

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 ROC government’s November 6 petition to disband the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) and indictment of agents acting on behalf of the PRC illustrates the extensiveness of PRC infiltration and political warfare efforts in Taiwan.**
- **The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released coordinates demarcating its claimed territorial sea baseline around Scarborough Shoal on November 10.[1] The PRC’s announcement of a territorial sea baseline around Scarborough Shoal likely aims to legitimize its territorial claim by fabricating a legal basis using internationally recognized maritime law concepts.**
- **PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu met in Beijing for the 19th round of PRC-Russia strategic security consultations.[2] The PRC’s and Russia’s differing emphases signal the partnership’s shared interests with distinct priorities.**

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

The ROC government’s November 6 petition to disband the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) and indictment of agents acting on behalf of the PRC illustrates the extensiveness of PRC infiltration and political warfare efforts in Taiwan. Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior (MOI) announced that it would petition for the disbandment of the CUPP for

electoral interference on behalf of the PRC.[3] The CUPP is a minor political party established in 2005 whose platform is based on support for unification with the PRC and the One China Principle, which recognizes the PRC as the legitimate representative of China and Taiwan as a part of that China. The MOI stated in its indictment that the CUPP has systemically developed pro-Beijing groups and interests in Taiwan since its founding.[4] Taiwan's Chiayi District Prosecutor's Office pressed charges on November 6 against CUPP members Chang Meng-chung and his wife, Hung Wen-ting, for taking NT\$74 million (US\$2.3 million) from the CCP to produce pro-PRC propaganda.[5] The MOI announced on November 8 that it has investigated and found evidence to pursue eight cases against 11 people for violating national security laws, laws governing cross-strait relations, and election integrity laws.[6] Taiwanese law enforcement also linked 134 CUPP members to serious crimes such as murder, robbery, transnational human trafficking, and gang violence.[7] This is the first time that the MOI has requested that the Constitutional Court dissolve a political party, illustrating the severity of PRC interference in Taiwanese domestic politics.[8]

Taipei prosecutors also indicted the heads of two "hometown associations" on November 5 for organizing a PRC-funded trip for Kuomintang (KMT) officials before Taiwan's January 2024 presidential elections.[9] Hometown associations are social and cultural organizations of people with common ancestry or ties to a common birthplace. The presidents of the Taiwan and Taipei Anhui Province hometown associations were charged with violating the Anti-Infiltration Act for allegedly recruiting 24 KMT officials at the request of Liao Jian, head of the PRC's Anhui Province Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), and paying travel expenses to the mainland that totaled approximately NT\$33,000 (US\$1,000) per person.[10] The PRC hosts urged the attendees during the trip to support KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih in the presidential election over Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate William Lai Ching-te on basis that Hou's victory would allow for "peaceful cross-strait development." [11]

Both the CUPP and hometown association influence campaigns fit into the broader PRC strategy of conducting political warfare to "win without fighting." The PRC strategy in Taiwanese politics broadly has the following components: increasing public support for reunification and weakening local resistance through media and grassroots efforts, gaining political power by bribing politicians and political parties, and accessing confidential information for espionage. These efforts aim to soften internal resistance against eventual Taiwanese reunification with China to make an invasion easier or unnecessary. A key aspect of the "winning without fighting" strategy is the United Front: the CCP strategy to covertly influence and gather intelligence both domestically and abroad.[12] PRC President Xi Jinping has called the United Front "an important magic weapon for uniting all Chinese people at home and abroad to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." [13]

The recent prosecution of the CUPP and the hometown associations illustrates the degree to which the PRC has been undertaking systemic efforts to undermine Taiwan's political system in line with the United Front strategy. The CUPP has no presence in any of the five branches of the ROC central government, but the party has been able to spread PRC propaganda with the use of radio and digital media as far back as 2011.[14] Taiwanese authorities charged three Taiwanese citizens affiliated with the CUPP in August 2024 with developing a spy network to recruit Taiwanese military personnel on behalf of the PRC [15] The petition to disband the CUPP would dismantle a channel through which the CCP accesses the Taiwanese population.

Hometown associations have a history of co-optation to support CCP interests. The CCP may have recruited hometown associations to rally for pro-CCP electoral reform initiatives during the 2021 Hong Kong elections.[16] Hometown associations have also contributed to PRC transnational repression and monitoring efforts against PRC dissidents living abroad, including the 10,000-member Henan association in New York, which has considerable electoral influence.[17] The Anhui hometown association case was notable because of the PRC’s targeting of Taiwanese public officials – the PRC pushed CCP narratives of cross-strait relations over the multi-day trip. This interaction demonstrates the opportunities hometown associations offer in helping the PRC achieve its political aims through a grassroots approach.

The PRC’s exploitation of Taiwanese political and social organizations reveals the extensiveness of their influence operations.

China

PRC President Xi Jinping congratulated incoming US President Donald Trump on his election victory. Xi called Trump on November 7 and “pointed out that history has shown us that China and the United States will benefit from cooperation and suffer from confrontation.”[18] PRC Vice President Han Zheng gave US Vice President-elect JD Vance a congratulatory call on the same day.[19] The PRC Foreign Ministry reported that it hopes that “the two sides will uphold the principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation.”[20] The PRC sent a similar congratulatory message to US President Joe Biden following his election win in 2020. Xi called for both sides to “uphold the spirit of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation.”[21] Xi also sent a similar message following Trump’s electoral victory in 2016, calling for “greater progress in China–U.S. relations from a new starting point.”[22]

The PRC Foreign Ministry has adhered to standard rhetorical protocol in its responses to Trump’s election. PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that the PRC is “committed to promoting the stable, healthy and sustainable development of Sino–US relations” during a regular press conference on November 7.[23] Mao avoided addressing specifics and said that “we do not answer hypothetical questions” in response to an inquiry about Trump’s potential tariffs against Chinese goods.[24] She also said that the PRC “firmly opposes any form of official exchanges between the US and Taiwan” in response to a question on Trump’s statement that China will not “invade” Taiwan.[25]

People’s Liberation Army Navy and Air Force representatives participated in the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) Working Group with US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) counterparts from November 6–8.[26] The semi-annual MMCA meetings provide a platform for representatives from both countries’ militaries to “clarify intent and reduce the risk of misperception, miscalculation, or accidents,” according to USINDOPACOM Director of Strategic Planning and Policy Jay Barger, who led the US delegation.[27] This MMCA meeting was the third since President Joe Biden and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping agreed to restart the talks during their meeting on November 15, 2023.[28]

The CCP views military-to-military communication as a bargaining chip that it can use to influence US behavior to the party's benefit, in contrast with the United States' view of the talks as a means of escalation management to prevent and control crises. The PRC suspended high-level military dialogue in August 2022 in direct response to then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.[29] The PRC declined a US-proposed meeting between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and then-PRC Defense Minister Li Shangfu in May 2023, which PRC officials have attributed to US sanctions on Li since 2018, before he became Defense Minister.[30] MFA spokesperson Mao Ning stated at the time that "the US should show sincerity and take practical actions to create necessary conditions for military dialogue and communication." [31] The PRC's history of withholding high-level military communication to influence US behavior suggests that the PRC could suspend MMCA talks again if bilateral relations deteriorate and the US takes actions that the PRC opposes.

Southeast

Asia

Philippines

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released coordinates demarcating the PRC's claimed territorial sea baseline around Scarborough Shoal on November 10.[32] The PRC's announcement of a territorial sea baseline around Scarborough Shoal likely aims to legitimize its territorial claim by fabricating a legal basis using internationally recognized maritime law concepts.

Scarborough Shoal is a contested atoll approximately 140 miles from the Philippine island of Luzon in the South China Sea. The PRC wrested effective control of the shoal from the Philippines in 2012 following a months-long standoff between PRC and Filipino ships and has since maintained a near-constant maritime security presence around the shoal.[33] Scarborough Shoal is still the site of frequent confrontations in which China Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militia vessels regularly execute dangerous tactics to expel Filipino vessels from the area.[34]

The PRC MFA published a statement on November 10 that claims that its newly announced territorial sea baseline around Scarborough Shoal is in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and is a "natural step by the Chinese government to lawfully strengthen maritime management." [35] The PRC's invocation of UNCLOS to justify the territorial sea baseline likely aims to validate its territorial claims on the pretense of adhering to an internationally recognized convention. The PRC frequently appeals to international law to vindicate its "law enforcement" actions, often excessively violent, against the Philippines and other rival claimants in the South China Sea.[36] The PRC's November 13 air and sea combat drills at Scarborough Shoal, which the PLA southern command said were "a patrol and guard activity carried out by the theater troops in accordance with the law," are consistent with such appeals.[37]

The PRC's claimed territorial sea baseline risks escalation with the Philippines should the PRC attempt to detain Filipinos that enter within 12 nautical miles of the shoal on legal grounds. The PRC enacted a law on June 15 that stated that the CCG can arrest and detain foreigners illegally entering or exiting PRC territorial boundaries for up to 30 days without trial and 60 days in "complicated cases." [38]

The PRC has conducted law enforcement around other disputed features in the South China Sea where it has established a territorial sea baseline, including the entirety of the Paracel Islands, an archipelago that the PRC seized control of from Vietnam in 1974. The Vietnamese MFA called on the PRC on October 31 to release Vietnamese fishermen that the PRC detained for fishing around the Paracel Islands.^[39] A PRC-based think tank called the South China Sea Probing Initiative stated that the PRC arrested the Vietnamese fishermen in April and May for “illegal” fishing in the PRC’s territorial waters around the Paracel Islands.^[40]

The PRC’s announcement of the territorial sea baseline around Scarborough Shoal follows the Philippines’ enactment of the Maritime Zones Act on November 8, which defines the Philippines’ internal waters, archipelagic waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone, and continental shelf. The PRC MFA released a statement on November 8 that condemned the act as a serious infringement on the PRC’s territorial sovereignty.^[41] The statement criticized the law for “illegally incorporating” Scarborough Shoal and the Spratly Islands into the Philippines’ territory by using domestic legislation to solidify the “illegal ruling” of the arbitral tribunal.^[42] The arbitral tribunal ruling refers to a 2016 decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which determined that the PRC’s claims to exclusive “historic rights” over resources and jurisdiction within its nine-dash line have no legal basis under UNCLOS.^[43] The ruling did not address sovereignty disputes over specific features in the South China Sea. The US Department of State announced its support for the Philippines’ enactment of the Maritime Zones Act, which it stated aligns Philippine domestic laws with UNCLOS and the PCA ruling.^[44]

PRC and Philippine Claims in the South China Sea

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The PRC announced a coastal baseline around Scarborough Shoal.

Scarborough Shoal

Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone

The Philippines staged landing drills on Kota Island on November 6 while PRC naval vessels observed.

Kota Island

Spratly Islands

Palawan (Philippines)

Sabina Shoal

Second Thomas Shoal

0 125 250 500 Kilometers

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

Map by George Barros, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Cameron Hayes, and Harrison Hurwitz
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Europe

German police arrested and searched the house of a former US military contractor on November 8 on suspicion that he offered sensitive information from the US military to a PRC intelligence service. The German Federal Prosecutor's Office stated that the contractor had made contact with Chinese officials and offered to provide the Chinese government with sensitive intelligence and to reconnoiter US military installations in Germany.[45] China's Ministry of Affairs spokeswoman reported that she was not aware of the situation.[46] The arrest comes amid heightened security concerns in Germany that employees in critical infrastructure industries and government may be passing information to the PRC and Russia. Germany's Interior Ministry drafted legislation in October to improve security checks for employees in nationally sensitive infrastructure and engineering fields, the country's Chancellery, government ministries and Office of the Federal President.[47]

This arrest follows a string of PRC-related espionage cases in Germany in the past year. German authorities arrested a PRC national on October 1 for alleged foreign agent activities that include passing on information regarding arms deliveries, which she obtained while working for a logistics company, to a member of a PRC intelligence service.[48] The member of the intelligence agency, identified as Jian G., was arrested on April 22 while working for a German member of European Parliament. The office of the German Federal Prosecutor General accused Jian G. of passing on information about negotiations and decisions in the European Parliament and spying on PRC opposition figures in Germany for PRC intelligence.[49]

Russia

PRC-Russia Joint Exercises 2018



PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu met in Beijing for the 19th round of PRC-Russia strategic security consultations.[50] The PRC's and Russia's differing emphases signal the partnership's shared interests with distinct priorities.

The recurring consultations are a platform for the PRC and Russia to coordinate policy and strengthen cooperation on international security issues.[51] The PRC readout highlighted the PRC's and Russia's strong political trust and pragmatic cooperation, which created a new paradigm for relations between neighboring major countries and contributed to unity and cooperation for Global South countries.[52] Shoigu stated that the most important task is “to counter the policy of dual containment of Russia and China being pursued by the US and its satellites and further strengthen foreign policy coordination, including building a Eurasian architecture of equal and indivisible security.”[53] Russian President Vladimir Putin defined the Eurasian security architecture on June 14 as “a system of bilateral and multilateral guarantees of collective security in Eurasia” to replace what Putin viewed as a collapsing Euro-Atlantic security system.[54] Shoigu's rhetoric is consistent with past Russian framing of the two countries as victims of the United States' efforts to maintain hegemony and suppress efforts to create a multipolar world order.[55] Former Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev made similar appeals to exercise collective resistance during past rounds of the strategic security consultation.[56]

The focus of both leaders' statements speaks to subtle differences in the countries' goals for the PRC-Russia partnership. The PRC's emphasis on multilateralism and a common Global South identity signifies its regard for the bilateral relationship as an anchor to support the PRC's cultivation of a community of countries that aligns with its interests and legitimizes PRC leadership on the world stage. Russia's appeals to form a united front with the PRC indicate its more urgent desire to solidify an alliance that can challenge US hegemony in Europe and Asia.

The PRC and Russia are conducting increasingly frequent joint military exercises in recent years and expanding the scope of their cooperation. The two countries have held joint exercises in at least five different parts of the world since July, including naval exercises in the South China Sea, Gulf of Finland, Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk, and Northern Pacific.[57] PRC–Russia cooperation also extends to political coordination on international security issues in the United Nations (UN). The US Deputy Ambassador to the UN Robert Wood accused the PRC and Russia on November 4 for “shamelessly protecting” North Korea from consequences for its arms buildup, which Woods stated emboldened North Korea to continue developing its ballistic missile, nuclear, and weapons of mass destruction programs.[58]

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