

# The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



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## **Key Takeaways**

- **The PRC convicted Taiwanese political activist Yang Chih-yuan of secessionism on August 24 and sentenced him to nine years in prison. Yang’s conviction is a threat from the PRC to Taiwanese people not to advocate for policies that promote Taiwanese sovereignty or statehood.**
- **The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested the anticipated passage through the Taiwan Strait of two German naval ships.**
- **PLA Southern Theater Commander General Wu Ya’nan had a call with US Indo-Pacific Command Commander Admiral Samuel Paparo as part of a trend of restoring US-PRC high-level military communication.**
- **The PLA and Russian military will participate in two military exercises and a joint Pacific patrol in close succession in September.**
- **The PRC is trying to forcibly expel the Philippine presence from Sabina shoal to degrade the Philippines’ military and coast guard operations in the South China Sea.**
- **The PRC elevated ties with Africa during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. The PRC's bilateral relationships with African countries now take the form of strategic partnerships or comprehensive strategic partnerships, signifying China's interest in cooperating with African nations across a variety of economic and security sectors.**

## Cross-Strait Relations

### *Taiwan*

**The PRC convicted Taiwanese political activist Yang Chih-yuan of secessionism on August 24 and sentenced him to nine years in prison. Yang’s conviction is a threat from the PRC to the Taiwanese people not to advocate for Taiwan’s statehood or policies that support Taiwanese sovereignty.** The PRC arrested Yang in August 2022 during his trip to the mainland to visit family and held him in detention until April 2023, when PRC authorities “approved” Yang’s arrest on suspicion of secessionism.[1] Yang helped found the Taiwanese National Party in 2011, which advocated for an independence referendum.[2] Yang also was a legislative candidate for the Taiwan Action Party Alliance, a short-lived political party that promoted Taiwanese statehood and participation in the United Nations.[3] Yang’s conviction marks the first instance of the PRC prosecuting an ROC national for secessionism.

Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) called for Yang’s immediate release on September 5 and Yang’s conviction proved that the PRC’s 22 guidelines on punishing “separatism” endangers all Taiwanese people who travel to the PRC, not just “a very small number of Taiwan independence die-hards,” as the PRC claims.[4] Spokesperson for the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) Chen Binhua accused Taiwan’s governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of attempting to intimidate people from Taiwan and prevent them from participating in normal cross-strait exchanges by distorting the nature of the legal guidelines.[5]

Yang’s punishment is an example of the type of behavior that the PRC aims to deter under the new legal guidelines that it released in June, which outline punishment for “Taiwan independence diehards.” The PRC regards expressions of support for policies that promote Taiwan’s sovereignty as separatist, such as Taiwan’s accession to international organizations and adopting a Taiwanese identity over a Chinese one. These policies are core objectives of the DPP, which the PRC accuses of separatism, despite the fact that the DPP does not advocate for declaring Taiwanese statehood. Imprisoning Yang, who shares similar positions on Taiwan’s sovereignty, discourages Taiwanese people from supporting policies that are associated with the DPP.

The PRC has repeatedly attempted to assuage concerns about the heightened risk of arbitrary detention for ordinary Taiwanese people who are in the PRC while simultaneously taking greater steps to root out separatists, such as sharing contact information on the TAO website to report people for separatist activities.[6] The TAO also advertised a list of 10 mostly DPP politicians, including Vice President Hsiao Bi-khim and Defense Minister Wellington Koo, who the PRC deemed “Taiwan independence diehards.”[7] The MAC has maintained that going to the mainland is dangerous for all Taiwanese people and to reconsider travel there unless absolutely necessary.

**The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) protested the anticipated passage through the Taiwan Strait of two German naval ships.**[8] German media outlet Der Spiegel reported on September 7 that the German frigate *Baden-Württemberg* and the supply ship *Frankfurt am Main* will sail through the Taiwan Strait on their route from South Korea to Jakarta in mid-September.[9] Der Spiegel stated that the German government would not notify the PRC to demonstrate that it views transit through the strait as a matter of freedom of navigation. Germany deployed the *Baden-*

*Württemberg* and the *Frankfurt am Main* in May on a so-called “foreign training cruise,” which can entail training with partner navies in the Indo-Pacific. Their voyage is not a formal military operation or a freedom of navigation operation.[10] The transit will be the first passage through the Taiwan Strait by German naval ships in over 20 years.[11]

PRC MFA spokesperson Mao Ning called the would-be transit a provocation against the PRC on September 9. Mao stated that both sides of the Taiwan Strait were the PRC’s territory, but did not clarify whether the Taiwan Strait is a space that countries can freely navigate.[12] Chairman of the Bundestag’s Committee on Foreign Affairs Michael Roth expressed on Twitter his support for the transit, which he stated was in accordance with international law. Roth denied that the transit is a provocation simply because it does not suit the CCP.[13] Roth stated his support for Canada and the Netherlands, whose naval ships traversed the strait in July and June, respectively.[14]

The PRC’s claim to sovereignty over the Taiwan Strait conflicts with the international consensus on the Taiwan Strait and attempts to revise its legal status. The PRC MFA first claimed in June 2022 that the PRC has full sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Taiwan Strait and denied that the Taiwan Strait qualified as international waters.[15] Bloomberg cited an anonymous source who stated that PRC officials began privately asserting this claim in meetings with US counterparts in 2022.[16] TAO spokesperson Chen Binhua repeated in March that the PRC held sole sovereignty over the strait and denied the existence of international waters.[17] The claims contradict the PRC’s long-held position that the Taiwan Strait is an “international waterway.”[18] Convincing other countries of the PRC’s sovereignty over the Taiwan Strait effectively turns the waterway into an inland sea that the PRC can deny access to, which would enable the PRC to conduct military operations or a blockade against Taiwan without the threat of obstruction from other navies.

**Taiwan’s National Security Bureau (NSB) warned in a written report to the Legislative Yuan that the CCP uses pop culture and cross-strait exchanges to promote cross-strait integration with and unification under the CCP-led PRC.[19]** The NSB stated that the CCP’s United Front work against Taiwan is diverse and targets Taiwanese religious communities, artists, media professionals, students, and more. The report mentioned that the CCP attempts to attract Taiwanese youth to the mainland and engage in cultural and creative activities, such as art and film, to promote the PRC’s soft power and strengthen a common Chinese identity. The United Front is a whole-of-government and society effort to advance the CCP’s ideology and interests by co-opting non-government segments of Chinese society. United Front activities against Taiwan aim to inculcate in the Taiwanese public CCP notions that the PRC is the only legitimate government of China and Taiwan is a part of that China.

Spokesperson for Taiwan’s Executive Yuan Julia Hsieh stated on September 5 that the government was aware of a campaign by the PRC to recruit Taiwanese influencers to visit Xinjiang Province and promote a more positive narrative about Beijing’s rule there.[20] MAC Deputy Minister Liang Wen-chieh stated on September 5 that Taiwanese people should exercise caution and beware not to violate the Anti-Infiltration Law, which bans the spread of false information by hostile foreign forces. Liang stated that the wave of “Beautiful Xinjiang” propaganda aims to dispel notions of human rights there.[21]

Taiwanese internet celebrities called attention to CCP efforts to recruit them to facilitate United Front work in June. YouTuber Potter King claimed that the CCP is spending considerable resources to lure

Taiwanese internet celebrities to the PRC under the pretense of traveling to film content.[22] 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.[23] 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.[24]

The CCP’s influence within creative industries is extensive. PRC-based gaming company Hero Games provided popular overseas streamers with a list of topics not to speak of while playing the new popular Chinese game *Black Myth: Wukong*, which Hero Games manages the marketing for.[25] The topics included issues of sensitivity to the CCP that it enforces censorship of, such as COVID-19, quarantines, “feminist propaganda,” and “other content that instigates negative discourse.”

### *China*

**PLA Southern Theater Commander General Wu Ya’nan had a call with US Indo-Pacific Command Commander Admiral Samuel Paparo as part of a trend of restoring US-PRC high-level military communication.** A US readout of the call said that Paparo urged the PLA to “reconsider its use of dangerous, coercive and potentially escalatory tactics in the South China Sea and beyond.” He also stressed the importance of maintaining lines of communication between the two militaries to reduce the risk of misperception and miscalculation. Paparo said he hoped his conversation with General Wu would be the first of many, both with Wu and with other PLA theater commanders. The Southern Theater Command is responsible for the South China Sea.[26] The PRC readout of the call offered no detail except that the two sides had an “in-depth exchange of views on issues of common concern.”[27]

The Paparo-Wu call is the first US-PRC theater commander-level conversation since US President Joe Biden and CCP Secretary-General Xi Jinping agreed to resume high-level military talks in November 2023. The PRC cut off military talks with the United States after then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022.[28] The US and PRC militaries will have several other interactions in September. Both militaries are participating in Brazil’s Formosa-2024 Exercise.[29] The United States will send Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase to the Beijing-hosted Xiangshan Forum on September 12-14.[30] General Wu Ya’nan will attend the Chiefs of Defense Conference that the US Indo-Pacific Command will host in Hawaii and will meet Paparo in person.[31]

**The US House of Representatives passed two bills that restrict the access of PLA-affiliated tech companies to US markets and supply chains as part of a broader legislative effort to limit CCP influence within the American economy.** The US House of Representatives has begun voting on a series of National security legislation to reduce CCP influence in several domains as part of “China Week.” The bills discussed have focused on identifying and reducing military, ideological, economic, and technological threats posed by the CCP to the American people.

One of the bills passed was the Countering CCP Drones Act, which would prohibit new drones from the PRC company DJI from operating in the United States and accessing its communication infrastructure.[32] DJI was placed on the United States Treasury Department’s investment blacklist in 2021, its role in biometric surveillance, tracking of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, and ties to the PLA.[33] DJI has denied any involvement in human violations or surveillance operations. Following the passage of this bill, DJI released a statement saying that Congress’s actions would undermine American interests and have negative impacts on federal agencies, law enforcement, emergency responders, and small businesses that utilize their technology.[34]

The House of Representatives also passed the Biosecure Act, a bill that would restrict the federal government from contracting with PRC biotechnology firms with ties to the CCP and PLA.[35] The legislation would target five companies, BGI Group, Complete Genomics, MGI, WuXi AppTec, and WuXi Biologics, and establish an inter-agency process for identifying additional companies that pose a threat to national security. BGI is a PRC genomics company with reported ties to the PLA that was placed on the Bureau of Industry and Security’s entity list in 2020.[36] MGI and Complete Genomics are BGI subsidiaries in the PRC and California, respectively. WuXi AppTec and WuXi Biologics are PRC-based pharmaceutical companies that have been targeted by the US Government for their connections with PLA under the military-civilian fusion strategy.[37] All of these companies have denied having ties to the PLA or posing any threat to US National Security.

## Southeast Asia

### *Philippines*

**An authoritative *People’s Daily* commentary accused the Philippines of violating PRC sovereignty at Sabina Shoal and infringing on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The PRC is trying to forcibly expel the Philippine presence from the disputed shoal to degrade the Philippines’ military and coast guard operations in the South China Sea.** The article in the CCP official newspaper *People’s Daily* was published under the pseudonym “Zhong Sheng,” a homophone for “voice of China” in Mandarin that *People’s Daily* uses to denote authoritative commentary articles on foreign affairs. The article claimed that the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) deliberately “stranded” its flagship *Teresa Magbanua* at Sabina Shoal to justify “humanitarian” resupply missions to the area, portraying itself as a victim while aiming to establish a long-term presence at the shoal. It claimed the Philippines “violated the law and provoked first” by intruding into what the PRC claims is its territory, while the PRC “defended its rights in accordance with the law. The article also claimed that the Philippines violated Article 5 of the 2002 PRC-ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which stipulated that all parties would refrain from occupying any presently uninhabited maritime features. It said all parties should keep Sabina Shoal uninhabited and without facilities. It also insinuated that the Philippines was “provoking” the PRC at the behest of “some non-regional countries” that wish to “sow discord” in the region. The article concluded that PRC-Philippines relations were at a “crossroads” and the Philippines had to choose dialogue and consultation over conflict and confrontation.[38]

The PRC claims nearly all land features in the South China Sea within its “Nine Dash Line” territorial boundary, including Sabina Shoal. Sabina Shoal is an uninhabited low-tide elevation located within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone. The Philippines uses Sabina Shoal as a staging ground for

resupply missions to the nearby Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines maintains a military garrison aboard a grounded warship. The PCG deployed the *Teresa Magbanua* to the shoal in April to monitor PRC activity there, in response to Philippine reports that crushed coral found at the shoal was evidence the PRC was preparing to build infrastructure there.

The PRC has deployed dozens of Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), PLA Navy (PLAN), and Chinese Maritime Military (CMM) vessels to block Philippine resupply missions and prevent it from establishing a permanent presence at Sabina Shoal. A CCG ship rammed the *Teresa Magbanua* three times on August 31, causing damage to the hull, while up to 71 CMM, CCG, and PLAN vessels swarmed around Sabina Shoal. The PRC has accused the Philippines of ramming its ships in confrontations despite video footage showing otherwise. PRC state media has accused the Philippines of preparing to build infrastructure on the shoal and likened the anchored *Teresa Magbanua* to the grounded *Sierra Madre* on Second Thomas Shoal. CCG vessels have also engaged in aggressive maneuvers against Philippine vessels resupplying the *Sierra Madre*, including a violent confrontation on June 17 in which the PRC rammed, boarded, towed Philippine boats to thwart a resupply mission.

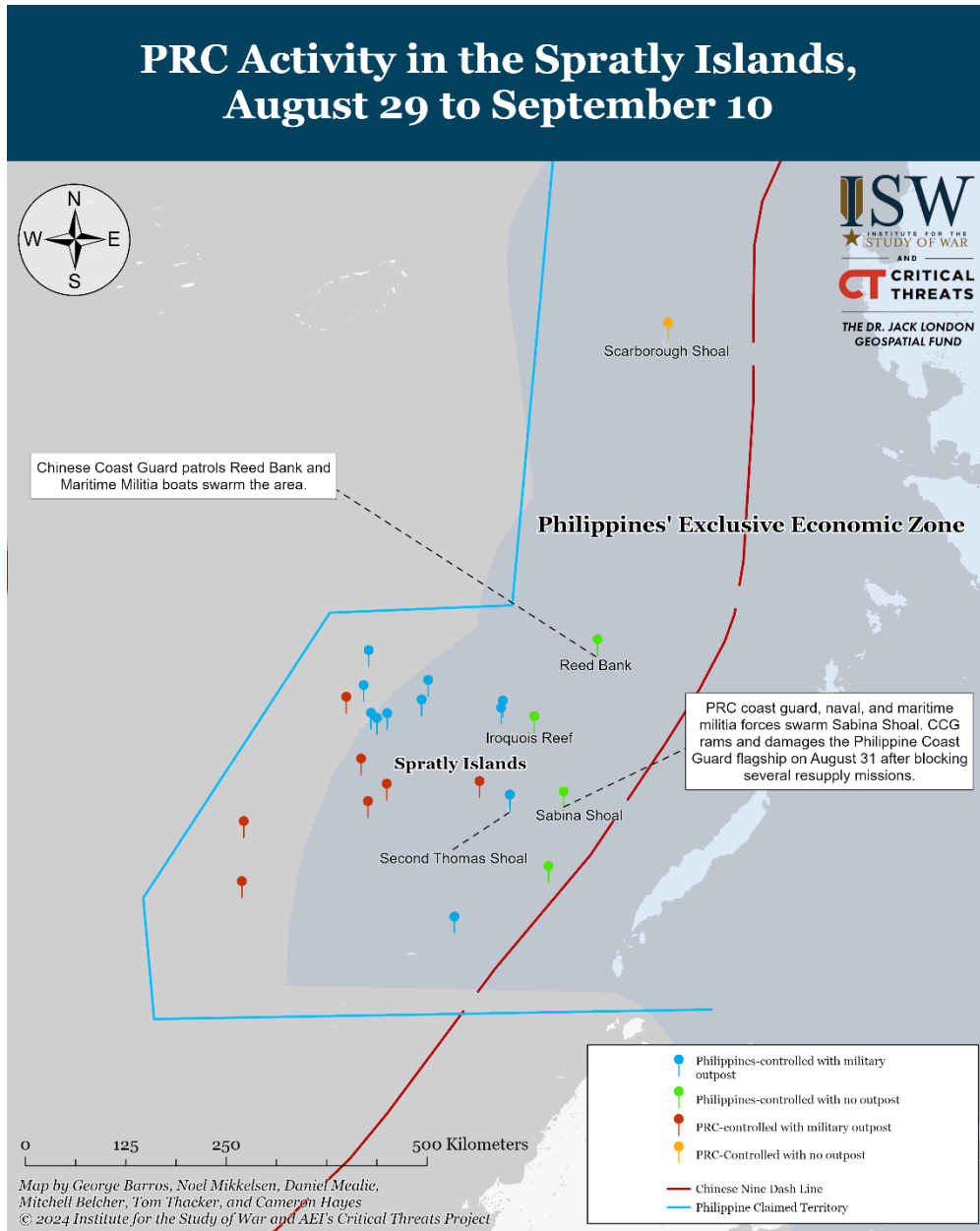
The PRC is framing the Philippines as an aggressor and a violator of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea as a form of legal and public opinion warfare to justify its own aggression against Philippine vessels in the region. It is framing its actions to force out the Philippine presence as enforcing the Declaration's stipulation against occupying currently unoccupied features, even though the Philippines has not constructed any facilities on Sabina Shoal and "occupies" it with coastguard vessels in the nearby waters, the same manner in which the PRC "occupies" the disputed Scarborough Shoal..

**The PRC is sending CCG and CMM vessels to the disputed Reed Bank in the Spratly Islands, likely to assert its control over oil and gas reserves in the area.** A CCG vessel conducted 24-hour "intrusive patrols" of Reed Bank on August 29 and September 2. Reed Bank is a large undersea tablemount in the Spratly Islands between 90 and 170 miles from the Philippine province of Palawan. It is part of the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone.[39] The Philippine Navy also reported 58 CMM vessels and one PLAN ship in the vicinity of Iroquois Reef from September 3-9, which has steadily climbed from 36 CMM vessels in the previous week and 17 the week before.[40] Iroquois Reef is an uninhabited reef at the southwestern end of Reed Bank.

The PRC is likely using Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels to assert control over Reed Bank and its copious energy resources. A 2013 report from the US Energy Information Administration estimated that untapped underwater reserves at Reed Bank may contain as many as 5.4 billion barrels of oil and 55.1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. The Philippines began oil and gas exploration in Reed Bank in the 1970s but ceased drilling in 2015 because the PRC contested its claim. A decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 ruled that Reed Bank is part of the seabed within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which means that the Philippines has the exclusive right to exploit the resources there. The PRC rejects the 2016 decision, however, and claims Reed Bank along with most of the South China Sea. The Philippines did not resume energy extraction there despite the Court of Arbitration ruling in its favor.[41]

The Philippine Navy also reported CMM or PRC fishing vessels "swarming" Iroquois Reef in July 2023 and December 2022. It said the vessels were loitering in the area and not fishing.[42] The PRC often

uses CMM vessels to maintain a presence in disputed parts of the South China Sea. Maritime militia vessels are often repurposed fishing boats. The PRC uses them because their connection to the PRC government is difficult to prove, their presence is less likely to trigger conflict escalation than CCG or naval vessels, and they can be deployed quickly in far greater numbers than official ships.



**Russia**

**The PLA and Russian military will participate in two military exercises and a joint Pacific patrol in close succession in September.** The PRC Ministry of National Defense (MOD) announced on September 9 that Russian air and naval forces will join PLA forces in the Northern/Interaction-2024 exercise in the Sea of Japan and Sea of Okhotsk. It did not specify the exact dates of the exercise but said participating Russian and PRC forces assembled in the Sea of Japan on

September 9. The exercise will last until late September.[43] The participating PRC and Russian air forces include more than 20 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, including the PRC's KJ-500, J-16, J-10, and Z-20, and Russia's Il-38, Su-30, and MiG-31. The participating PLA naval forces include the guided missile destroyers *Xining* and *Wuxi*, the guided missile frigate *Linyi*, the comprehensive supply ship *Taihu*, and three ship-borne helicopters. The Russian naval forces include the frigate *Marshal Shaposhnikov*, destroyer *Admiral Panteleyev*, four corvettes, and Ka-27 anti-submarine helicopters. The MOD also announced that the PRC and Russian navies would carry out their fifth joint maritime patrol in the Pacific Ocean on an unspecified date and that the PRC would participate in Russia's Ocean-2024 military exercise, which is ongoing from September 10-16.[44] The Ocean-2024 is a massive Russian exercise involving 400 ships, 120 aircraft, and 90,000 personnel conducting drills in the Pacific Ocean, Arctic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Baltic Sea, and Caspian Sea. Neither country's defense ministry specified the nature, location, or dates of the PRC's participation in the exercise.[45]

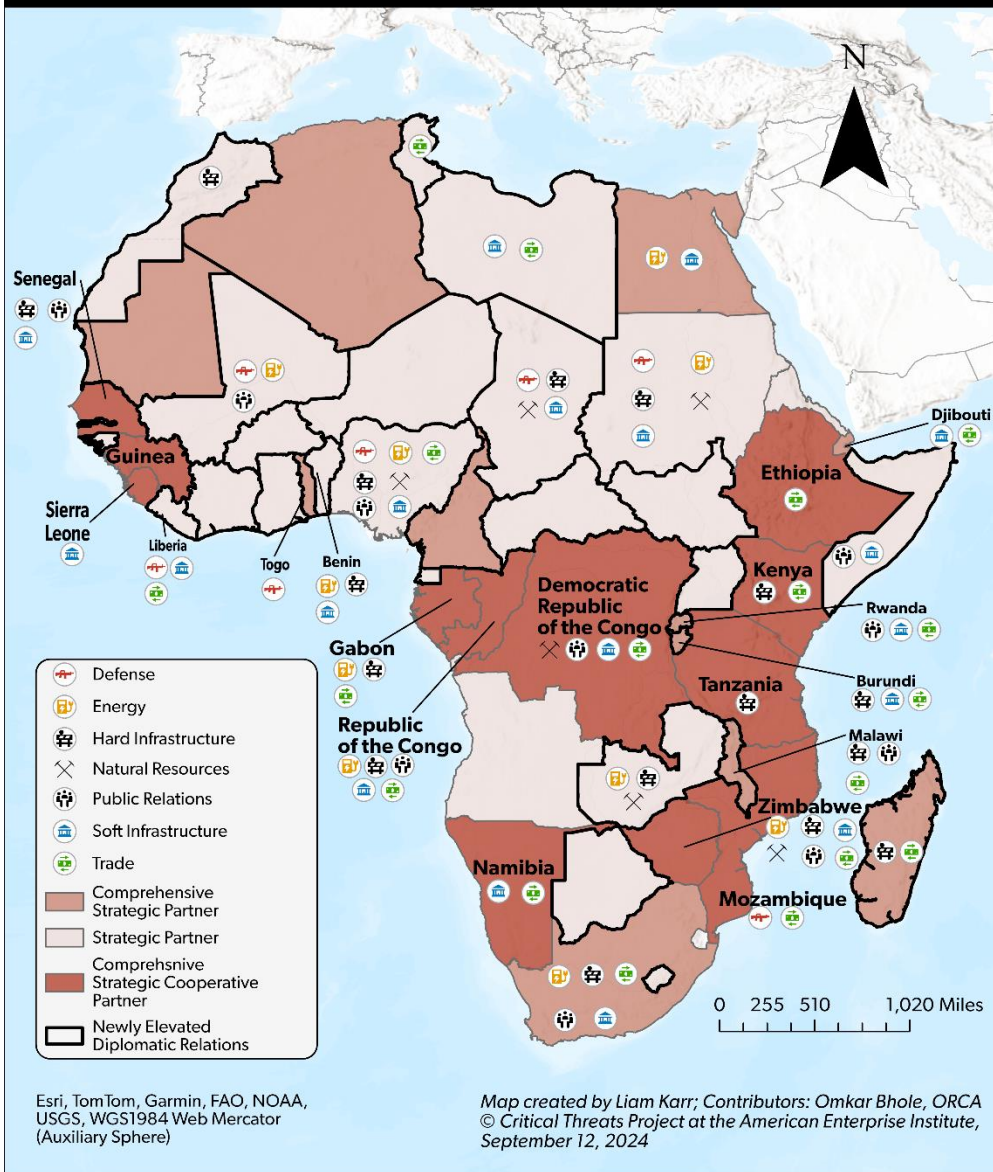
The PRC and Russia have increased joint naval and aerial exercises and patrols in the Pacific region in recent years, in a sign of their growing geopolitical alignment against the collective West and its Asian allies such as Japan.[46] The two countries held at least seventeen joint patrols or exercises in parts of the Western Pacific Ocean including the East China Sea, Sea of Japan, Yellow Sea, Bering Sea, and South China Sea between 2022 and the present, averaging five to six per year. They had one or no joint military activities in this region each year prior to 2021.[47] The two countries held the Joint Sea 2024 exercise and their fourth joint Pacific patrol in the South China Sea in July. They deployed four bombers in a joint patrol near Alaska's Aleutian islands the same month. The PRC organized several previous "Interaction"-series exercises with Russia in recent years, including the Northern/Interaction-2023 in the Sea of Japan in July 2023.[48]

## Africa

**The PRC elevated ties with Africa during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which reflects the greater strategic importance the PRC is giving to the continent.** African leaders met with high-ranking Chinese officials from September 4-6 to discuss bilateral ties, development goals, and economic cooperation. The summit resulted in a spate of new PRC-Africa agreements – with the PRC offering almost \$50.7 billion in investment – as well as the elevation of PRC-Africa ties to an “all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era.”[49] The PRC's bilateral relationships with African countries now take the form of strategic partnerships or comprehensive strategic partnerships, signifying China's interest in cooperating with African nations across a variety of economic and security sectors.



# China's Bilateral Agreements During FOCAC 2024



*Note: Soft Infrastructure includes agriculture, education, health, local economic development, tech, and telecommunications projects. Trade includes currency swap and export agreements. Public relations includes cultural exchange and media sharing agreements.*

For more information on specific cooperation agreements between the PRC and African nations, see the Africa File from the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

The PRC's rhetoric affirmed high-level support for Africa in the context of the broader "Global South" and framed China-Africa relations as an equitable partnership, possibly to hedge against accusations of exploitation, neocolonialism, or "debt trap" diplomacy. PRC press releases cast the PRC as Africa's equal partner and emphasized "mutual respect" in PRC-Africa relations. Xi contrasted Western

“modernization,” associated with “immense sufferings,” and Chinese modernization, based on inclusivity and equity.[50] PRC spokesperson Mao Ning stated in a press conference that China seeks “equal” cooperation with Africa and does not promulgate debt traps.[51] As a further sign of its commitment to Africa, the PRC upgraded bilateral ties with African nations.

US officials are concerned that the PRC’s new initiatives in Africa will facilitate the PRC’s military power projection. Bloomberg reported that the PRC may intend to build a base in Gabon following FOCAC security agreements.[52] According to WSJ, rumors around a proposed Chinese base in Gabon have swirled since former Gabonese President Ali Bongo reportedly promised Xi in August 2023 that the PRC could station troops there.[53] US officials reportedly tried to persuade Bongo to retract this statement, but their efforts proved moot after Bongo’s security forces ultimately overthrew him.[54] Interim president Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema took power in September 2023 and has not indicated his stance on the proposed Chinese base.[55] Nguema seems to hold positive views of the PRC, his country’s top trading partner and the provider of loans that backed three vocational training centers in Gabon.[56]

African leaders also declared their support for the one-China principle across high-level meetings during the forum. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Mao Ning referenced Africa’s broad adherence to the one-China principle and issued a statement on Swaziland, the one African country noticeably absent from FOCAC. She said that Swaziland's diplomatic support for Taiwan was not in its best interests and that China believes Swaziland will soon switch its allegiance to the PRC.[57] By “naming and shaming” Swaziland, while publicly elevating the status of nations that adhere to the one-China principle, the PRC signaled that development assistance and economic cooperation may be linked to diplomatic consensus on the PRC’s Taiwan policy.

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