

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 PRC hosted the 16th annual Straits Forum to promote stronger cross-strait linkages with the Taiwanese business community, civil society, and opposition political parties.**
- **Taiwanese internet celebrities are calling attention to CCP efforts to recruit them to facilitate United Front work.**
- **The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs used revelations about a US information operation against the PRC’s COVID-19 vaccine to discredit other negative US narratives about the PRC.**
- **The PRC forcefully blocked a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal two days after the implementation of a new CCG regulation that permits more aggressive “law enforcement” in the South China Sea. A CCG and Philippine boat collided, and the CCG boarded, towed, emptied, and damaged two Philippine supply boats.**
- **The PRC and Australia agreed on June 17 to improve military-to-military communication to avoid future standoffs**

Cross-Strait

Relations

Taiwan

The PRC hosted the 16th annual Straits Forum to promote stronger cross-strait linkages with the Taiwanese business community, civil society, and opposition political parties.

Deputy Director of the Straits Forum Organizing Committee Office Chen Zhiyong stated that the forum was focused on realizing the PRC's goals for social and economic cross-strait integration. The goals are supported by the various initiatives in the PRC's ambitious plan to increase Taiwan's connectivity with the mainland's Fujian province with infrastructure linkages and preferential economic programs for Taiwan residents.[1]

Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Deputy Minister Liang Wen-chieh stated that the Straits Forum is a United Front platform for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He reminded the public that the law forbids anyone from participating in any activities that involve the PRC's "One Country, Two System" political vision for integrating Taiwan.[2] The United Front is a whole-of-government and society effort to advance the CCP's ideology and win the hearts and minds of the Chinese people by forming a thorough alliance between the CCP and the rest of society.

The Straits Forum is an informational tool for the PRC to portray itself as the purveyor of peaceful and prosperous cross-strait relations, as well as highlight Taiwanese attendants' conformity to CCP platitudes about cross-strait relations and national identity. The PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) claimed that more than 7,000 people from Taiwan attended, including representatives from political parties, various industries, and community leaders, in defiance of what it called the DPP's "green terror" restrictions.[3] The forum did not result in any official policy outcomes for advancing cross-strait relations.

Kuomintang (KMT) Vice Chairman Sean Lien attended the forum, where he met with CCP Politburo member Wang Huning. PRC state media highlighted Lien's alignment with CCP cross-strait narratives and opposition to formal Taiwanese independence. Wang stated in his speech that the PRC maintains the capability and will to "crush separatist plots for Taiwan's independence." [4] Past Straits Forums have featured similar meetings between CCP and KMT officials.[5] The CCP and KMT maintain regular political exchanges, which sometimes result in the CCP granting concessions that are beneficial to Taiwan's economy. Such meetings serve to legitimize the KMT as the political party that is capable of managing a healthy cross-strait relationship, in contrast to the ruling DPP, with which the PRC severed contact in 2016 for its alleged "separatist" policies.

Wang is Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the foremost United Front work organization, as well as deputy leader of the Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs, making him one of the top CCP officials responsible for overseeing the PRC's policy toward Taiwan.

CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping highlighted KMT-CCP cooperation, expressed opposition to Taiwanese independence, and promoted cross-strait unification in his congratulatory letter to the Whampoa Military Academy centennial celebration on June 17.[6] The Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang, a non-ROC, CCP-controlled entity that holds the designation of "political party," emphasized the shared ideals between the KMT and the CCP to achieve national rejuvenation.[7] The PRC's portrayal of the CCP-KMT relationship as one of

cooperation and shared values is consistent with the PRC's efforts to showcase the KMT's legitimacy as the representative of Taiwan rather than the democratically-elected DPP government. The CCP's emphasis on shared values and history between the two parties presents the CCP-KMT relationship as the hopeful path to cross-strait unification.

Minister of the ROC's Veteran Affairs Retired and retired General Yen Teh-fa stated that few retirees of the ROC military went to the mainland to participate in the PRC's anniversary event. Yen warned against accepting media interviews for those who did travel to the PRC and highlighted the risk of falling for tricks of the CCP's cognitive warfare and united front tactics.[8] Former chairman of the disbanded Huang Fu-hsing wing of the KMT Chi Lin-lien was among the attendees.[9] The Chairperson of the KMT Cultural Communication Association distanced the KMT from Chi's participation by stating that he held no party position.[10]

Taiwanese internet celebrities are calling attention to CCP efforts to recruit them to facilitate United Front work. YouTuber Potter King first claimed that the CCP is spending considerable resources to lure Taiwanese internet celebrities to the PRC under the pretense of traveling to film content.[11] 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. YouTuber Ba Jiong revealed that the contract he received discussed a plan to establish a "Taiwan Support Party" that artists would join as honorary members to shape the future of PRC-Taiwan relations.[12] 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. Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior issued an announcement that urged individuals not to break the law by accepting instructions and funding from foreign forces that would compromise Taiwan's national security.[13]

The PRC has targeted pop culture icons as an avenue to influence Taiwanese politics in the past. Reuters reported on December 28 that the PRC pressured the popular Taiwanese band Mayday to support the PRC's claim that Taiwan is a part of China.[14] Reuters cited an anonymous source who provided access to an internal security note that details the PRC's threats to fine the band for lip-syncing, a fraudulent offense in the PRC. A Taiwanese security official involved in the leak asserted that the PRC's intimidation of Mayday was to influence Taiwan's youth vote in the presidential elections.

China

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) used revelations about a US information operation against the PRC's Covid-19 vaccine to discredit other negative US narratives about the PRC. A Reuters report on June 14 revealed that the US Department of Defense carried out clandestine psychological operations on Twitter from 2020 to 2021 to discredit the PRC's Sinovac vaccine in the Philippines. The operation was intended to counter growing PRC influence in the Philippines.[15] MFA spokesperson Lin Jian said the operation was part of a "consistent practice" of

the United States “manipulating social media to spread false information, poison public opinion, and smear the image of other countries.” Lin said the United States uses such tactics to discredit countries it wishes to “contain and suppress.” He claimed this approach applied not only to narratives about the Sinovac vaccine but also to US criticism of the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative and that the PRC has “overcapacity” in its electric vehicle industry.[16]

The MFA deflected concerns about the PRC’s expanding nuclear arsenal by claiming the United States is the real threat to nuclear strategic stability. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released a report that estimated that the PRC’s nuclear warhead arsenal grew from 410 to 500 between 2023 and 2024, making it the world’s fastest-growing nuclear arsenal.[17] MFA spokesperson Lin Jian declined to comment on the PRC’s nuclear expansion except to say the PRC’s nuclear strategy is defensive and “maintains a high degree of stability, continuity, and predictability.” He claimed instead that the US investment in upgrading its nuclear triad, increase in “nuclear sharing,” and extended deterrence deserve more attention as the “major issues that truly concern global strategic stability.”[18] “Nuclear sharing” likely refers to the US-UK-Australia cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines, which the PRC has framed as a threat to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.[19]

SIPRI’s estimate of the PRC’s nuclear arsenal aligns with estimates presented in the US Department of Defense’s China Military Power Report in 2023. The Department of Defense assessed that the PRC could reach 1,000 warheads by 2030 and 1,500 warheads by 2035.[20]

Southeast

Asia

Philippines

The PRC forcefully blocked a Philippine resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal two days after the implementation of a new CCG regulation that permits more aggressive “law enforcement” in the South China Sea. A CCG and Philippine boat collided, and the CCG boarded, towed, emptied, and damaged two Philippine supply boats. CCG, PLA Navy (PLAN), and Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM) vessels disrupted a joint Philippine Coast Guard and Navy resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal on June 17. The Philippines controls Second Thomas Shoal and has troops stationed aboard the grounded warship *Sierra Madre*, but the PRC also claims the shoal as its territory. The Philippine supply ship and a PRC vessel collided during the confrontation. The PRC and the Philippines blamed each other for the collision.[21] The CCG also boarded, inspected, and towed away two Philippine inflatable boats carrying supplies and confiscated some of the supplies, including rifles. CCG personnel damaged the hulls of the boats with bladed weapons and abandoned them. At least eight Philippine personnel were injured during the clash, including one who lost a

thumb.[22]

The Philippines accused the PRC of using “physical attacks and violence” against Philippine soldiers to prevent the resupply mission. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) released videos of the incident which showed the CCG deploying tear gas, blaring sirens, flashing strobe lights, and ramming the Philippines navy supply boats.[23] This is the first time the PRC has used bladed weapons or boarded a Philippine government vessel during its confrontations with the Philippines in the South China Sea.[24] It is the second time the Philippine military reported that the CCG had seized its supplies. The first time was on May 19, when the Philippine military said the CCG seized food and medicine it had airdropped to Second Thomas Shoal.[25]

The CCG claimed that the Philippines sent ships to “illegally” enter PRC waters around Second Thomas Shoal, which the PRC calls Ren’ai Reef and the Philippines calls Ayungin Shoal, and that the CCG acted in a “reasonable, legal, professional, and standard” way to warn, intercept, board and inspect, and forcibly expel the Philippine vessels.[26] The PRC MFA claimed the Philippine supply delivery included construction materials, which would be used to reinforce the *Sierra Madre*. [27] The PRC aims to prevent the delivery of construction materials to Second Thomas Shoal because the Philippines’ ability to maintain a presence on the shoal depends on the structural integrity of the *Sierra Madre*, a World War II-era ship that is severely dilapidated. The PRC most likely believes that preventing the delivery of supplies to the *Sierra Madre* will eventually force the Philippines to abandon the shoal as the *Sierra Madre* becomes uninhabitable.

The confrontation happened two days after the CCG officially implemented new procedures first announced on May 15 that authorize it to detain for up to 60 days any foreign national that illegally intrudes into the PRC’s claimed territory and to board and inspect the cargo of foreign vessels traveling to the PRC’s claimed waters. ISW previously assessed that the procedures were intended to enhance PRC efforts to assert its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.[28] Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief Romeo Brawner urged Filipino fishermen to ignore the CCG’s restrictions and continue fishing operations as normal.[29] It is unclear whether the CCG attempted to arrest any of the Philippine personnel involved in the June 17 supply mission.

The PRC claims all the islands and maritime features within its delineated “nine-dash line” as PRC territory, including the Spratly Islands and nearly all other land features in the South China Sea. Other countries including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan dispute some or all of the PRC’s claims in the region. A 2016 decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration declared the PRC’s maritime claims within the nine-dash line to be legally invalid, but the PRC rejects this ruling. The PRC has deployed coast guard, maritime militia, and naval vessels using a variety of “gray zone” tactics including physically surrounding, ramming, and firing water cannons at Philippine vessels to contest Philippine control over several PRC-claimed features including Second Thomas Shoal. It uses such tactics to gain control of the territories without provoking US intervention or outright war.

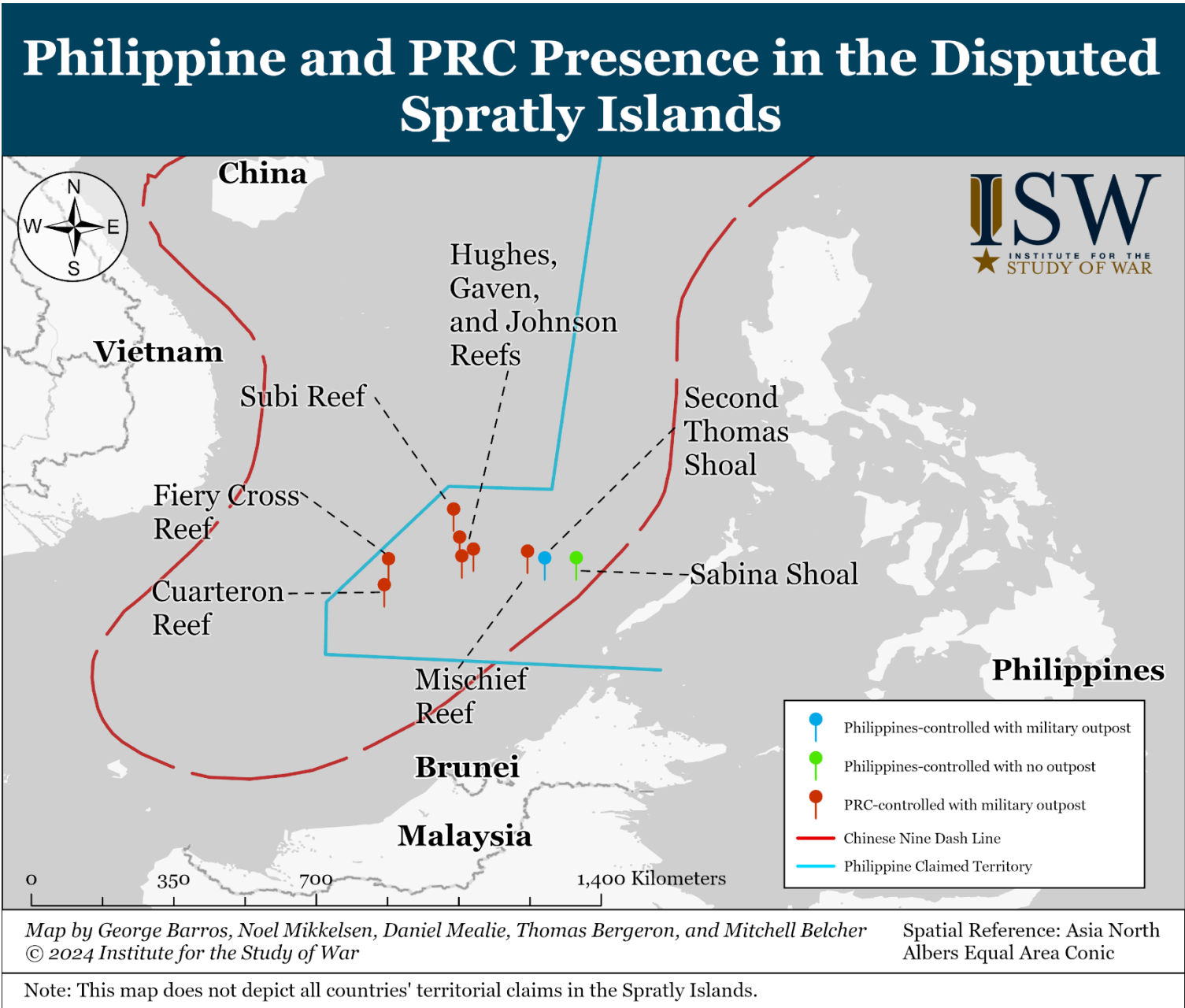
The CCG claimed that it took “restrictive measures” against Philippine boats that landed on Sabina Shoal in the South China Sea. PRC state media *Global Times* reported on June 14 that the CCG confronted a Philippine ship that “intruded” into waters near Sabina Shoal and released small boats to “illegally” land on sandbars there. The CCG warned the Philippine ships of the PRC’s claimed sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, of which Sabina Shoal is a part, and took unspecified “restrictive measures.” *Global Times* did not specify when this incident occurred.[30] Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson Jay Tarriela asserted Philippine sovereignty over Sabina Shoal and denied that the CCG took any “regulatory actions” against the Philippine ship there, which he identified as the *BRP Teresa Magbanua*. [31] The Philippine Coast Guard deployed the *Teresa Magbanua* to Sabina Shoal on May 12 to monitor PRC activity in the area.[32] The Philippines has accused the PRC of dumping crushed coral at Sabina Shoal as a preparatory step to begin reclamation and build facilities there.[33]

Sabina Shoal is roughly 37 miles east of Second Thomas Shoal and is the staging point for Philippine resupply missions to Second Thomas Shoal. The Philippines and the PRC both claim it as their territory, although the shoal is located well within the Philippines’ Exclusive Economic Zone and the Philippines has de facto control of it. A PRC-controlled Sabina Shoal would extend the PRC’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and improve the PRC’s ability to assert its claim over the Second Thomas Shoal. A PRC-controlled Sabina Shoal would also provide the PRC with the opportunity to build a military facility to the east of the Second Thomas Shoal. This would surround the Second Thomas Shoal with PRC military facilities, which would enhance the difficulty of Philippine resupply missions to the *Sierra Madre*.

The PLA Navy (PLAN) deployed an amphibious assault ship to the Spratly Islands for the first time as part of an intensifying PRC effort to assert control over disputed South China Sea territories. Manila Times and PRC state media *Global Times* reported that a Type 075 helicopter landing dock, which is a type of PLA amphibious assault ship, was spotted for the first time near Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands. Subi Reef is a disputed territory and hosts one of the PRC’s main military bases in the South China Sea. *Global Times* cited unspecified “experts” who claimed the deployment was preparation for “emergency response” amid “repeated provocations” from the Philippines. The ship made its maiden voyage to the Spratly Islands shortly after another PLA amphibious assault ship held hovercraft drills around Sabina Shoal on June 4.[34] Philippines Coast Guard spokesperson Jay Tarriela said the deployment on June 4 was to disrupt the activities of Philippine scientists surveying Sabina Shoal.[35]

The PRC MFA claimed that the Philippines’ application to delimit an extended continental shelf (ECS) in the South China Sea violated PRC sovereignty. The Philippines submitted a delimitation case for an ECS with the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf on June 15. An ECS would grant the Philippines exclusive rights to resource exploration and exploitation within the extended boundaries. The Philippines Maritime and Ocean Affairs Department said it was entitled under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to delimit the outer limits of its continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles but less than 350 nautical miles from its shores.

It did not specify how far out it seeks to delineate the extended shelf.[36] PRC MFA spokesperson Lin Jian called the Philippines’ “unilateral” submission of an ECS case a violation of “China’s sovereign rights and jurisdiction” and claimed the UN Commission would not review the case if it involved delimitation of disputed waters.[37] The PRC previously ignored and rejected a 2016 decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that its territorial claims within the Nine Dash Line have no legal basis. It would likely reject a UN Commission decision that grants the Philippines an extended continental shelf if the ECS overlaps with PRC territorial claims.



Oceania

The PRC and Australia agreed on June 17 to improve military-to-military communication to avoid future standoffs. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced the agreement after a state visit from PRC Premier Li Qiang.[38] This marks the second high-level visit from a PRC official to Australia during the last three months and since Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Albanese in March.[39]

The PRC has used confrontational intimidation tactics to deter Australian military presence in waters it deems to be its neighborhood, resulting in several tense encounters. Australia's Department of Defence revealed a Chinese warship sent out a sonar pulse in proximity to an Australian naval vessel in the East China Sea on November 14, injuring a diver.[40] A PRC fighter jet released flares in the path of an Australian naval helicopter on May 4 during an Australian mission to ensure sanctions enforcement against the DPRK. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Lin Jian claimed that the Australian helicopter deliberately flew close to the PRC's airspace in a provocative manner.[41] The PRC has used this tactic to instigate confrontations with other foreign militaries in the past. The Canadian Ministry of Defence claimed that a PRC fighter jet launched flares in front of one of its military helicopters in the South China Sea on October 29.[42]

Both Li and Albanese signaled the meeting represented a stabilization of the relationship, following a period of turmoil in which the PRC imposed a series of economic trade restrictions against Australian goods, which were in response to tensions involving COVID-19 and PRC influence in domestic Australian politics. The two countries also signed a pact to improve cooperation in various areas, including visa exemptions, education, and climate change.[43] Li toured lithium processing plants in the province of Western Australia following his meeting with Albanese, highlighting the PRC's interest in maintaining access to Australia's critical minerals sector that supplies key inputs for the PRC's electric vehicle production.[44]

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