

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

- **Taiwan.** Recall campaigns against 32 legislators in the KMT opposition advanced to the next stage. Successful recalls could shift the balance of power in the Taiwanese legislature to favor the ruling DPP.
- **Taiwan.** The PRC launched a sudden military exercise south of Taiwan likely as a coercive show of force. This follows similarly provocative PRC exercises near Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand.
- **South Korea.** Anti-PRC sentiments have surged in South Korea, following President Yoon Suk-yeol mentioning PRC espionage repeatedly in his impeachment trial. A leading presidential candidate reversed his pro-PRC position in response to this public frustration.
- **The Philippines.** The Philippines arrested PRC nationals for espionage targeting military and government sites, including the presidential palace. This alleged espionage is part of the PRC’s and United Front’s clandestine activities in the Philippines.
- **Russia.** PRC President Xi Jinping met Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu in Beijing. The PRC in the meeting reaffirmed its strategic cooperation with Russia while trying to project an image of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

The Taiwanese Central Election Commission (CEC) advanced 32 recall campaigns targeting Kuomintang (KMT) legislators. Successful recall campaigns against the KMT

opposition could shift the balance of power in the Legislative Yuan (LY) in favor of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The CEC announced that 13 recall cases against KMT legislators have moved to the second stage and three recall cases against DPP legislators failed to gather enough signatures.[1] This announcement comes after 19 recall proposals for KMT legislators reached the second stage and nine recall proposals against DPP legislators failed to gather enough signatures at the end of February.[2] KMT legislators face a total of 32 recall motions in the second stage, while DPP legislators have no recall motions in the second stage of recall to date. DPP legislative caucus Chair Ker Chien-ming called for a mass recall campaign against opposition legislators on January 4. The KMT responded by launching its own recall campaigns against the DPP. [3] These results illustrate the low popularity of the KMT-initiated recall campaign in the wake of massive KMT-led government budget cuts. The second stage requires 10 percent of eligible voters in the relevant legislator’s district to sign the recall petition within 60 days — 10 times the number of signatures needed at the first stage — so it is unclear how many of the 32 recall motions will advance further in the coming months. Gathering signatures from 10 percent of eligible voters would trigger a special election in the relevant legislator’s district, providing the DPP an opportunity to win seats that the KMT currently holds.

The DPP would need to flip six seats and maintain its current seats for a simple majority of 57 seats. Winning 12 seats would yield the DPP a firm majority over all opposition parties in the LY. The LY is comprised of 113 members and currently has no majority party; the DPP holds 51 seats, the KMT holds 54 seats (including two KMT-aligned independents), and the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) holds eight seats.[4] The KMT and TPP have recently aligned to gain majority control, obstructing DPP President William Lai Ching-te’s agenda through measures, such as passing a motion to slash the government budget by record levels in January 2025. The motion sought to cut some department budgets by over 90 percent. The large cuts to defense spending and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs budget in particular undermine the Taiwanese ability to resist PRC coercion and threats.

The PRC launched a sudden live-fire exercise 40 miles south of Taiwan on February 26, likely as a coercive display of force. This exercise follows similarly provocative exercises near Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand. The PRC broadcasted radio warnings that it would conduct live-fire military exercises in an approximately 1,850 square-mile area near Kaohsiung and Pingtung off Taiwan’s southern coast, overlapping with busy international shipping lanes.[5] The PRC gave no advanced warning of the drills through usual channels, such as notices to airmen or mariners, which endangers nearby air and sea traffic. Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) reported at least 32 PRC military aircraft around Taiwan on February 26, 22 of which crossed the median line in the Taiwan Strait into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).[6] The aircraft included fighter jets, surveillance planes, and drones. [7] Seven People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships operated within the designated drill zone, which was far outside of Taiwan’s territorial waters.[8] Two unnamed senior Taiwanese officials told Reuters that Taiwan detected no live fire in the drill zone, contrary to what the PRC had announced. [9] Both the MND and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) condemned the military exercise as a “blatant provocation to regional security and stability.” [10] Their PRC counterparts issued dismissive statements downplaying the significance of unannounced live-fire drills. PRC Ministry of Defense (MOD) spokesperson Wu Qian called the exercise “routine” and described the Taiwanese reaction as “hype.” [11]

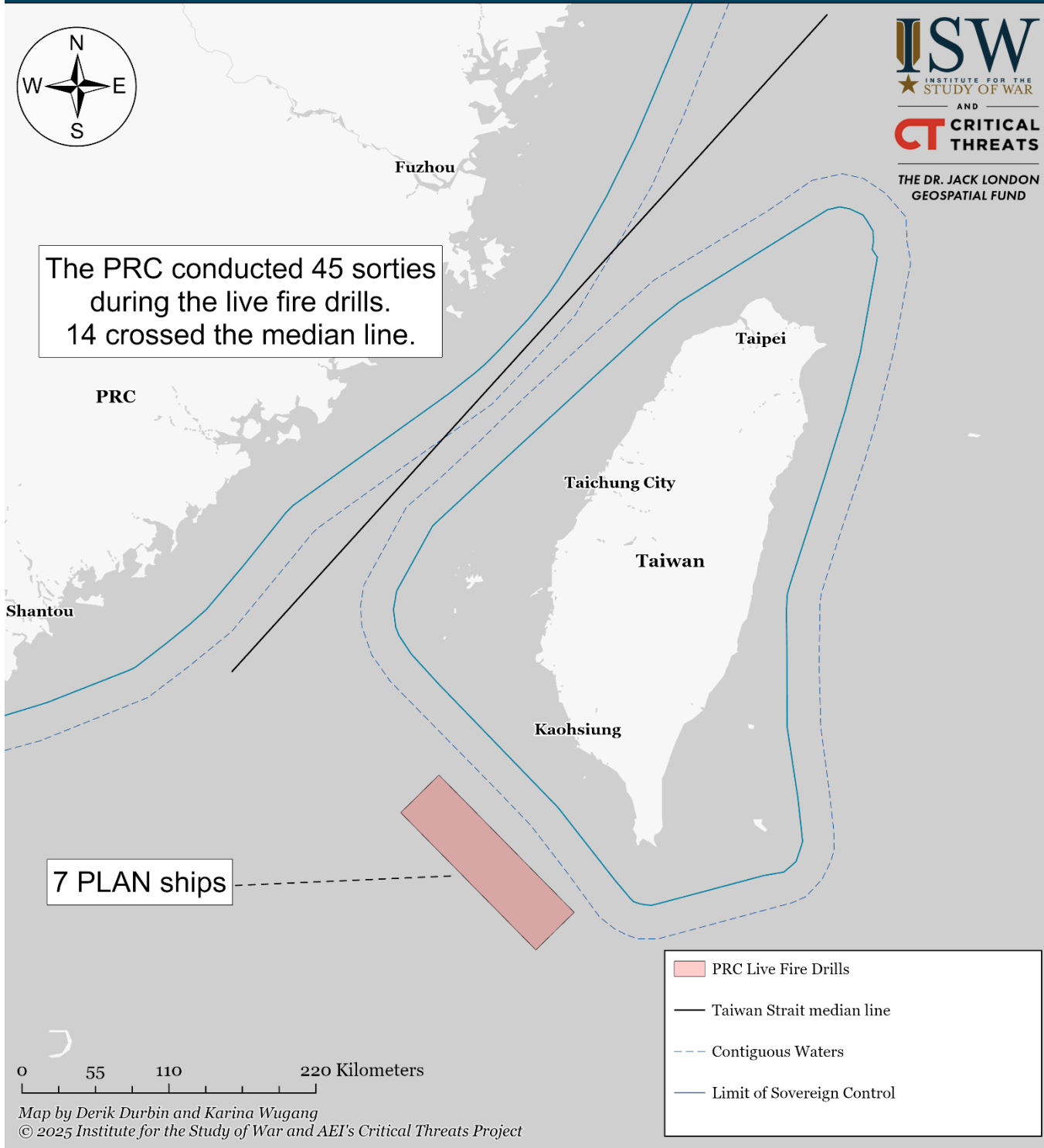
The PRC conducted an unprecedented series of unannounced live-fire drills in the Indo-Pacific in a single week. The PRC first launched live-fire drills in the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand on February 21.^[12] Australia and New Zealand were provided only a couple of hours of notice instead of the standard Notice to Airmen (NOTAM). Australia’s military notably observed no ships firing even though the PRC declared a live-fire exercise. ^[13] New Zealand’s defense ministry reported a second live-fire drill warning on February 22, again without a NOTAM.^[14] The PRC began four days of live-fire drills in the Gulf of Tonkin on February 24 with only a few hours of notice in response to Vietnam announcing a new coastal baseline on February 21.^[15] The PRC gave minimal warning instead of the customary 12-to-24-hour notice in all these cases, likely to maximize disruptiveness and intimidation while technically remaining compliant with international law.^[16]

The PRC has conducted other major, unannounced exercises around Taiwan in the past year as well — Joint Sword A in May 2024, Joint Sword B in October 2024, and an unnamed exercise in December 2024. The United States notably unfroze 870 million US dollars of military aid to Taiwan on February 26 — the same day as the PLA exercises. PRC MFA spokesperson Lin Jian denounced the resumption of US aid to Taiwan as a violation of the “one-China principle and the three Sino-US joint communiqués.”^[17]

PRC Live-Fire Drills near Taiwan February 26, 2025



The PRC conducted 45 sorties during the live fire drills. 14 crossed the median line.

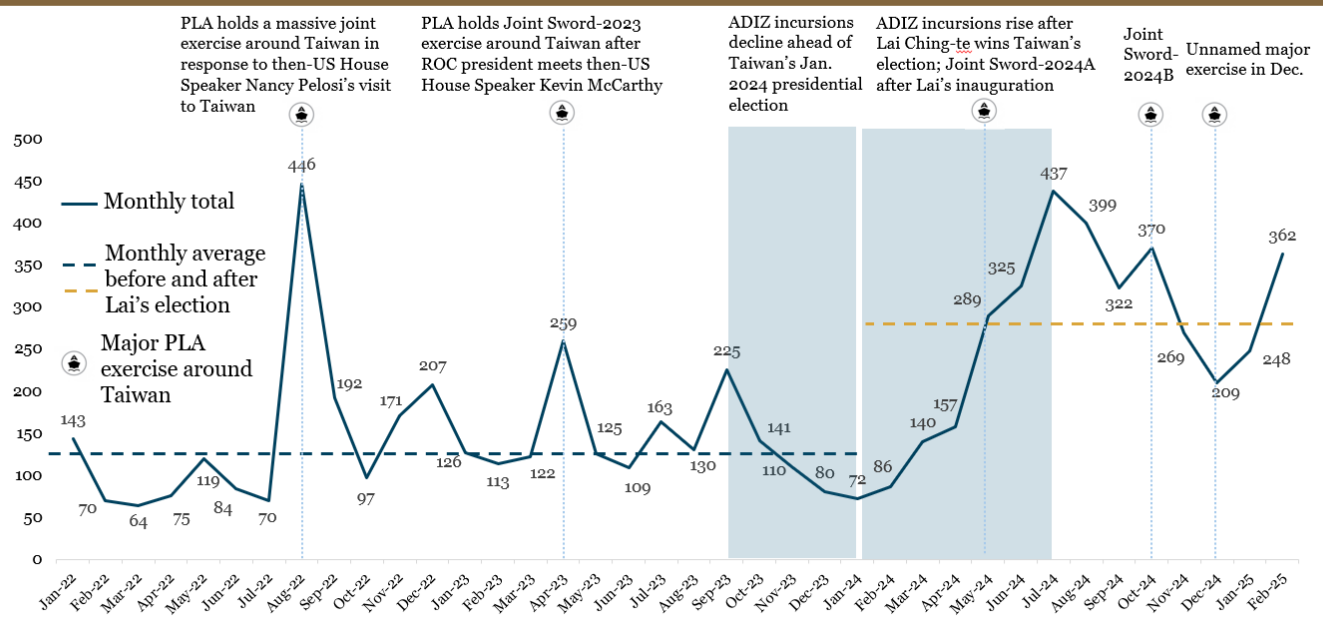


PLA aircraft flew into Taiwan's de-facto ADIZ 348 times in February 2025. The PRC has normalized a higher frequency of ADIZ incursions to degrade Taiwan's threat awareness and response threshold. The PRC dramatically increased the frequency of ADIZ incursions after the inauguration of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te in May 2024. The PRC views Lai as a “separatist” due to his administration’s focus on preserving Taiwanese sovereignty in the face of intensifying PRC efforts to advance its goal of annex Taiwan. PLA incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ have exceeded 200 every month since Lai took office, whereas this volume was unusual before then.

This new normal of ADIZ incursions represents one of the many elements of intensifying PRC coercion against Taiwan and Lai’s administration. The normalization of more frequent ADIZ incursions by PLA aircraft raises the threshold of coercive activity that would trigger a Taiwanese response, making it more difficult for Taiwan to detect and respond to a real threat in time. Taiwan must put personnel on standby to respond to ADIZ incursions, which strains resources and exhausts the personnel.

The PRC calibrates its military activities around Taiwan to intimidate and deter it from practicing policies that the PRC perceives as supportive of Taiwanese sovereignty. PLA aircraft incursions into Taiwan’s de-facto ADIZ are a near daily occurrence that typically serve as a barometer for the PRC’s reactions to political developments regarding Taiwan. Spikes in ADIZ incursions often correspond to political incidents in Taiwan that the PRC opposes, including high-level meetings between Taiwanese and foreign officials or expressions of Taiwanese sovereignty by ROC leaders.

ISW Institute for the Study of War
Monthly PRC Incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ, 2022 - Present



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

The PRC imposed retaliatory economic measures and released a white paper in response to US tariffs on PRC goods. The PRC imposed 15-percent tariffs on US agricultural goods and placed 10 US companies on its unreliable entity list on March 4 in response to the United States' imposition of 20-percent tariffs on all PRC imports.^[18] The unreliable entity list identifies foreign entities that harmed PRC businesses and restricts these entities' ability to invest in the PRC. The PRC likewise placed fifteen US firms, including defense contractor General Dynamics Land Systems, on an export control list.^[19] The PRC frequently sanctions United States-based aerospace and defense firms by freezing their assets based in the PRC. The PRC is signaling its disapproval of US policy through these retaliatory measures rather than trying to harm the United States economically.

The PRC imposition of tariffs on US agricultural goods represents the latest escalation in a series of economic disputes between the United States and PRC. The PRC already imposed 15-percent duties on liquefied natural gas products and coal following US President Donald Trump's return to office and subsequent imposition of 10-percent duties on imports from the PRC.^[20] The PRC also imposed export controls on five critical minerals — tungsten, bismuth, indium, molybdenum, and tellurium — in February, in a retaliatory move meant to restrict US access to products with defense applications.^[21]

The PRC released a white paper in response to US accusations regarding the PRC role in the fentanyl trade — an issue the Trump administration has raised in conjunction with tariffs. The United States imposed tariffs on the PRC, Canada, and Mexico in part to stem the flow of fentanyl into the United States. Fentanyl precursors, which pharmaceutical companies can use to make legal drugs, pass from the PRC to Mexico, where cartels process the ingredients into fentanyl.^[22] The US Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) accused the PRC of subsidizing the export of fentanyl precursors, financially supporting firms that trafficked “fentanyl materials and other synthetic narcotics,” and benefitting “strategically and economically” from the fentanyl crisis.^[23] The PRC has repeatedly deflected accusations of involvement in the fentanyl trade. The PRC MFA commented that the United States “spread all kinds of lies on the fentanyl issue, smeared China, shifted the blame, and insisted on imposing tariffs” on March 4.^[24] The PRC continues to employ strong rhetoric amid the tariff escalations. PRC MFA spokesperson Lin Jian said on March 4 that, if the United States “insists on a tariff war, trade war or any other war, China will fight to the end.”^[25]

The PRC hosted its Two Sessions meetings, during which it highlighted its ongoing disapproval of the Lai administration and its plans to continue supporting pro-reunification elements in Taiwan. The National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), collectively known as the Two Sessions, began to convene in Beijing in early March 2025. The NPC is the PRC's legislative body, and the CPPCC convenes scholars and business leaders.^[26] Two Sessions discussions bring together nearly 3000 NPC delegates and 2100 CPPCC delegates to approve decisions made by top-level leadership and disseminate information on decision-making to the media.^[27] The NPC is expected to last approximately one week, during which legislators will endorse decisions made by the CCP and discuss political priorities for the upcoming year.^[28] High-level officials' Two Sessions speeches often highlight PRC perceptions,

intentions, and budgeting priorities. The PRC announced an 8.4-percent increase in funding toward diplomatic initiatives — a growth from last year’s 6.6-percent increase. Military budget growth rates remained the same at 7.2 percent.[29]


PRC Premier Li Qiang delivered a government work report emphasizing “reunification” with Taiwan during the Two Sessions on March 5.[30] The report mentioned working with “fellow Chinese in Taiwan” for reunification, marking a change in language from the 2024 report.[31] The Global Taiwan Institute noted that the 2024 report on Taiwan dropped previous language on “peaceful reunification” in favor of rhetoric on “reunification.”[32] ISW noted following the 2024 NPC that PRC Premier Li Qiang’s report to the NPC also omitted the term “peaceful reunification” in 2016 and 2020 — the years that ROC President Tsai Ing-wen won the presidential elections. Li’s rhetoric could indicate PRC disapproval of the Lai administration, which the PRC frequently accuses of separatism.[33]

Li’s delivered the work report after the Taiwan Work Conference, which occurred shortly before the NPC and CPPCC meetings from February 25-26. CPPCC Chairman Wang Huning delivered a speech emphasizing that the CCP must “unswervingly advance the great cause of national reunification.”[34] Wang is chairman of the CPPCC, which is a primary United Front work organization, as well as and deputy leader of the Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs, making him one of the top CCP officials responsible for overseeing PRC policy toward Taiwan. Wang called for cross-strait cooperation as part of ongoing PRC efforts to restart cross-strait tourism.[35] Wang also called on the PRC to “firmly support the patriotic unification forces” in Taiwan — a change from the previous year’s rhetoric.[36] This statement, along with Li’s rhetoric in the government work report, highlights the PRC’s efforts to support pro-reunification entities in Taiwan to undermine Taiwanese independence.

The United States sanctioned six entities based in the PRC and Hong Kong for procuring unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) components for Iran. US sanctions have targeted multiple instances of PRC support for Iranian drone and ballistic missile programs. The sanctioned firms include Dingtai Industrial Technology Co Limited, Yonghongan Trade Limited, Hong Kong Tianle International Co Limited, DDC Develop Industry Hong Kong Limited, Shenzhen Zhiyu International Trade Co Ltd, and JP Oriental International Holdings Limited. The US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) accused these entities of acting as front companies for the OFAC-sanctioned Iranian firm Pishtazan Kavosh Gostar Boshra (PKGB) and its subsidiary Narin Sepehr Mobin Isatis (NSMI), which support the Iranian ballistic missile and UAV programs.[37]

The United States has sanctioned PRC-based entities for their support of Iranian UAV procurement efforts previously. OFAC sanctioned a PRC-based network of five companies and one individual for supporting an Iranian firm in exporting drones to Russia in March 2023.[38] OFAC similarly sanctioned seven entities and five individuals based in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Iran for their support to subordinates of the Iranian Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics in July 2024.[39] ISW has noted that Hong Kong has emerged as a hub for PRC companies to circumvent sanctions on Iran,

Russia, and North Korea, as its lenient regulatory environment facilitates relatively easy concealment of corporate ownership and the rapid creation and dissolution of shell companies.[40]

 US-Sanctioned PRC and Hong Kong Entities on Feb. 26, 2025		
Sanctioned Entity	Description	Reason
Dingtai Industrial Technology Co. Limited	Hong Kong-based electrical and electronics manufacturer	Procured US-origin UAV-applicable items including valve assemblies, radio frequency connectors, and engines on behalf of OFAC-designated Iranian firm PKGB.
Yonghongan Trade Limited	Hong Kong-based international trading company.	Procured Western-origin aircraft components including vane turbines, vane compressors, blade turbines, and blade compressors for OFAC-designated PKGB front companies Advantage Trading Co. Limited and Duling Technology Limited.
Hong Kong Tianle International Co. Limited	No information available.	Facilitated price quotes and the procurement of US-origin electronic components for PKGB front company Rastafann. Procured thousands of micro servos on behalf of PKGB.
DDC Develop Industry Hong Kong Limited	No information available.	Consignee for engine shipments with PKGB subsidiary NSMI.
Shenzhen Zhiyu International Trade Co. Ltd.	PRC-based freight and cargo company.	Exported UAV-applicable production and testing equipment to PKGB subsidiary NSMI.
JP Oriental International Holdings Limited	Hong Kong-based distributor, exporter, and trading company.	Exported UAV-applicable shipments over multiple years to PKGB subsidiary NSMI.

Northeast Asia

South Korea

President Yoon Suk-yeol's repeated mentions of PRC espionage during his final impeachment trial on February 25 have fueled anti-PRC sentiment across the political spectrum in South Korea. Presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung has reversed his pro-PRC stance, aligning with many public sentiments. This comes as the PRC was working to cultivate friendlier ties with South Korea in order to suppress anti-PRC attitudes and influence South Korea's upcoming presidential election. Yoon argued that declaring martial law on December 3 was necessary to raise public awareness about espionage activities by anti-state actors, such as North Korea and the PRC, and inability to prosecute them under the current law during his final impeachment trial.^[41] Yoon said, “Last year, PRC nationals were repeatedly caught flying drones to photograph our military bases” and “industrial spies leaking national key technologies have surged. . . with two-thirds of it flowing to the PRC,” referencing past instances of PRC interference and industrial espionage.^[42] Yoon argued that the opposition-led National Assembly has blocked the passage of legislation aimed at punishing foreigners arrested on espionage charges. South Korea's current espionage law prevents the prosecution of foreign suspects except those from North Korea. The law specifies that anyone who engages in espionage, aids enemy spies, or leaks military secrets to an enemy could face death or life imprisonment (Article 98 of the Criminal Act).^[43] The Constitutional Court precedents have limited the definition of an “enemy country” to North Korea.^[44] The opposition Democratic Party (DP) had postponed the revision of the Criminal Act in the National Assembly's Legislation and Judiciary Committee, where the DP holds the majority, in December 2024.^[45] The DP denied opposing the bill, claiming that Yoon's martial law declaration disabled them from processing the bill.^{[46][47]}

Yoon argued that declaring martial law falls within the scope of presidential power and that the opposition's obstruction of necessary legislation for the national security equates to a national emergency. The constitution allows for the declaration of a state of emergency “in times of war, invasion, or a national emergency equivalent to these, when the country is in a state of combat with the enemy or when social order is severely disrupted, making the execution of administrative and judicial functions significantly difficult” (Article 77, Section 1 of the Constitution).^[48] The Constitutional Court is expected to decide by mid-March whether to impeach or reinstate Yoon. The constitution mandates that a presidential election be held within 60 days of an impeachment, meaning an early election could be held by mid-to-late May.

Yoon's consistent references to PRC espionage are contributing to rising anti-PRC sentiment, with protesters holding anti-PRC demonstrations, including in front of the PRC embassy. Protesters have held signs that read “No China” and “CCP OUT.”^[49] One of Yoon's supporters attempted to break into the PRC embassy on February 14, allegedly stating that his goal was to “give people a chance to experience anti-PRC sentiment firsthand.”^[50] A petition calling for a revision of the “National Security Act to punish foreign spies, such as those from the PRC” has garnered 42,733 signatures--85 percent of its target to be referred to the National Assembly's standing committee.^[51]

DP leader Lee Jae-myung — a leading candidate for the potential presidential election — has distanced himself from pro-PRC positions likely in response to the growing anti-PRC sentiments. Lee stated his

support for strengthening ties with Japan and continuing trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan in an interview with the *Economist* on January 30.[52] Public backing for the revision bill and Lee's shift in foreign policy, coupled with mass protests by Yoon supporters, indicate that Yoon's campaign on anti-PRC rhetoric has successfully generated strong public momentum across the political spectrum.

The PRC is signaling its intent to restore relations with South Korea despite the growing anti-PRC rhetoric in the country. South Korea's National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik met with CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping on February 10, and a PRC official hinted at the possibility of lifting the "K-Culture ban" that the PRC imposed in 2017.[53] Xi will likely visit South Korea for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, reflecting the PRC's continued desire to improve bilateral relations.[54] The PRC is seeking ways to decrease anti-PRC sentiment by offering cultural and economic opportunities and influence voter sentiment ahead of the expected early election in May.

Southeast Asia

Philippines

The Philippine government has arrested multiple PRC nationals on espionage charges targeting military camps and the presidential palace as part of its expanded campaign against PRC espionage and United Front activity throughout the country. The National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) announced on February 25 that it had arrested two suspected PRC spies accused of targeting the Presidential palace, Camp Aguinaldo, Camp Crane, Villamor Air Base, and the US Embassy in Manila with the assistance of three Philippine citizens.[55] The NBI stated that the two PRC nationals employed the Filipinos to drive around targeted areas in vans equipped with surveillance, data theft, and network disruption technology, collecting "thousands" of pieces of data before being apprehended.[56]

Philippine President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. identified PRC espionage and influence in Philippine politics as a major issue following the arrest of five PRC nationals conducting "illegal intelligence gathering" on Philippine Navy and Coast Guard facilities, ports, and ships near the South China Sea on January 24.[57] The five individuals targeted areas and equipment that have been utilized in Philippine military operations in the South China Sea and joint exercises with the United States and Australia. The NBI announced on February 28 that four of the arrested individuals led the Philippine China Association of Promotion of Peace and Friendship and Qiaoxing Volunteer Group--civic groups that are overseen by the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC), which is a CCP-led organization engaged in United Front work.[58] United Front Work Department officials have previously spoken at meetings for the Philippine-based groups, with the latest event occurring in May 2024. The two Philippine-based groups advertised their affiliation with the CCP, and leaders stated that the groups would focus on promoting Chinese culture and expanding Chinese-Philippine friendships.[59] The groups also made donations of cash and patrol vehicles to local police and city government officials, likely an effort to ingratiate themselves with local officials and increase their standing in local Philippine communities.[60]

Statements from President Marcos and other Philippine officials indicate that efforts to neutralize PRC espionage networks and reduce CCP influence in Philippine domestic politics will remain a focus of the

administration due to high levels of concern over what is likely PRC-sponsored behavior.[61] The nature of the PRC's espionage and United Front activity indicates that the PRC views the Philippines as an important target for influence operations, particularly given tensions in the South China Sea.

Europe

Russia

Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu met with PRC President Xi Jinping and PRC Premier Wang Yi in Beijing. The PRC reaffirmed its strategic cooperation with Russia while trying to project an international image of neutrality in the Ukraine war. PRC Premier Wang Yi also attended the meeting. Russian media reported that the discussions focused on “strategic security,” including counterterrorism.[62] Shoigu himself noted the short notice of the bilateral meeting and said that it “highlights the special nature of bilateral dialogue.”[63] The PRC MFA readout echoed these sentiments, emphasized “comprehensive strategic cooperation,” and called for the two sides to “continue to strengthen coordination in international and regional affairs.”[64] This statement echoes Lin’s February 27 statement that it is “completely futile for the United States to sow discord between China and Russia” after US Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressed concerns about Russian dependence on the PRC.[65]

PRC rhetoric reflects simultaneous efforts to signal strong and consistent support for Russia while shirking the international opprobrium directed at Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. ISW has assessed that the PRC leverages its alleged neutrality on the war in Ukraine to benefit reputationally on the international stage.[66] The meeting between Xi, Wang, and Shoigu occurred shortly before US President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington, DC. PRC MFA spokesperson Lin Jian commented on this meeting by saying that “China will continue to be committed to playing a constructive role in the political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis” but that “China is neither the creator nor a party to the Ukrainian crisis” on March 3.[67] The PRC has consistently supported the Russian war effort via the export of dual-use goods throughout the war. NATO allies called the PRC the “decisive enabler” of the war in a July 2024 communique.[68]

PRC rhetoric beyond official readouts echoes these statements and indicates the PRC's intent to position itself as an international leader amid the Ukraine crisis. Fudan University professor Shen Yi reportedly wrote in PRC news outlet Guancha that “clinging to the U.S. comes with risks” and that “if one sees the risks of relying on the US but finds Moscow unappealing, then there is another path.”[69] The PRC's public affirmations of support for Russia aim to retain a key diplomatic and security partner, all while attempting to abnegate responsibility for the Russian war effort and cast the PRC as an ideal leader among “Global South” states.



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