

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



China-Taiwan Weekly Update, October 11, 2024

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

Key Takeaways

- The People’s Republic of China (PRC) accused Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) president Lai Ching-te on October 10 of promoting separatism and inciting cross-strait confrontation in his National Day speech.
- The PRC urged Czechia and other “relevant countries” on October 8 not to interact with Taiwanese “separatist forces” in response to former ROC President Tsai Ing-wen’s plans to visit Czechia.
- The FBI announced charges against five PRC nationals who were caught near a US military base in August 2023 during annual exercises.
- The China Coast Guard (CCG) fired water cannons at Philippine civilian vessels completing a resupply mission at Scarborough Shoal.
- Vietnam accused PRC law enforcement of attacking ten Vietnamese fishermen near the Paracel Islands. The PRC aims to defend its control over the maritime features it administers and deny other states the ability to extract resources in areas it claims.
- The PRC supported a Russian draft proposal at the United Nations that calls for a UN investigation into the destruction of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline in September 2022.
- The militant group Baloch Liberation Army killed two Chinese nationals in an IED attack in Karachi on October 6.

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) accused Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) president Lai Ching-te on October 10 of promoting separatism and inciting cross-strait confrontation in his National Day speech. The PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) spokesperson Chen Binhua rejected that the division between the PRC and ROC is about “democracy vs. authoritarianism” and accused Lai of forcing notions of independence onto Taiwan.[1] Taiwan is already an independent and sovereign polity under the name of the Republic of China (ROC). Chen emphasized the PRC’s claim as the only legitimate government of China, including Taiwan, and the shared history and identity of the Chinese nation.[2] Chen claimed that the PRC was closer to achieving “national rejuvenation” than ever before.

National Rejuvenation is a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mantra that describes the Chinese nation’s attainment of lasting greatness by the centennial of the PRC in 2049.[3] It acts as the PRC’s overarching strategic goal and compass for all policymaking, especially economic and foreign policy that aim to make the PRC a leading economic and political power in the world. The annexation of Taiwan and the political assimilation of other territories that the PRC regards as wayward or lost is a necessary step to achieve national rejuvenation.[4]

PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Mao Ning accused Lai of intentionally severing the historical ties between the people of mainland China and Taiwan in his speech.[5] Mao stressed the international consensus on the “One-China Principle,” which states that there is only one China, Taiwan is part of that China, and the PRC is its legitimate representative. This claim ignores the different “One China” policies of many countries around the world, which acknowledge the PRC as the government of China but in many cases do not take an explicit stance on Taiwan’s sovereignty.[6]

Lai emphasized in his speech on October 10 Taiwan’s determination to defend its national sovereignty and its commitment to living in a free and democratic society.[7] He cast the people of Taiwan as peace-loving and eager to engage with the rest of the world. Lai noted the shared nature of the challenges that the world and Taiwan are both facing, namely the expansion of authoritarianism that threatens the rules-based order and Taiwan’s free and democratic society. He denied that the PRC has the right to represent Taiwan and urged the PRC to meet its responsibility together with Taiwan to contribute to regional and global peace.

Lai’s speech on October 10 was his highest-profile public address since taking office on May 20. The PRC responded to Lai’s inauguration speech by launching two days of large-scale military exercises that closely surrounded Taiwan from May 23-24.[8] Chen Binhua called the exercises a “resolute punishment” for Lai’s inauguration speech, which the PRC claimed was provocative and promoting Taiwanese independence. Reuters cited an anonymous Taiwanese national security official on October 7 who assessed that the PRC would likely use Lai’s speech as a pretext to launch another round of premeditated military exercises in a show of coercion against Taiwan.[9] Reuters reported that it reviewed an internal security memo that outlines the Taiwanese government’s assessment of impending PRC military activities after National Day.

The PRC urged Czechia and other “relevant countries” on October 8 not to interact with Taiwanese “separatist forces” in response to former ROC President Tsai Ing-wen’s plans to visit Czechia. The ROC Presidential Office announced on October 7 Tsai’s plans to travel to Czechia and “other European countries” this weekend.[10] The announcement stated that Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Council are responsible for planning the trip. Tsai will attend the Forum 2000 conference in Prague, which is focused on spreading democratic values and supporting human rights.[11] Reuters reported that Tsai will also visit France and Belgium.[12]

PRC MFA Spokesperson Mao Ning urged Czechia and the “relevant countries” to abide by the “One-China Principle” and not do anything to harm bilateral relations.[13] TAO Spokesperson Zhu Fenglian warned Czechia and the other countries not to send the wrong signal to “Taiwan independence separatist forces” and refrain from giving them a platform to spread

“separatist fallacies.”[14] Zhu accused the Democratic Progressive Party, Taiwan’s incumbent party, of engaging in separatist activities and deceiving the international community.

The PRC often lobbies foreign officials not to meet with Taiwanese officials. Mao accused Czech President Petr Pavel in January 2023 of violating Czechia’s political commitment to uphold the “One-China Principle” after he shared a phone call with Tsai, making him the first EU head of state to speak directly with a Taiwanese president.[15] Mao stated that Pavel ignored the PRC’s repeated attempts to dissuade Pavel from engaging with Tsai. US Congresswoman Young Kim stated in September that PRC officials contacted members of Congress and their staff to dissuade them from participating in a May delegation to Taiwan.[16] Legislators from six countries who attended an international summit in Taiwan in July claimed that PRC diplomatic officials contacted them before they departed to prevent them from attending.[17]

Pavel’s succession from his PRC-friendly predecessor Miloš Zeman was a setback for PRC influence in Central Europe. Czechia and Taiwan have strengthened relations under Czech President Petr Pavel despite PRC pressure to diplomatically isolate Taiwan. Within the past two years, Taiwan and Czechia have developed bilateral technology investment initiatives, direct flights, security partnerships, and cooperative plans to jointly provide aid to Ukraine.[18] Czech parliamentarians led delegations to Taiwan in March 2023 and June 2024, with the former consisting of over 150 businesspeople, scientists, and officials.[19]

China

The FBI announced charges against five PRC nationals who were caught near a US military base in August 2023 during annual exercises. A US National Guard officer discovered the five people taking photos of US military equipment at a campground near Camp Grayling, a US military base that was hosting the US National Guard’s annual Northern Strike exercise. The live-fire drills had around 7,000 participants, including some Taiwanese soldiers. The five people were students at the University of Michigan at the time. They claimed that they were “media” trying to take pictures of a meteor shower. The FBI and customs authorities questioned the students at the airport months later but did not arrest them. An affidavit that the FBI publicized on October 1 charged the five with conspiracy, tampering with evidence, and making false statements to federal officers. The FBI discovered pictures of US military vehicles on an external hard drive, which was seized from one of the people, and found that some of the people texted about deleting photos and messages to throw off suspicion. The suspects are not in custody because they returned to the PRC after graduating from the university, however.[20]

Two other University of Michigan students from the PRC were caught photographing military and naval infrastructure at Naval Air Station Key West in Florida in 2020. They were convicted and sentenced to prison.[21]

The PRC frequently denies that it carries out espionage activities in other countries. It has not commented on the FBI charges in this case but often accuses the United States of unfairly targeting students and academics from the PRC on illegitimate grounds. The PRC Ministry of State Security claimed on October 8 that the US Department of Justice’s (DOJ) “China Initiative,” which the DOJ initiated in 2018, aimed to “fabricate so-called ‘Chinese espionage cases.’” It said the DOJ has been “recklessly arresting Chinese-origin experts and scholars through malicious tactics, conducting indiscriminate investigations and harassment, continuously hyping the ‘Chinese espionage threat.’”[22]

Southeast Asia

Philippines

The China Coast Guard (CCG) fired water cannons at Philippine civilian vessels completing a resupply mission at Scarborough Shoal. On October 8 two vessels from the Philippines Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)

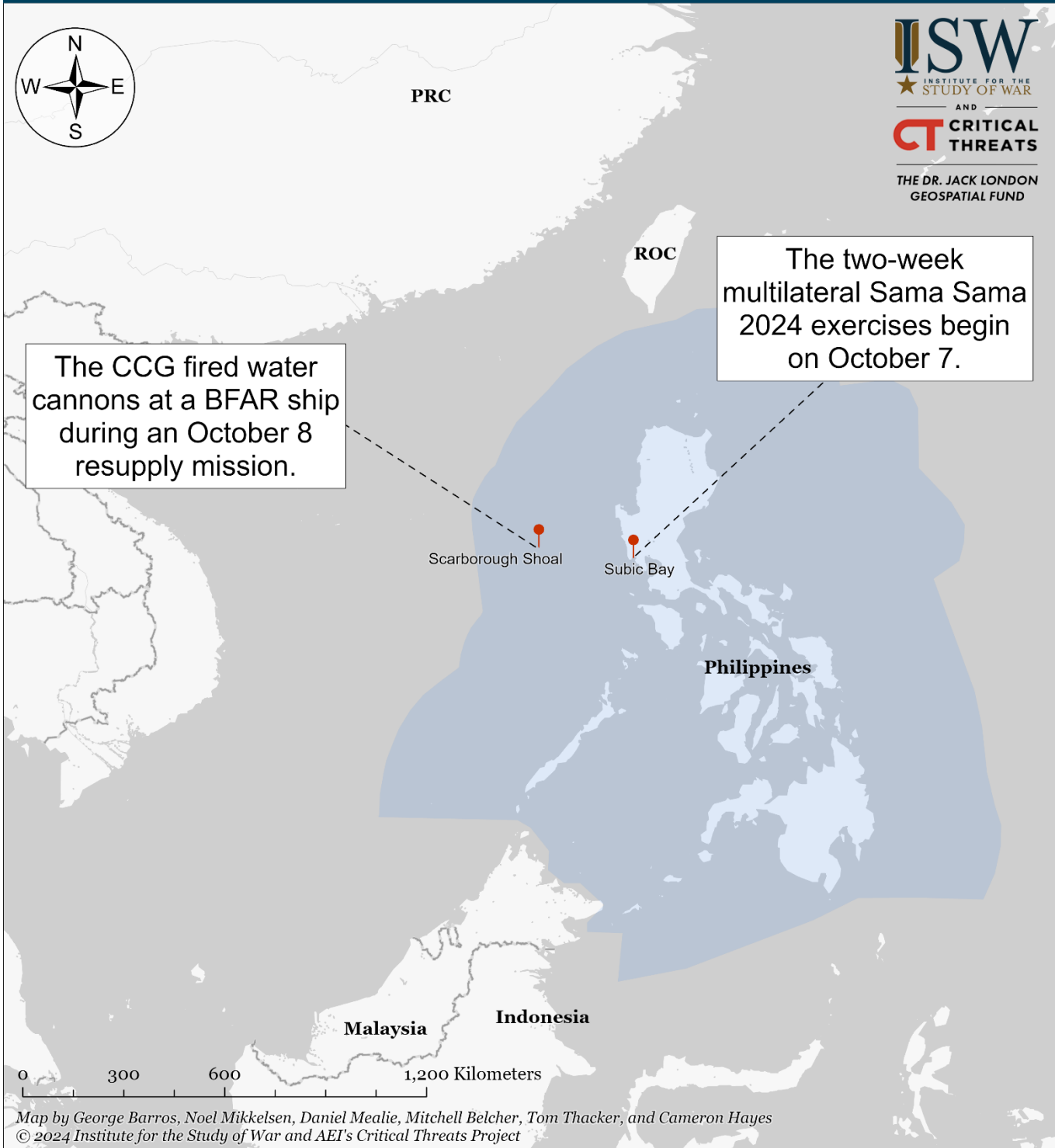
conducted a resupply mission for Philippine fishermen near Scarborough Shoal.[23] During the resupply mission, three CCG ships shadowed and fired water cannons at the BFAR vessels. Despite this interference, BFAR was able to carry out its mission successfully. Philippine Rear Admiral Roy Vincent Trinidad released a statement on the incident, saying that while it was a matter of concern it would not prevent the Philippines from continuing to patrol the West Philippine Sea and supporting its military and civilian vessels in the area. CCG spokesperson Liu Dejun accused the BFAR vessels of sailing in PRC waters without permission and stated that the CCG law enforcement measures were legitimate means to protect PRC territorial sovereignty.[24]

Confrontations between PRC vessels and Philippine civilian ships conducting resupply missions have occurred before. Most recently, on September 27 a PRC missile ship shadowed two BFAR vessels, *BRP Datu Romapenet* and *BRP Taradipit*, during a resupply mission to Half-Moon Shoal.[25] A BFAR aircraft monitoring the mission reported that the PRC vessel aimed a high-intensity laser at the pilots, an action which the Philippine authorities said constituted a threat to pilot safety.[26] A separate September 27 Philippine resupply mission to the *BRP Sierra Madre* in Second Thomas Shoal was not interrupted by the PRC due to a previous agreement made between the two countries. The difference in PRC behavior indicates that they are more likely to respond when the Philippines takes an action that the PRC sees as provocative or otherwise against PRC interests in the South China Sea.

Naval exercises between the Philippines, the United States, and allies began on October 7 near Subic Bay. The Sama Sama 2024 exercise also included participants from Canada, France, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Japan.[27] The exercises will take place over the next two weeks and will reportedly include drills focusing on anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, anti-air warfare, and maritime domain awareness. Participating assets from the United States include the *USS Howard*, personnel from the U.S. 7th Fleet, three Command Task Forces, Destroyer Squadron Seven, and the Marine Corps' Marine Rotational Force for Southeast Asia. Philippine assets included the *BRP Jose Risal*, *BRP Waray*, *BRP Nestor Reinoso*, special operations units, and supporting units.[28] This is the seventh iteration of the Sama Sama exercises, which has evolved from a bilateral exercise between the United States and the Philippines to a multilateral and multiplatform exercise.

The Philippines and the Republic of Korea (ROK) signed six bilateral agreements and elevated their ties to a “strategic partnership.” One of these six agreements will increase maritime cooperation between the Philippines and ROK navies.[29] Seoul's ambassador to Manila, Lee Sang-hwa said that the October 7 agreements represented a “pivotal moment” in relations between the two states.[30] The two states have been steadily increasing their military ties through joint exercises and weapons sales over the past year. Modernizing the Philippine military and improving relations with regional partners are key elements of Marco's foreign policy.[31] The establishment of close military relations with the United States, Japan, the ROK, and others may be intended to send a message to the PRC and warn against escalation within Philippine maritime territory. While there has been no official response to these agreements from the PRC, the Hong Kong-based media outlet *South China Morning Post* characterizes this agreement as an indication of the desire to counter the PRC within Manila and Seoul.[32]

Events in the West Philippine Sea (October 7-8)



Vietnam

Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry accused PRC law enforcement of perpetrating an attack on ten Vietnamese fishermen fishing near the disputed Parcel Islands. The fishermen initially reported that around 40 foreign assailants on boats assaulted them at sea with metal pipes on September 29, causing three of the fishermen to suffer broken bones. They did not identify the assailants. The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused PRC law enforcement on October 4 of perpetrating the attack and claimed the PRC’s actions “seriously violated Vietnam’s sovereignty in the Parcel Islands,” international law, and an agreement by the leaders of the two countries to better manage their territorial disputes.[33] Vietnam said that PRC Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) vessels 101 and 301, assigned to Sansha City, surrounded the Vietnamese boat and deployed rubber-hulled inflatable boats to board it. Sansha is a small PRC settlement in the Parcel Islands that Beijing has designated a “prefecture level city” to administer all the PRC’s claims in the South China Sea.[34] The PRC MFA confirmed on October 1 that law enforcement authorities took measures to stop Vietnamese fishermen who it claimed were “illegally” fishing in waters near the Parcel Islands. The MFA did not mention the attack but claimed the PRC actions were “professional and restrained” and that it did not note any injuries.[35] It did not respond to Vietnam’s specific allegations.

A PRC think tank released an edited video of the incident and falsely claimed the fishermen used weapons to “initiate attack.” The PRC think tank South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI) exclusively released a video of the incident that showed boats deployed from the Sansha Law Enforcement 101 ship surrounding the Vietnamese fishing boat. The fishermen tried and failed to prevent the MSA personnel from boarding. The think tank claimed the Vietnamese fishermen were “obviously trained, using long bamboo poles, harpoons and machetes to initiate attack.” It further claimed that three “Chinese auxiliary law enforcement officers were also injured to varying degrees” under attack by the Vietnamese fishermen. The video was edited and did not show anyone being injured.[36] SCSPI is a Beijing-based think tank affiliated with Peking University.

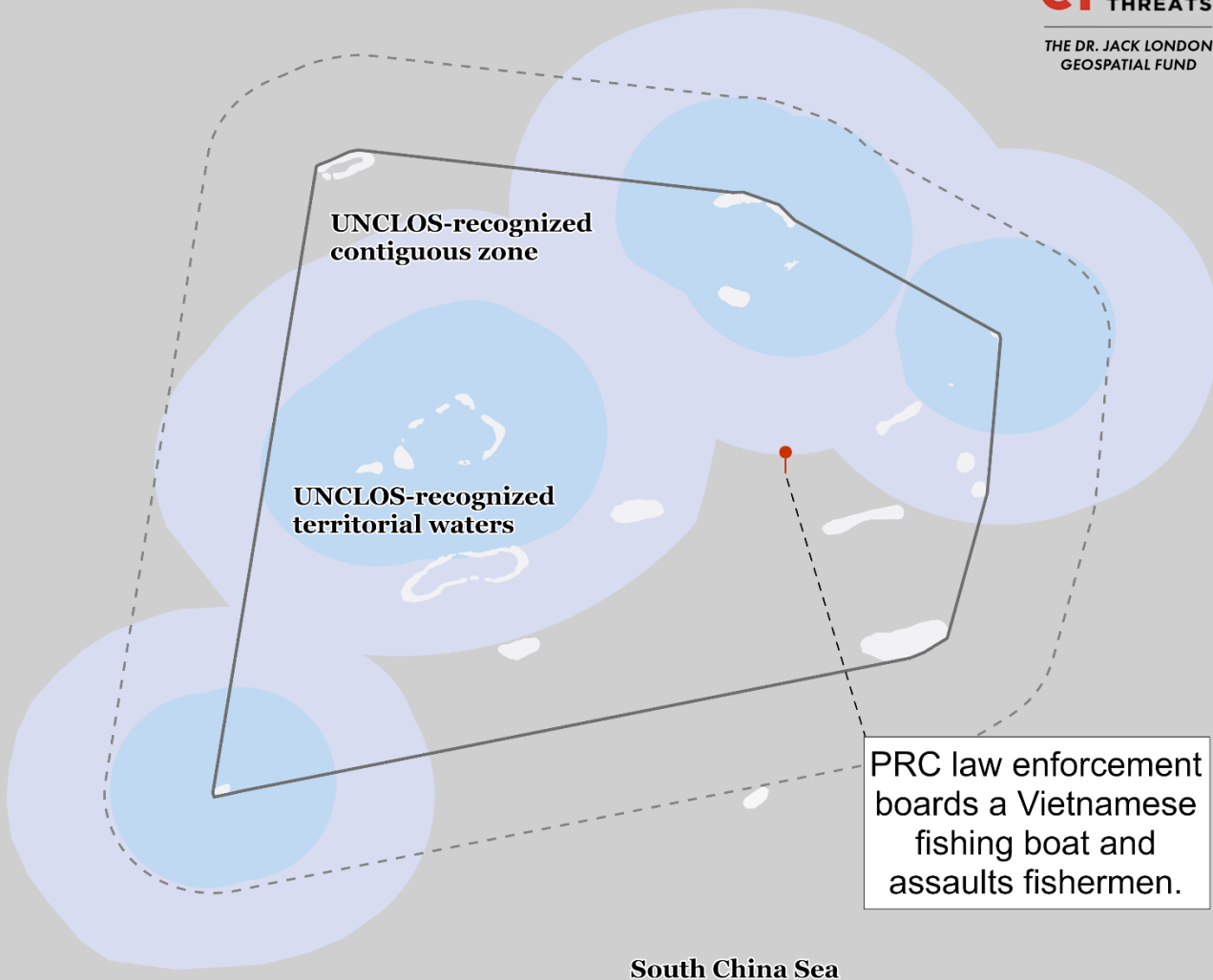
PRC state-owned tabloid Global Times claimed that the Vietnamese fisherman broke the helmets of two law enforcement personnel while using bamboo poles to prevent the personnel from boarding their fishing boat. The Global Times mischaracterized the ships as “China Coast Guard law enforcement vessels.” [37] The ships “Sansha Law Enforcement 101” and “Sansha Law Enforcement 301” are operated by local civilian law enforcement based in Sansha, rather than the paramilitary CCG.[38]

The PRC, Vietnam, and Taiwan all claim the Parcel Islands. The PRC seized control of the archipelago from Vietnam in 1974 and has since constructed military facilities on several islands, as well as the “city” of Sansha on Woody Island.[39] The PRC claims a straight territorial baseline around the archipelago, which means it claims full sovereignty over all waters between the islands as internal waters. It asserts the right to restrict unauthorized access to foreign nationals. International law does not recognize the PRC’s straight-baseline claim, however. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) allows states to claim territorial waters extending 12 nautical miles seaward from their coast but not to draw straight-line boundaries around entire island groups (except for a few designated “archipelagic states,” which the PRC is not). The United States military has conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations through the relevant waters to contest this PRC claim. Coordinates released by SCSPI show that the confrontation with the Vietnamese fishing boat occurred within the PRC’s illegally claimed “internal waters” but outside the UNCLOS-designated territorial waters.[40] International law has not determined which country has rightful sovereignty over the islands themselves.

PRC law enforcement attack on Vietnamese fishermen in Paracel Islands (September 29, 2024)



South China Sea



PRC law enforcement boards a Vietnamese fishing boat and assaults fishermen.

South China Sea

0 50 100 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, and Cameron Hayes
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- PRC-claimed territorial baseline
- - - PRC-claimed territorial waters boundary

Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative[41]

The PRC's confrontations with Vietnam are aimed at defending PRC control over the features it already administers, especially the Paracel Islands, and at preventing Vietnam from extracting resources in places the PRC claims. The PRC has used CCG, maritime militia, and research vessels to block Vietnamese energy exploration in Vanguard Bank and other energy-rich areas of Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone. It used ramming and water cannons against Vietnamese ships trying to block PRC energy exploration and against Vietnamese fishermen fishing in waters near the Paracel Islands.[42] On the other hand, the PRC has done very little in the past few decades to challenge Vietnam's presence in the Spratly Islands, where Vietnam occupies by far the largest number of features of any country. It has not publicly objected to Vietnam's rapid island-building and militarization of the Spratly archipelago likely because it does not fear that those military facilities would be used against the PRC.

Russia

The PRC and Russia conducted another joint naval drill in the Pacific. Russian news reported joint PRC-Russia anti-submarine drills, following the joint Beibu/Northern Interaction 2024 exercises.[43] Two Russian anti-submarine destroyers, the Admiral Tributs, and the Admiral Panteleyev, participated in the exercise. The PRC sent the Type 055 destroyer Wuxi, the Type 054 frigate Linyi, and the Type 052 destroyer Xining.[44] This joint exercise follows joint PRC-Russia coast guard patrols in the North Pacific in September and points toward a pattern of growing Russia-PRC military cooperation in the Pacific.[45]

The PRC supported a Russian draft proposal at the United Nations that calls for a UN investigation into the destruction of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline in September 2022. Russia's UN representative Vassily Nebenzia convened a UN Security Council meeting on October 4 and called for an independent UN investigation into the destruction of the natural gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea. He criticized independent investigations by Denmark, Sweden, and Germany as inconclusive and accused the United States, Germany, and other Western countries of deliberately hindering or sabotaging investigations and even of confessing "complicity" in the "terrorist attack." [46] PRC UN Representative Geng Shuang announced the PRC's support for Russia's proposal and likewise criticized the Danish, Swedish, and German investigations for lacking detailed conclusions. He did not speculate about the perpetrators of the pipeline explosion but questioned whether there was a "hidden agenda to the initial opposition to an international investigation" and whether "evidence [has] been covered up and destroyed over the past two years or so." [47] The PRC has supported past Russian calls for a UN investigation into the pipeline's destruction, but the UN Security Council rejected the past proposals.[48]

The PRC has sought to portray itself as a fair and neutral arbiter in the Russia-Ukraine war but aligns with Russia's framing of the war. It is critical of NATO, portrays the Western security order and arms sales to Ukraine as fueling the war, opposes sanctions on Russia, calls the war a "crisis" rather than a "war," and calls for respect for Russia's "legitimate security concerns." It has lent credence to Russia's narratives of US culpability in the war, including amplifying Russian allegations that the United States operated secret bio-labs in Ukraine and uncorroborated self-published reporting by US journalist Seymour Hersh that a US operation deliberately destroyed the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.[49] The PRC has not explicitly defended Russia's invasion of Ukraine or provided lethal military aid to Russia, however.

South Asia

The militant group Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) killed two Chinese nationals in an IED attack in Karachi on October 6. The BLA opposes both the Pakistani government and Chinese investment in Pakistan and has a precedent of attacking Chinese projects and nationals there. The October 6 attack took place shortly before the upcoming Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in Islamabad, which will bring together regional leaders including PRC Premier Li Qiang.[50] The BLA has previously attacked Chinese workers and interests in Pakistan. Recent examples include a 2023 attack on a military convoy carrying Chinese workers in Balochistan[51] and a 2022 suicide bombing near a Confucius Institute in

Karachi.[52] The BLA operates primarily in Balochistan province and rarely conducts high-profile attacks in Karachi.[53] Nikkei reported that the BLA is transitioning from a rural organization to a terrorist group capable of operating in urban environments.[54]

The Chinese embassy in Karachi responded by condemning the attack, urging Chinese citizens not to travel to Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,[55] and asking Pakistan to investigate. It also asked Chinese citizens and projects in Pakistan to remain vigilant and improve their security.[56] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs member Liu Jinsong met with Pakistani Ambassador to China Hashmi on October 8 and “asked Pakistan to earnestly fulfill its commitments, do its best to do a good job in rescue and aftermath, thoroughly investigate the case, and severely punish the murderer.”[57] The Ministry of State Security (MSS), the PRC’s intelligence service, has declared that it will improve intelligence-sharing mechanisms to prevent future attacks.[58] Pakistani news sources reported that the Pakistani government is approving a security plan to ensure that the summit takes place safely following the Karachi attack.[59] Pakistani authorities recently declared that they will restrict the movement of PRC nationals visiting for the SCO meeting, although PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning denied knowledge of this plan.[60] Mao said that “China will work with Pakistan to effectively ensure the safety of Chinese personnel, projects, and institutions in Pakistan,” but did not specify the form this cooperation might take, in a press conference on October 10.[61]



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