Reduce combat readiness and hinder force modernization
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	<p><b>Cut</b></p> <p>40% of funds from “strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation” program</p> <p>100% of media policy and promotion expenses</p> <p>9% of consular affairs management budget</p> <p><b>Frozen</b></p> <p>50% of operating expenditure</p>	Weaken Taiwan’s presence on the international stage, reduce diplomatic competitiveness, and undermine Taiwan’s efforts to combat PRC cognitive warfare campaigns
Mainland Affairs Council	<p><b>Cut</b></p> <p>12.5% of annual expenditure</p> <p>Incl. up to 40% of operating expenditure</p> <p><b>Frozen</b></p> <p>Approximately 9% of annual expenditure</p>	Reduce Taiwan’s capacity to counter PRC infiltration, United Front work, propaganda, and intelligence gathering
Ministry of Digital Affairs	<p><b>Cut</b></p> <p>40% of the budget for the Information Security Administration</p> <p>100% of travel expenses</p>	Reduce Taiwan’s resilience against malicious hacking and ability combat online fraud, Prevent MODA from conducting information security audits of overseas embassies, hinder Taiwan’s participation in international information

**A PRC-owned cargo ship likely sabotaged a Taiwanese undersea cable on February 25, highlighting the increasing PRC willingness to strike critical infrastructure in Taiwan, on Taiwanese territory.** Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) announced that it detained the *Hong Tai 58* on February 25 after Chunghwa Telecom--Taiwan's largest telecom provider--notified the CGA that an undersea cable was severed between the main island of Taiwan and the Penghu Islands.[21] The incident occurred approximately seven miles off Taiwan's west coast, past Taiwan's coastal baseline and well within its internal waters.

The *Hong Tai 58* is a Togo-registered cargo ship owned by Hong Kong-based Dongguan Jinlong Shipping Co.[22] The eight crew members on board were PRC nationals.[23] The vessel has several inconsistencies in its identification and registration information, including three different names tied to its unique identifiers. The Taiwanese government created on January 26 a blacklist of 52 PRC-owned ships that warrant greater scrutiny to monitor the growing "shadow fleet" of ostensible merchant vessels that act on behalf of the PRC.[24] The *Hong Tai 58* is on the shadow fleet blacklist.[25]

The Taiwanese National Defense Ministry launched on January 15 new protocols that supported surveillance and law enforcement efforts against vessels that authorities suspect of sabotaging undersea cables in Taiwanese waters.[26] The ROC government enacted the new measures after another undersea cable-cutting incident on January 3, involving the PRC-owned, Cameroon-flagged cargo vessel *Shunxing 39*. [27] That incident also occurred in Taiwan's internal waters, approximately seven miles off its northern coast.

The incident on February 25 marks the sixth instance of damage to undersea cables connected to Taiwan in 2025. ROC Ocean Affairs Council Minister Kuan Bi-ling noted on February 26 the possibility that frequent submarine cable breakages are PRC sabotage.[28] Kuan said that there have been 40 cases of submarine cable breakage in the past five years. Some of these cases were due to natural causes, such as harsh sea conditions or old age, while others were due to interference by "external forces." [29] Taiwan's Digital Affairs Ministry announced in an emergency press release on February 17 that the CGA is investigating the cause of recurring damage to two undersea cables connecting to the offshore island of Matsu, which occurred immediately after their recent repair.[30] The government originally attributed this damage to natural deterioration.

**The PRC's likely involvement in the destruction of submarine cables reflect its increasing focus on disrupting Taiwan's telecommunications.** Taiwan's National Security Bureau reported on January 5 that PRC hacking activities targeting Taiwan's telecommunications increased by 650% from 2023 to 2024.[31] The surge in hacking activities targeting telecommunications was by far the most dramatic increase of any critical infrastructure sector. Malign activities targeting Taiwan's telecommunications infrastructure are aimed at disrupting, denying, and degrading the efficiency of communication and the flow of information. PRC military doctrine emphasizes achieving "information dominance," which the PRC defines as gaining superiority over an adversary in terms of information acquisition, transmission, processing, utilization, and confrontation capabilities.[32] Achieving information dominance entails the destruction of the enemy's information networks and communications systems to cripple its decision-making. The PRC's use of sabotage and cyber operations against Taiwan's telecommunications would be a critical component of a PRC campaign to

informationally isolate Taiwan and sow chaos in a future short-of-war coercion campaign, blockade, or full-scale invasion.[33]

**The Taiwanese Education Ministry ended exchanges with three PRC educational institutions in an apparent effort to reduce United Front (UF) influence within Taiwan, particularly UF activities targeting youth.** Taiwanese officials identified Huqiao University, Jinan University, and Beijing Chinese Language and Culture College as falling under the jurisdiction of the United Front Work Department (UFW) and thus acting on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[34] Taiwanese Education Minister Cheng Ying-yao said on February 20 that Taiwanese universities are prohibited from conducting exchanges with these universities and that degrees from the universities will no longer be recognized.[35]

The PRC seeks to coopt Taiwan's youth to spread CCP ideology and pro-PRC beliefs in Taiwan. Surveys have shown that younger populations within Taiwan are less likely to self-identify as Chinese, instead preferring to self-identify with the Taiwanese nationality; a change highlighted by the 2014 student-led Sunflower Movement protesting the passage of a cross-strait agreement and increased PRC influence over Taiwanese society.[36] The PRC seeks to reduce anti-CCP ideology among Taiwanese youth through UF-led information operations and direct exchanges that portray the PRC positively.

The UF 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 support PRC efforts to politically assimilate Taiwan, particularly by inculcating in the Taiwanese public CCP notions that the PRC is the only legitimate government of China and Taiwan is a part of that China. UF work can also support covert and clandestine activities, such as infiltration, manipulation, co-optation, and intelligence gathering on target groups.[37] The UFW is a department of the Central Committee of the CCP responsible for conducting UF work outside the PRC, particularly in communities of the overseas Chinese diaspora.[38]

Educational exchanges between Taiwanese and PRC universities provide an opportunity for the PRC to influence Taiwanese students and encourage cross-strait connection through shared culture and history as well as creating opportunities for cross-strait dialogue. Creating a sense of unity or acknowledgement of the PRC's "one family" on both sides of the strait supports the stated PRC goal of "peace reunification." The Taiwanese government seeks to halt the spread of UF activities in Taiwan in order to reduce CCP influence over the Taiwanese populace.

### *China*

**The PRC is exploiting recent US behavior to promote itself as an international leader that upholds multilateralism and international cooperation.** The PRC is diplomatically emphasizing its commitment to upholding multilateralism and free trade as it condemns US trade measures as "unilateral" in international forums. PRC Ambassador to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Li Chenggang condemned US tariffs at a WTO meeting on February 18, arguing that the tariffs violated WTO rules.[39] PRC officials have sent messages to their US counterparts to discuss the tariffs. PRC Commerce Minister Wang Wentao condemned the tariffs in a letter to US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick. PRC Vice Premier He Lifeng held a phone call with US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent on February 21 to discuss economic and trade relations between the two countries.[40] Foreign

Minister Wang Yi called the PRC a “staunch defender of the current international order” at the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting with WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.[41] The PRC is likely trying to present itself as a responsible steward of international norms in contrast with Donald Trump’s “America First” policies.[42] Wang chaired a meeting of the United Nations Security Council themed “Practicing Multilateralism, Reforming and Improving Global Governance” on February 18 and outlined the PRC’s four-point proposition to promote representation for disenfranchised “Global South” amid the “turbulent and changing international landscape.”[43]

The PRC is trying to benefit reputationally from recent US behavior vis-a-vis the Russia-Ukraine war. The PRC is leveraging its claimed neutrality on the war to maintain a strategic partnership with Russia while promoting an inclusive resolution to the war. PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated at the Munich Security Conference on February 14 that the PRC hopes “that all parties and stakeholders directly involved participate in the peace talks in due course.”[44] Wang’s statements follow US-Russia negotiations that excluded Ukraine and other European countries. PRC President Xi Jinping spoke on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the third anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[45] The Russian and PRC readouts reaffirmed friendly relations between the two countries. PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi also met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the G20 summit in Johannesburg on February 20.[46] The PRC has consistently advocated for a peaceful settlement of the war on terms that would favor Russia while avoiding openly supporting Russia. The PRC abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution that recognized Russia as the aggressor, called for just peace in Ukraine, and supported Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.[47] The United States voted against the resolution along with Belarus, Russia, and North Korea.

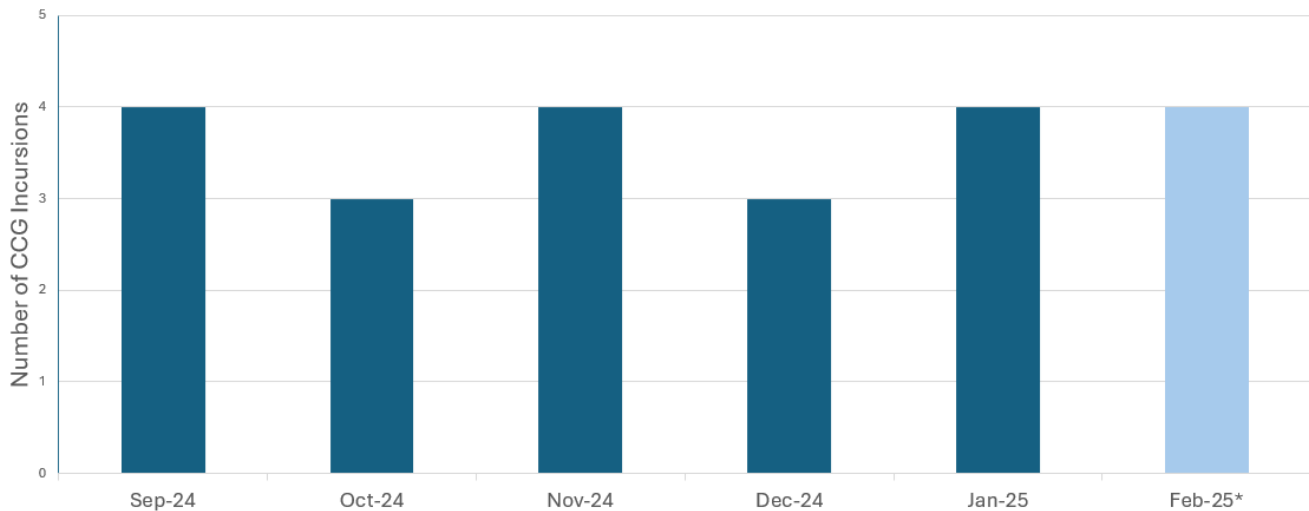
**Four China Coast Guard (CCG) ships entered the restricted waters around Taiwan’s Kinmen Islands on February 20 and 25 as part of the PRC effort to normalize coast guard incursions.**[48] There have been 60 such incursions since February 14, 2024, and a total of four in February 2025. Kinmen is a group of Taiwan-controlled islands with a large military garrison roughly three kilometers from the coast of the PRC. Taiwan designates “prohibited” and “restricted” waters around Kinmen, which it treats as equivalent to territorial waters and a contiguous zone. The bar graph below shows monthly incidents from September 2024 to February 25, 2025. There are discrepancies in the available information between February 2024 and August 2024 that ISW was unable to corroborate at the time of this writing, so it is omitted from the graph. The CCG has normalized three to four patrols into Kinmen’s restricted waters per month in the last six months of data.

The CCG 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 performing simultaneous entries into the restricted waters around Kinmen provides the CCG with experience in choreographing the initial actions that would be required for a blockade to isolate Kinmen. Conducting the incursions also enables the PRC to gauge the Taiwanese coast guard’s response patterns and the resources that it can deploy to challenge the stronger

CCG. The CCG is trying to desensitize Taiwan and its partners to such intrusions, which could help cultivate surprise in an actual blockade scenario.



## CCG Incursions into Kinmen Restricted Waters, Sept 2024 – Feb 2025



\*Data is up to February 25 (month to date).

Source: Taiwan Coast Guard Association

### Northeast Asia

#### *Japan*

**Japan and the Philippines agreed to establish a new framework for expanding defense technology cooperation and hold further discussions on an intelligence-sharing agreement to monitor PRC military activity in the Indo-Pacific and especially the South China Sea.** Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani announced on February 22 that he plans to visit the Philippines to discuss further defense and intelligence cooperation, including efforts to detect and surveil PLA activity.[49] Japan offered to export a control system that manages data used to detect aircraft and missiles provided by multiple radar sources to the Philippines.[50] Additional details on the date of export have not yet been revealed. Japan and the Philippines are currently holding discussions regarding signing an intelligence sharing agreement and developing frameworks for joint development of ships and surveillance technology.

Japan and the Philippines signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement in July 2024 allowing for the deployment of Japanese forces on Philippine territory for combat training purposes.[51] Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa and Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro stated that the agreement was the first step toward greater defense cooperation between the two states, both of whom are involved in intensifying territorial disputes with the PRC. Japan signed similar agreements with Australia and the United Kingdom in 2022 and 2023, respectively.[52]



The PRC has criticized defense cooperation between states that it perceives as likely to oppose its interests in the Indo-Pacific, asserting that such actions increase instability and push the region toward a “new Cold War.”<sup>[53]</sup> Similar rhetoric was published in the state-owned outlet *Global Times* following the February 22 announcement, with the PRC placing the blame for escalation and tensions on Japanese and Philippine efforts to enhance their military capabilities and “pander to the United States’ ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy.’”<sup>[54]</sup>

### *North Korea*

**At least a dozen PRC fishing vessels in the Indian Ocean have reportedly employed North Korean labor since 2019, likely in violation of international sanctions and enabling the heavily sanctioned North Korean regime to earn foreign currency.**<sup>[55]</sup> London-based NGO Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) reported that at least 12 PRC-flagged tuna fishing vessels operating in the Southwest Indian Ocean used North Korean workers. EJF interviewed Indonesian and Filipino crew members who worked alongside North Koreans on these vessels between 2019 and 2024. The crew indicated that the PRC captains falsely reported the number of passengers to immigration authorities when docking and transferred North Korean workers to sister vessels at sea to conceal their identities. Mauritian authorities arrested six North Koreans working on a PRC boat for illegally entering Mauritius on December 5, 2022, demonstrating the past North Korean presence on PRC fishing vessels in the Indian Ocean.<sup>[56]</sup> PRC fishing vessels’ employment of North Koreans would constitute a violation of UN Security Council sanctions, which prohibit member states from employing North Korean workers. The United Nations estimates that around 100,000 North Korean workers were employed abroad in 2023, generating roughly 500 million US dollars annually for the North Korean regime.<sup>[57]</sup> North Korea is suspected of supporting its nuclear and ballistic missile programs through foreign currency earnings generated by dispatching North Korean nationals to work abroad.<sup>[58]</sup>

### *South Korea*

**The PRC reportedly plans to lift the “K-Culture ban,” which prohibits the import of South Korean content into the PRC, as early as May 2025, signaling PRC efforts to strengthen ties with South Korea ahead of a possible PRC-friendly presidency.**<sup>[59]</sup> The ban was imposed in retaliation for South Korea’s deployment of the US-provided Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2017. The ban has restricted the import of South Korean dramas, movies, games, and K-pop performances into the PRC. A senior official from the China-Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Center, which organizes PRC participation in the APEC summit, met with a South Korean reporter on February 19 and stated, “Starting next month, we plan to send a civilian cultural delegation to South Korea and expand cultural exchanges, aiming for a full reopening in the first half of this year.”<sup>[60]</sup> The potential lift comes after CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping met with South Korean National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik on February 7 and discussed opportunities for cultural exchange.<sup>[61]</sup> The foreign ministers of South Korea, the PRC, and Japan are set to meet in Tokyo in March 2025 and further discuss cultural exchanges.

The reports of the PRC lifting the ban comes as South Korea is expected to hold an early presidential election in mid-May. The impeachment trial of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol concluded on February 25.<sup>[62]</sup> The Constitutional Court is expected to issue its final ruling by mid-March, as previous presidential impeachment trials took roughly two weeks to reach a decision. If the

Constitutional Court rules in favor of impeachment and removes Yoon from office, the next presidential election must be held within 60 days of the ruling, likely in mid-May. Leading presidential candidates have already begun preparing for the possible early election, with opposition Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung appealing to moderate voters, and Daegu Mayor Hong Joon-pyo, a member of the ruling People Power Party, signaling his candidacy in a social media post.[63] Recent polls indicate that Lee is the leading presidential candidate with 34 percent support.[64] Lee has consistently argued that South Korea should avoid getting caught up in a "new Cold War" between the United States and China, suggesting that his presidency could mark a shift away from the pro-US positions adopted by President Yoon.[65] The PRC's economic and diplomatic behavior suggests that it is positioning itself to build favorable ties with South Korea ahead of the next administration. Such a move would give the PRC significant leverage in countering US-led efforts to economically restrict the PRC through its Asian neighbors, particularly amid the escalating tariff war with the United States.

**A former Samsung Electronics senior manager was sentenced to prison for leaking semiconductor technology to the PRC. The extent of these leaks could inflict substantial losses on Samsung Electronics specifically and South Korean semiconductor technology more broadly.** The Seoul Central District Court's 25<sup>th</sup> Criminal Division sentenced the former senior manager, identified by the surname Kim, to seven years in prison and a 200 million Korean Won fine for violating the Act on Protection of Industrial Technology.[66] Kim and other suspects were prosecuted for leaking Samsung's 18nm DRAM process technology to PRC firm ChangXin Memory Technologies (CXMT) in January 2024. Kim allegedly accessed trade secrets from Samsung and its partners and attempted to establish his own semiconductor equipment company in the PRC to facilitate additional leaks.[67] Kim and his associates, in addition to leaking technological information, poached 20 engineers from Samsung and its affiliates and offered them generous salaries to work for PRC-affiliated firms.

CXMT is a leading company in the PRC semiconductor industry that has experienced rapid advancement in its DRAM output, nearing the output levels of DRAM market leaders Samsung, SK Hynix, and Micron. CXMT reports that its output increased from 70,000 wafers per month in 2022 to 200,000 wafers per month by late 2024, making up nearly 15 percent of global DRAM supply.[68] South Korean prosecutors allege that this CXMT expansion was aided by the information leaked by Kim and other Samsung employees. While CXMT has not yet reached the market share of South Korean firms, the rate of the PRC's progress has prompted concern within the South Korean semiconductor industry. The Korea Institute of Science and Technology Evaluation and Planning--a South Korean think tank--released a report in February 2025 stating that the PRC has now surpassed or is on par with South Korean production in five areas of semiconductor technology.[69] PRC domination of crucial semiconductor technologies could have significant impacts on the South Korean economy, as semiconductors currently amount to approximately 20 percent of South Korea's total exports.[70] South Korean semiconductor firms and other high-tech industry manufacturers have reported previous leaks of their critical technology to the PRC, further enabling PRC technological advancement.[71] PRC domination of semiconductor markets is of significant concern to South Korea, the United States, and Taiwan due to potential impacts on global supply chains and national security.

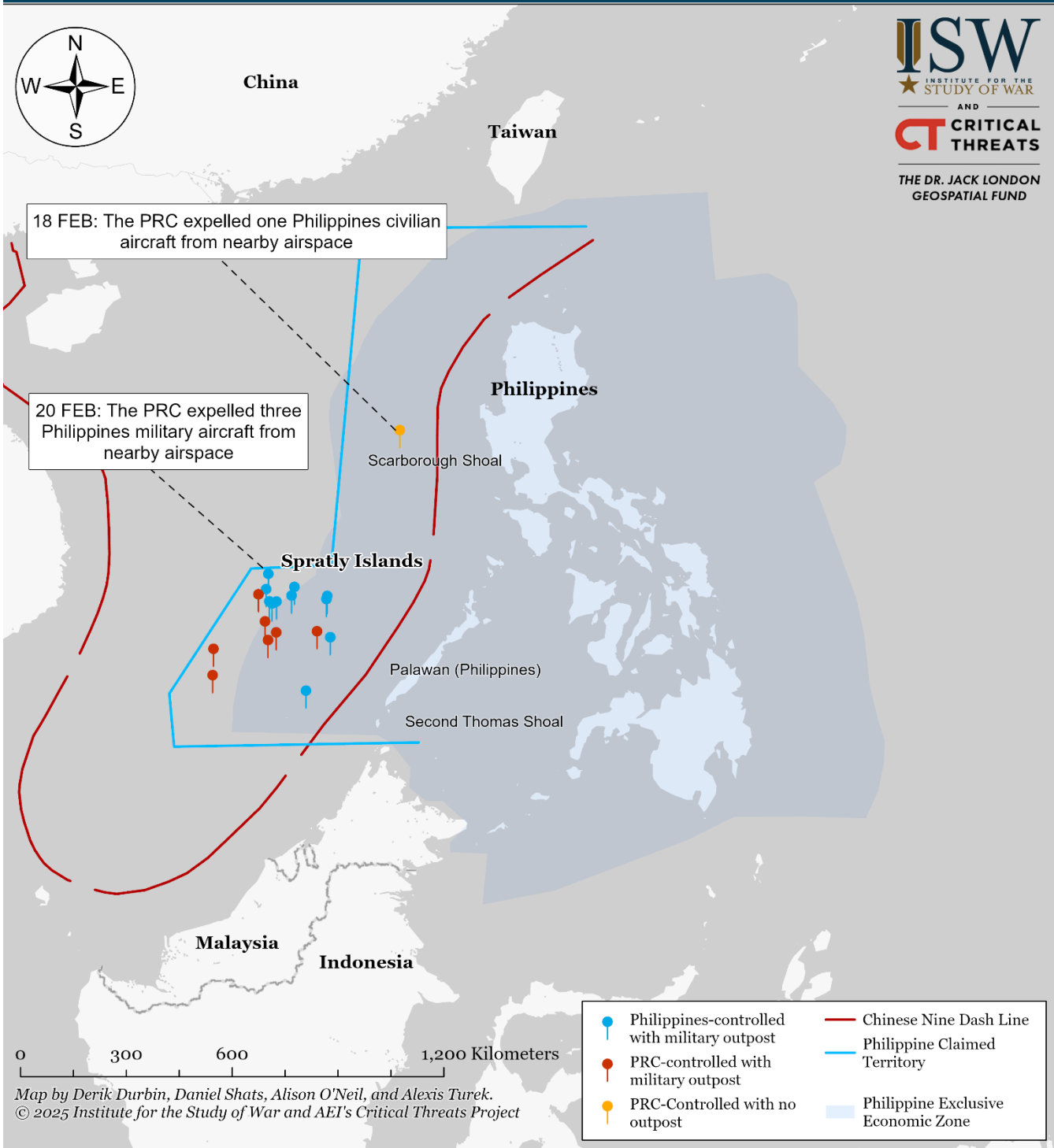
## Southeast Asia

## *Philippines*

**The PLA expelled three Philippine aircraft from the airspace near the Spratly Islands, the latest confrontation amid a period of high tensions between the PRC and the Philippines.** PLA Southern Theater Command spokesperson Colonel Tian Junli stated that three Philippine aircraft “illegally entered” the airspace near the Spratly Islands on February 20.[72] The Spratly Islands are a disputed archipelago in the South China claimed by Malaysia, the PRC, the ROC, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. The PRC has engaged in extensive artificial island-building and dredging in the Spratlys, with analysts determining that seven PLA outposts have been completed throughout PRC-occupied territory in the Spratlys.[73] The Philippines has criticized the PRC presence and militarization of the Spratly islands previously and competing territorial claims between the two states in the Spratlys and elsewhere in the South China Sea have resulted in multiple confrontations between PRC and Philippine vessels and aircraft.

Tian criticized the most recent of these incidents as another example of the Philippines’ disregard for PRC territorial sovereignty.[74] The PLA expelled a Philippine aircraft from the airspace over Scarborough Shoal, which is occupied by the PRC, on February 18.[75] The Philippines Coast Guard accused the PLA of carrying out unsafe aerial maneuvers against a Philippines Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources plane completing a maritime domain awareness flight. The Philippines Coast Guard stated that a PLA Navy helicopter flew within three meters of the Philippine plane. The recent spate of confrontations between the Philippines and PRC reflects a general increase in bilateral tensions.

# Events around the South China Sea (February 18-20)



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## *Vietnam*

**The PRC began a live-fire military exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin in response to Vietnam announcing a new coastal baseline on February 21.[76] This exchange highlights the mounting tensions between the two countries over territorial disputes in the South China Sea.** A coastal baseline is a conceptual line that a state uses to define its territorial waters, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and continental shelf, which extends seaward from the baseline. Vietnamese state media claimed that the baseline is in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 2000 Agreement on the Delimitation of the Gulf of Tonkin.[77] The latter agreement established a maritime boundary in the disputed Gulf of Tonkin between the PRC and Vietnam, although it only bisects a relatively small portion of the gulf. Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry stated on February 21 that the baseline provides an additional legal basis to protect Vietnamese sovereign rights and jurisdiction over Vietnamese-claimed territory.[78]

The PRC defined its own coastal baseline along the southwestern coast of in the Gulf of Tonkin on March 1, 2024, which it framed as a “necessary act for exercising national sovereignty and jurisdiction.”[79] Vietnam urged the PRC at the time to adhere to UNCLOS when determining the baseline to measure territorial waters and comply with the 2000 delimitation agreement.[80]

The PRC began four day, live-fire drills in the Gulf of Tonkin on February 24, two days after Vietnam announced the new baseline, in what is likely an expression of dissatisfaction with Vietnam’s actions.[81] The PRC’s and Vietnam’s conflicting maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea extend beyond the Gulf of Tonkin to the Paracel and Spratly islands. PRC-Vietnam tensions over the South China Sea are less public than the PRC’s disputes with other rival claimants, such as the Philippines, and are typically confined to closed-door negotiations. Vietnam occasionally resorts to public criticisms of the PRC when negotiations fail to resolve tensions.[82] PRC MFA Spokesperson Guo Jiakun publicly criticized Vietnam’s land reclamation in the Spratly Islands on February 19, two days before Vietnam’s announcement, and referred to Vietnam’s presence there as an illegal occupation.[83]

## Oceania

**The PRC conducted unannounced live-fire drills involving three warships near Australia and New Zealand between February 21-22.** The warships involved in the drills were the cruiser *CNS Zunyi*, the frigate *CNS Hengyang*, and the replenishment vessel *CNS Weishanhu*. [84] The live-fire exercises occurred in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand, approximately 340 nautical miles from Sydney.[85] Australia reported sighting the ships in the Coral Sea on February 13, shortly after a PRC jet released flares within 30 meters of an Australian maritime patrol aircraft over the South China Sea on February 11.[86] The PLA Navy reportedly warned airliners that they were crossing a secret live-fire exercise.[87] Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles said that the PRC had not notified Australian authorities, however, and that the Australian government learned of the drill from the airlines.[88] PRC Defense Ministry Spokesperson Wu Qian deflected Australia’s accusations and said that “During the exercise, China organized live-fire exercises with naval guns

against the sea on the basis of repeatedly issuing safety notices in advance.”<sup>[89]</sup> Wu added that the PRC’s actions were in line with international law and “will not affect aviation safety.”<sup>[90]</sup>

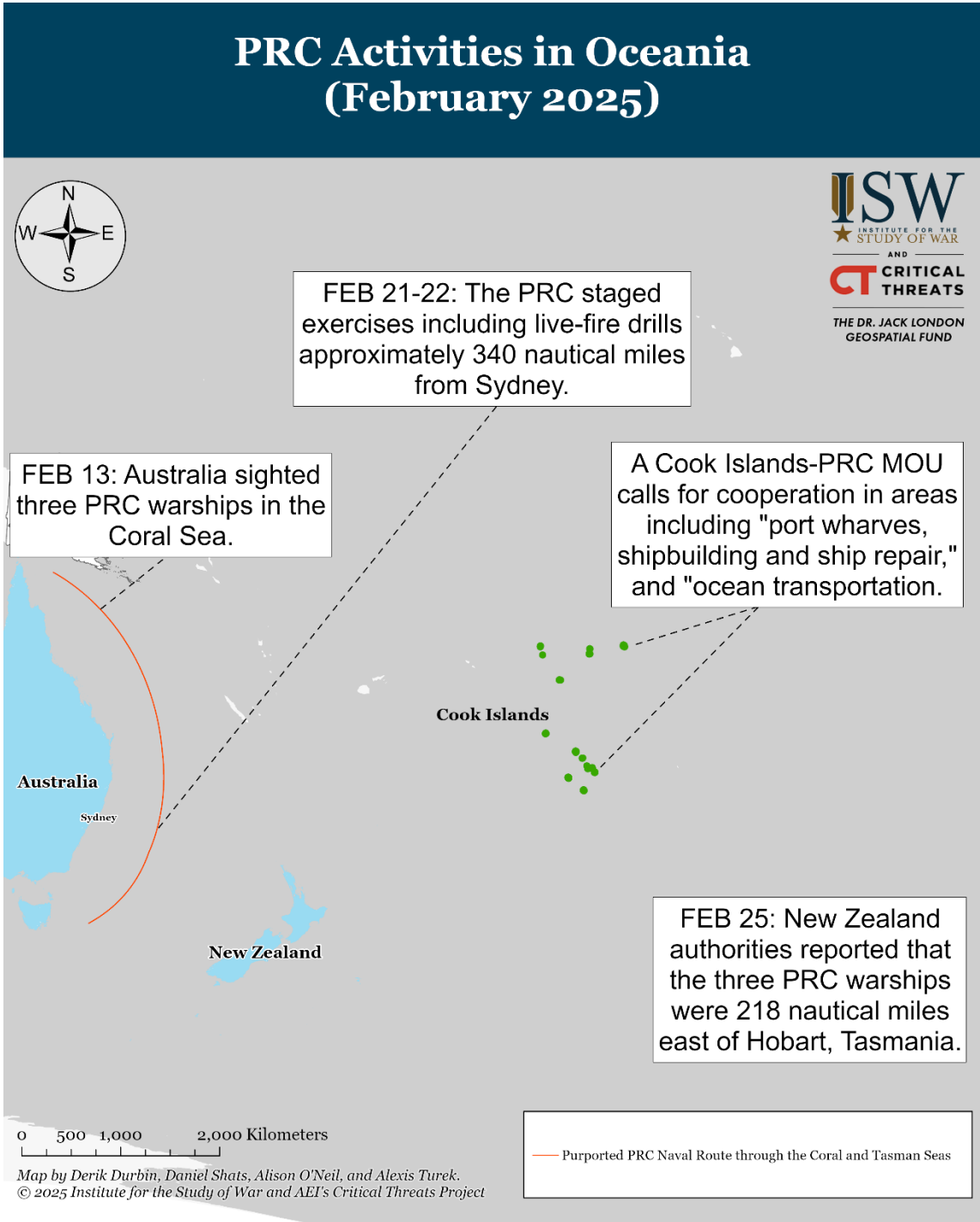
The PRC appears to have organized the exercises to be provocative. New Zealand Defense Minister Judith Collins said the live fire exercises took place with “a couple of hours’ notice” instead of the expected 12-24 hours usually notified via a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM).<sup>[91]</sup> The governments of Australia and New Zealand both reported that the PRC did not issue a NOTAM.<sup>[92]</sup> Airspace Australia CEO Rob Sharp stated that 49 flights were reportedly forced to reroute due to the exercises.<sup>[93]</sup> Collins said that drills of this type, involving ships of these capabilities, occurring in those waters were unprecedented.<sup>[94]</sup> Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said that the exercise was legal and had occurred outside Australia’s EEZ.<sup>[95]</sup> Albanese said that the PRC “could have given more notice,” however.<sup>[96]</sup> Albanese told reporters that “Australian defense were certainly aware” and that Australian frigates had been monitoring the PRC vessels, which were 218 nautical miles east of Hobart, Tasmania, as of the time of this writing.

Conflicting narratives have emerged regarding the nature of the drills. The plurality of sources described the exercises as live-fire drills and cited officials who claimed the PRC had not warned the Australian military. Newsweek cited a source claiming that PRC officials had warned Australian officials, however.<sup>[97]</sup> Albanese said that it was not clear whether a live firing had actually occurred; Australian media reported that the PRC ships moved in a pattern consistent with live-fire exercises but that the Australian military had not observed the ships firing on a target.<sup>[98]</sup> Australian media reported that the vessels crossed back into the Australian EEZ on February 25.<sup>[99]</sup> New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters met with PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi on February 26 and expressed concern about the drills’ short notice.<sup>[100]</sup> Peters said that Wang “took our concerns on board.”<sup>[101]</sup> The PRC MFA readout did not specifically mention Wang’s discussion of the drills but said that the PRC and New Zealand would resolve “specific differences” through “constructive dialogue.”<sup>[102]</sup>

Unannounced military drills may be part of a PRC effort to intimidate Australia and New Zealand. The exercises illustrate the PRC’s increasingly assertive stance in the Indo-Pacific. Oceania is a key region in which the PRC seeks to increase its influence and access. The PRC follows a naval doctrine of “near seas defense and far seas protection,” which involves prioritizing the defense of the first island chain (including Taiwan) while building the capability to project naval power globally.<sup>[103]</sup> These global power projection efforts encompass the Indo-Pacific, which hosts a number of US allies, partners, and Compact of Free Association countries. The PRC likely seeks to deny US and allied access to a region it views as critical to its own defense.

The PRC ships’ transit to the Tasman Sea coincided with defense talks between the PRC and Australia, suggesting that the PRC could have timed the transit and subsequent live-fire drills as a show of strength. ABC Australia reported that PRC military officials told Australia that they had canceled planned live-fire exercises to avoid disrupting these defense talks, which took place between PRC General Xu Qiling and Australian Air Marshal Robert Chipman. The PRC had not mentioned future exercises, however.<sup>[104]</sup> It is also possible that the PRC launched the drills specifically to signal opprobrium against Australia and New Zealand following diplomatic spats. The PRC has employed sudden and unannounced military drills as a coercive tool to signal disapproval of political or diplomatic actions, particularly around Taiwan. The live-fire exercises came shortly after the PRC

signed several deals with the Cook Islands, a move that drew concern from authorities in New Zealand, which holds a compact of free association with the islands. They also come shortly after the encounter between PRC and Australian aircraft over the South China Sea, which prompted the Australian military to file formal objections against the PRC military.<sup>[105]</sup> The live-fire drills between Australia and New Zealand could signal the PRC's disapproval of Australia following the South China Sea encounter, the PRC's dismissal of New Zealand's concerns about the Cook Islands, or both.



**The Cook Islands published documents detailing the Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) signed with the PRC. The documents detail maritime cooperation, indicating the PRC’s intent to expand its Pacific presence while driving a wedge between US allies in Oceania.** The documentation included a memorandum of understanding on “blue economy cooperation” encompassing “port wharves, shipbuilding and ship repair, ocean transportation,” and other forms of maritime cooperation.[106] Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown had kept the terms of the deal private prior to his trip to the PRC, a move that New Zealand officials criticized as a violation of the Cook Islands’ compact of free association with Wellington. Brown also demurred when pressed for details about the agreements after signing them, claiming he did not think he needed to provide exact wording.[107] Cook Islands opposition leaders called for a no-confidence vote against Brown.[108]

The PRC’s efforts to establish a foothold in the Cook Islands exemplify a trend of increasingly assertive PRC behavior in the Pacific. PRC military diplomacy has sought to expand its reach and influence in Oceania, and the PRC could use an agreement with the Cook Islands to gain a naval foothold near Australia and New Zealand. New Zealand is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network that also includes the United States, Canada, and Britain. The PRC’s choice of the Cook Islands as such a foothold indicates possible intent to drive a wedge between New Zealand – which other Five Eyes states have criticized as friendly to the PRC – and its intelligence-sharing partners. PRC efforts to frustrate US coalition-building in the Pacific risk destabilizing alliances critical to the defense of Taiwan and other US regional partners.

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