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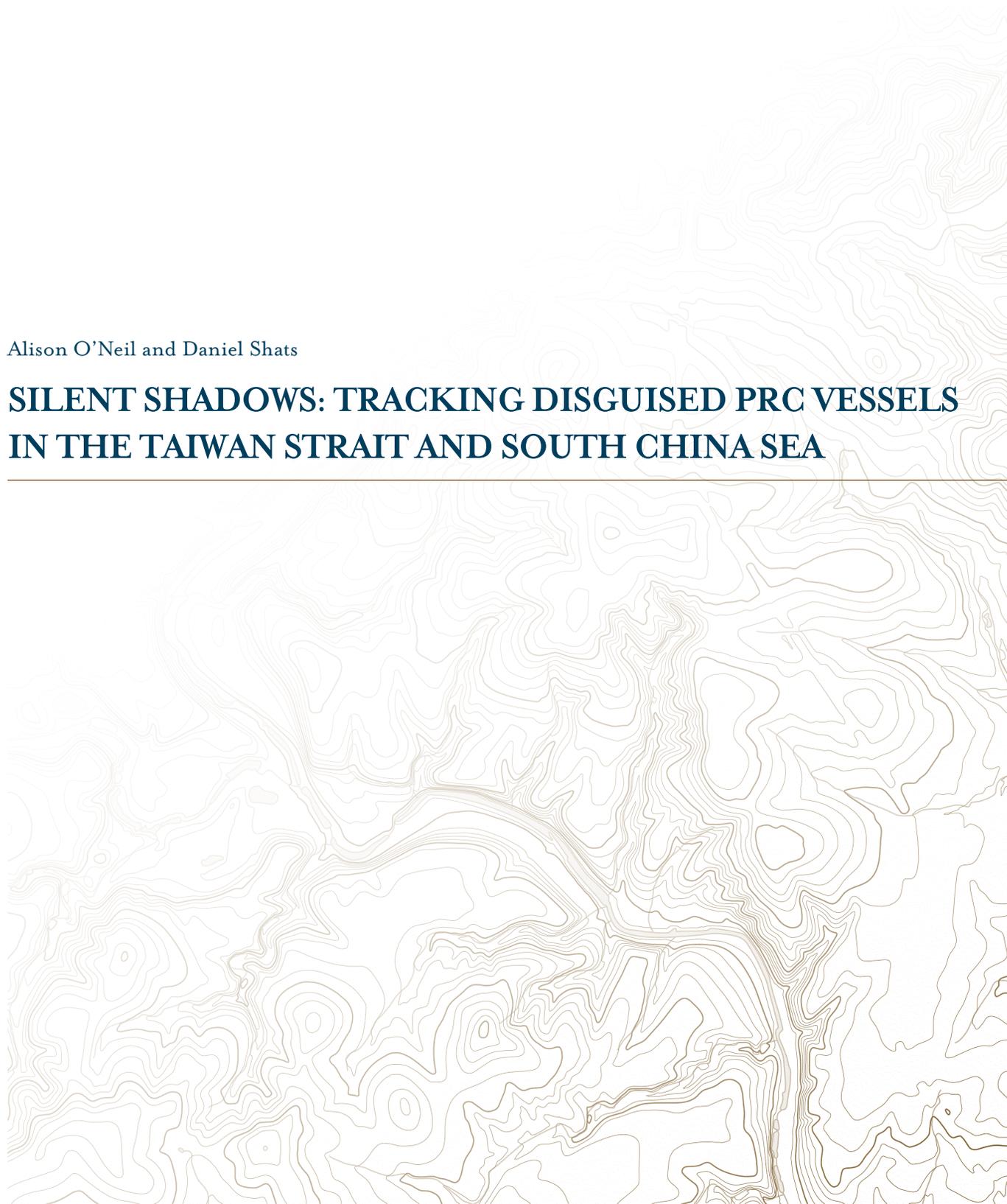
ALISON O'NEIL AND DANIEL SHATS

SILENT SHADOWS: TRACKING DISGUISED PRC VESSELS IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT AND SOUTH CHINA SEA



Alison O'Neil and Daniel Shats

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Cover: This photo taken on September 20, 2023 shows Philippine fishermen aboard their wooden boats sailing past a Chinese maritime militia vessel near the Chinese-controlled Scarborough Shoal in waters of the disputed South China Sea. China, which claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, snatched control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012. Since then, it has deployed coast guard and other vessels to block or restrict access to the fishing ground that has been tapped by generations of Filipinos. (Photo by Ted ALJIBE / AFP) (Photo by TED ALJIBE/AFP via Getty Images)

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SILENT SHADOWS: TRACKING DISGUISED PRC VESSELS IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

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SILENT SHADOWS: TRACKING DISGUISED PRC VESSELS IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

Introduction

Incursions by suspicious vessels from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) pose an ongoing and increasing threat to Taiwan, its outlying islands, and the South China Sea. Taiwan’s National Security Bureau (NSB) in October 2025 reported that the PRC uses at least eight methods of incursions to intrude into the restricted waters of Taiwan’s outer island Kinmen.¹ These methods included falsifying and concealing vessel identities as well as using “mixed navigation” — hiding among civilian and commercial vessels — as a means of concealment.²

Suspicious and concealed behavior by PRC vessels is not unique to the waters around Kinmen. Taiwan’s Coast Guard Administration (CGA) reported in November 2025 that it expelled 1,135 PRC fishing boats from Taiwanese waters in 2024.³ The CGA’s and NSB’s findings add to a growing body of evidence pointing to PRC incursions in contested waters, both around Taiwan and in the South China Sea. *The PRC uses disguise and concealment to confuse its adversaries, conduct sabotage and surveillance, clutter the information space, and ultimately set the conditions for further aggression. This paper aims to identify different types and patterns of PRC disguised vessel activity, explain the purpose of such tactics, and offer policy recommendations to deter or neutralize short-of-war operations that erode threat awareness and lay the groundwork for further escalations.*

Background: PRC Maritime Claims and Objectives in the Indo-Pacific

The PRC operates within a complex maritime environment of overlapping territorial claims and exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the South China Sea, East China Sea, Yellow Sea, and Taiwan Strait. PRC maritime claims in the South China Sea are based on the “Nine Dash Line,” a unilateral and unclearly-defined boundary which encompasses Scarborough Shoal, the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, and Taiwan’s Pratas Island. The PRC also claims the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which it calls the Diaoyu

Islands. Its claimed EEZ overlaps with the claims of Japan, South Korea, and North Korea in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. Most contentiously, the PRC claims Taiwan and its outlying islands as its own, promising to “unify” Taiwan with China at some point before the PRC’s centennial in 2049.

Taiwan and the South China Sea are the areas of greatest tension between the PRC and its regional competitors, many of whom are US partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific, and the areas where the PRC is most likely to deploy military force.

The PRC uses disguise and concealment to confuse its adversaries, conduct sabotage and surveillance, clutter the information space, and ultimately set the conditions for further aggression.

The PRC's peacetime strategic aims in the waters around Taiwan are as follows:

- Erode Taiwan's territorial control of its waters, especially around the outlying islands Kinmen, Matsu, and Pratas;
- Disrupt Taiwan's communications via undersea cable sabotage;
- Attenuate the resources and weaken the threat awareness of Taiwan's coast guard and military via frequent aerial and maritime incursions;
- Train the PLA for a possible blockade of Taiwan or invasion contingency;
- Set conditions to facilitate future military operations against Taiwan, including improving PRC domain awareness and reducing Taiwan's threat awareness.

The PRC uses similarly coercive behavior to establish de facto control over the territories within the Nine-Dash Line. The 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in *Philippines v. China* declared that the Nine-Dash Line and associated PRC historic claims have no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The PRC does not recognize the PCA ruling.

The PRC's strategic aims in the South China Sea are as follows:

- Maintain sea lines of communication (SLOCs) central to trade and fuel transport;

- Retain control over territory within the "Nine-Dash Line" demarcation;
- Oppose US and allied freedom of navigation patrols (FONOPs) in PRC-claimed territory;
- Militarize South China Sea islands when possible;
- Access South China Sea resources, including hydrocarbons;⁴
- Discredit the 2016 PCA ruling and Philippine claims to South China Sea territory.

The PRC advances and defends its claims in the South China Sea and around Taiwan using many short-of-war means. The focus of this piece is the PRC's use of non-naval sea vessels with concealed, disguised, or otherwise deceptive identity markers to carry out surveillance, sabotage, territorial encroachment, and other missions in ways that do not appear to be overt hostile military action. The use of deceptive short-of-war tactics at sea is a way for Beijing to manage the risk of escalation. It does not imply that Beijing is unwilling to go to war over these territories, however. Beijing's preparations to invade or blockade Taiwan, in particular, are well-known as the main drivers of PRC military modernization.⁵ Many of the PRC's subtler means of advancing its maritime claims set conditions to ease and enable future military action.

Methods of Disguise and Concealment at Sea

One of the most essential ways to detect and identify vessels at sea is through their Automatic Identification System (AIS). AIS uses a transmitter and receivers to continuously broadcast a vessel's location and identity.⁶ The system transmits static information — the Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number, vessel type, country of registration, owner, dimensions, and other data — as well as dynamic information including position, timestamp, and course over ground.⁷ AIS data provides an open-source means of tracking and identifying

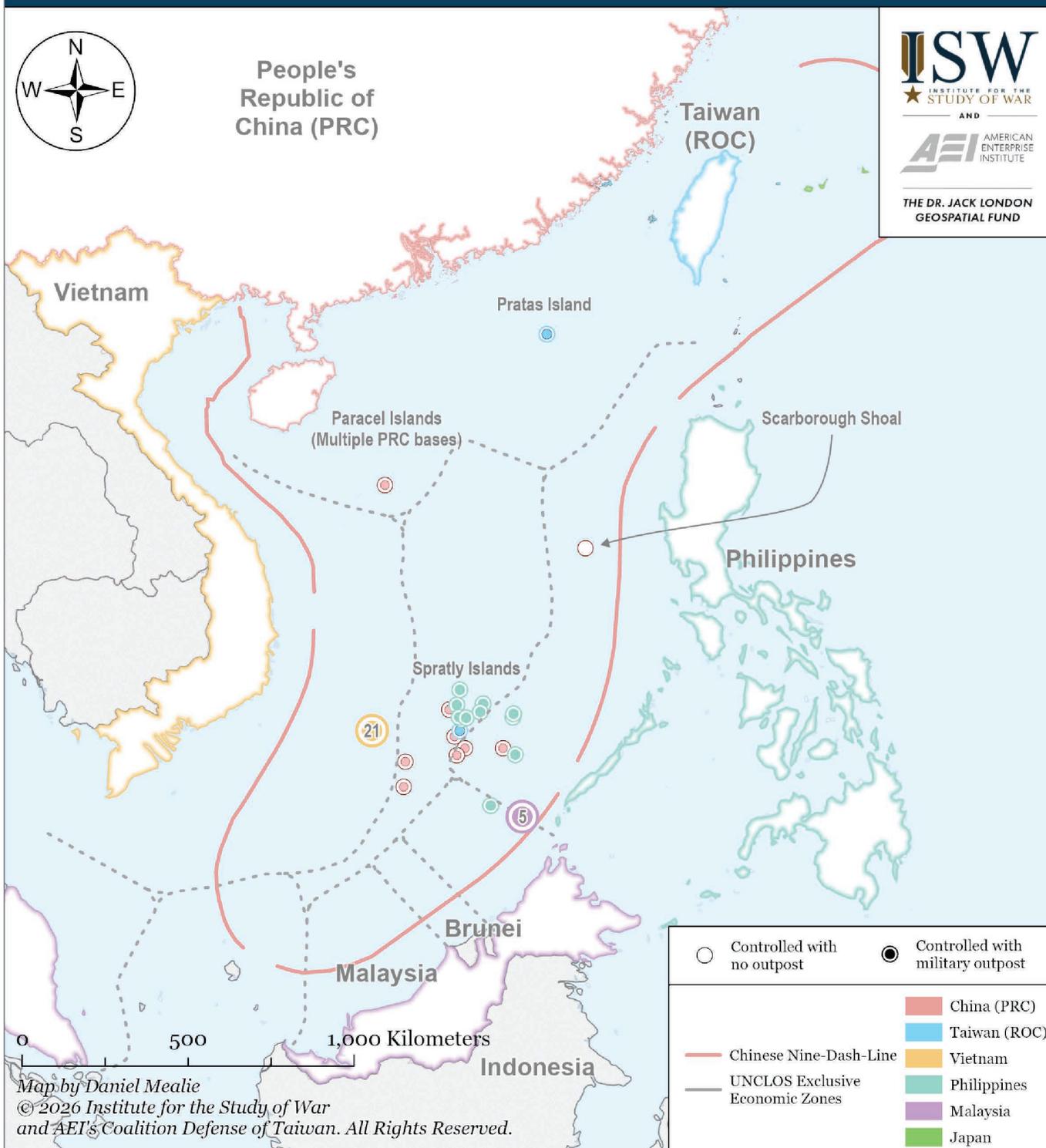
ships under normal circumstances, helping ships at sea avoid collisions.

Vessels can hide their locations by turning off AIS or tampering with AIS data.⁸ Disguised vessels that turn off or spoof AIS violate international maritime tracking norms and undermine maritime visibility. International Maritime Organization (IMO) guidelines stipulate that all passenger ships and all ships over 300 gross tons must operate AIS while at anchor or underway, although it acknowledges

Disputed Archipelagos in the South China Sea As of December 2025



PRC Nine-Dash-Line and Islands in the South China Sea As of December 31, 2025



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that some ships, “in particular leisure craft, fishing boats and warships,” might not carry AIS equipment.⁹ AIS can be switched off in limited cases, including to avoid piracy, but maritime authorities concur that AIS concealment often points to illicit activity.¹⁰ The United States’ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) found that AIS-disabled activity concealed approximately six percent of global fishing between 2017 and 2019. NOAA similarly reported that AIS concealment typically took place on the high seas and adjacent to Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), especially those with fishing resources, low levels of supervision, and “contested boundaries.”¹¹

It is also possible to “spoof” AIS signals as an additional means of concealment, allowing vessels to mask their true location.¹² Spoofing AIS usually entails falsifying transmittable data to misrepresent a ship’s identity and location. Spoofing methods include modifying the transmitted coordinates of a vessel to make it appear in a different location or transmitting the MMSI of a different vessel. Signal spoofing can also be done from onshore locations, creating “ghost” ships that appear on ship tracking platforms but do not actually exist. Taiwan’s National Security Bureau (NSB) identified “spoofing” as a means of PRC coercion near Taiwan in an October 2025 report.¹³

Seaborne vessels can also disguise or conceal their identities by modifying static identification data. Most of the static data transmitted by AIS is manually entered and can be falsified or left blank. The AIS data of many PRC-affiliated fishing boats does not include an “owner” or “operator” and may have a null callsign, such as “0” or “123456,” for example. Some boats can transmit names and identification numbers through AIS that do not match the name and number on their hulls. Smaller boats such as fishing dinghies rarely have AIS systems at all. Taiwan frequently reports small boats in its waters that do not have names, home ports, or ship certificates — what

The AIS data of many PRC-affiliated fishing boats does not include an “owner” or “operator” and may have a null callsign, such as “0” or “123456.”

Taiwan calls “Three No’s” — making them hard to identify even with an up-close inspection.¹⁴ Finally, many cargo vessels fly “flags of convenience” that do not match their true country of origin.

PRC disguised vessel activity can be seen around the South China Sea, Taiwan, and Taiwan’s outlying islands. Some of these vessels belong to the Chinese Maritime Militia (CMM) or the China Coast Guard (CCG); others are mislabeled or misrepresented commercial vessels.

CMM and Fishing Vessel Activity in the South China Sea

Many of the PRC boats that fish in disputed waters likely belong to the CMM. The CMM comprises a fleet of mostly civilian-owned vessels that carry out activities for the People’s Armed Forces while masking their state affiliation.¹⁵ CMM vessels blur the line between civilian and military operations by masquerading as ordinary fishing boats and at times engaging in normal fishing activities, while at other times engaging in “gray zone” operations in service of PRC state objectives. Larger fishing vessels are often trackable on AIS-based satellite platforms, but some larger boats are “motherships” that can deploy multiple smaller boats without AIS. The PRC employs the CMM and fishing fleets as deliberate tools to assert control in disputed waters. It can deploy such boats in greater numbers and deeper into foreign-controlled waters during peacetime than is feasible for coast guard or naval ships, which are undeniably state assets and usually much harder to conceal. CMM vessels enable the PRC to project influence and dominate contested maritime zones below the threshold of open conflict. Other nations in the region, including Vietnam, maintain maritime militias or functionally similar forces.¹⁶ The Center for Strategic and International

Studies’ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) found that the PRC deploys the largest fleet of maritime militia ships in the South China Sea, however.¹⁷

PRC fishing fleets and maritime militia vessels have become a constant presence in PRC-claimed waters of the South China Sea, often encircling or crowding contested areas such as Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal, and docking and resupplying at major PRC bases such as Mischief Reef and Subi Reef. The number of such vessels may rapidly swell around specific regions during periods of tension, such as over 80 PRC boats swarming around Sabina Shoal in 2024 and over 200 around Whitsun Reef in 2021. Most of these boats are small craft that do not broadcast AIS.¹⁸ Taiwan and Japan have also reported large numbers of PRC fishing boats fishing in their EEZs and even in their territorial waters, such as around the Kinmen Islands and the Senkaku Islands.¹⁹ The PRC's actions in the South China Sea have provoked low-level confrontations between the PRC and the Philippines. PRC short-of-war tactics likewise affect trade and fisheries in addition to heightening maritime military tensions. Philippine fishing catches near Scarborough Shoal have reportedly dropped by 16 percent since the mid-2010s due to PRC intrusions.²⁰ PRC deployment of CCG and CMM vessels in conjunction with PLAN vessels resulted in collisions between PRC and Philippine vessels in August 2024.²¹ AMTI found that the CMM appeared in record numbers across South China Sea reefs in 2025, deploying an average of 241 vessels per day compared to 232 per day in 2024.²²

International custom and practice have traditionally protected fishing fleets from naval response, although this convention does not apply if fishing vessels are found to support military activities. Maritime scholarship has noted that the PRC deliberately obfuscates distinctions between civilian and military vessels and would likely frame any military response to such activities as illegitimate in the event of a conflict.²³ CMM and fishing fleet activity

in the South China Sea often manifests as aggression below the threshold of war, typically targeting Philippine territory and operations. “Swarms” of fishing boats aim to isolate Philippine and other countries’ operations, block supply missions, support PRC maritime surveillance, and restrict access to vital resources such as fish and seabed fossil fuel deposits.²⁴ Many CMM vessels in the South China Sea come from the Spratly Backbone Fishing Fleet, which receives PRC state funding to deploy to the Spratly Islands for at least 280 days per year.²⁵

Maritime experts have highlighted the role that fishing fleets could play in a maritime conflict, potentially serving as intelligence collectors or performing rescue and repair functions.²⁶ The PRC may employ such fishing vessels in peacetime to train for contingencies around both the South China Sea and Taiwan.

CMM and Fishing Vessel Activity Around Taiwan

PRC fishing vessels also operate in large numbers in the Taiwan Strait. Many of these boats are likely genuinely fishing, albeit sometimes in violation of Taiwanese law, while some are very likely state-directed. Large numbers of PRC fishing boats in Taiwan-administered waters strain Taiwan’s law enforcement resources and erode its threat awareness. Data from Starboard Maritime Intelligence shows that many PRC boats in the Taiwan Strait transmit fake AIS signals in addition to their own signals, which can serve PRC cognitive warfare aims by inflating the apparent number of foreign vessels in Taiwan-administered waters and obscuring other ships’ malign activities in a cloud of fake signals. Many of the fishing boats that ISW-CDOT has observed transmitting multiple signals in Taiwan’s EEZ belong to the *Min Shi Yu* fishing fleet, suggesting they are part

A “three no’s” PRC fishing boat capsized in prohibited waters around Kinmen in February 2024 after colliding with a Taiwanese Coast Guard Administration (CGA) boat that was pursuing it. The PRC used the incident, which killed two PRC fishermen, to begin regular intrusive coast guard patrols into Kinmen’s restricted waters.

of the same CMM unit. The name *Min Shi Yu* indicates that they are fishing (yu 鱼) boats from Shishi City (shi 狮) in Fujian Province (min 闽).

Crowding Taiwanese waters with fishing boats also increases the risk of collision or confrontation with Taiwanese vessels, leading to incidents that the PRC can exploit to justify expanding its coercive behavior. A “three no’s” PRC fishing boat capsized in prohibited waters around Kinmen in February 2024 after colliding with a Taiwanese Coast Guard Administration (CGA) boat that was pursuing it. The PRC used the incident, which killed two PRC fishermen, to begin regular intrusive coast guard patrols into Kinmen’s restricted waters and thereby expand the scope of the PRC’s claimed law enforcement jurisdiction.²⁷ Taiwan reported a large number of PRC fishing boats intruding into waters around Pratas Island in February 2025, almost exactly one year after the Kinmen incident. The CCG then began regular intrusive patrols into Pratas waters, ostensibly in the name of protecting its fishermen.

Some “three no’s” boats serve supporting roles for other PRC operations in contested waters. Taiwan detained an unmarked “three no’s” boat in its restricted waters in March 2025 that was carrying around 500,000 liters of fuel. The boat was likely loitering in Taiwanese waters to resupply other PRC-affiliated vessels, such as fishing boats, allowing them to remain at sea for a longer time.²⁸

AIS Spoofing and Phantom Vessels

The PRC has sometimes used fake AIS signals hosted on boats or spoofed through other means to confuse the maritime domain awareness of Taiwan, the Philippines, and other countries. Data from Starboard Maritime Intelligence showed that an AIS signal appearing as a “law enforcement” ship called “*Russian Warship 532*” repeatedly appeared and disappeared around the Taiwan Strait, East China

Sea, and Yellow Sea since late August 2025, seemingly traveling long distances much faster than is possible for a real ship.²⁹ No major news or government sources reported observing a Russian warship in these areas at the time, even though the ship appeared at times within Taiwan’s and South Korea’s EEZs. An ISW-CDOT investigation found that the signal briefly appeared in Taiwan’s northern EEZ on September 17 and moved in tandem with a PRC fishing boat called *Min Shi Yu 07792* before disappearing, suggesting that the fishing boat was hosting the signal. Several other fishing boats appeared to host the “*Russian warship*” signal in different sea areas off the PRC’s coast from August to October. Another fishing boat called *Min Shi Yu 06718* transmitted a false identity as a law enforcement ship called *Hai Xun 15012* in the same area on September 17, 2025, and continuously throughout August and September as it sailed up and down the Taiwan Strait.³⁰

The PRC appears to use spoofing of false identities less frequently in the South China Sea, though it is possible that such spoofing has simply gone undetected. Starboard data showed an AIS signal of a ship called “*French Warship 2*” appearing periodically near the coast of Vietnam as well as in the East China Sea in August and September 2025 in a similar manner to the spoofed “*Russian Warship 532*” signal. In another instance, Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson for the West Philippine Sea Jay Tarriela accused the PRC of spoofing a fake coast guard ship very close to the Philippine shore in December 2024, likely transmitting the signal from a dredging ship.³¹ Tarriela also reported in March 2023 that a CCG ship changed its AIS signature to that of a fishing vessel while tailing a Philippine coast guard ship.³² The PRC may be using these fake signals to test Taiwan and the Philippines’ threat response, overwhelm their law enforcement by exaggerating the number of PRC or foreign vessels in their surrounding waters, and pollute the information environment to mask the PRC’s true intentions.

Disguised vessel intrusions offer a means of extending the PRC’s de facto maritime control, one of the PRC’s main goals in both the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

Vessel “spoofing” in the Taiwan Strait, as demonstrated by the spoofed “*Russian Warship*” since August 2025, may serve a disinformation purpose to sow confusion among Taiwanese or international observers. Efforts to broadcast the locations of fishing vessels such as *Min Shi Yu* ships while concealing the locations of other vessels could indicate an attempt to create shifting impressions of the size and location of PRC fishing fleets. This behavior could also serve an intimidation purpose, specifically against Taiwan’s CGA, which must contend with constant low-intensity incursions around Taiwan and its outlying islands. Such lines of effort would align with additional PRC efforts to pollute Taiwan’s information space and sow doubt within military and civilian ranks. “Spoofed” vessels that broadcast different identities in different circumstances undermine the reliability of technology-assisted means of tracking such vessels and necessitate increased resources and effort to verify potential threats. Specific patterns of PRC disguised vessel activity may also highlight an intent to test techniques and ultimately implement them elsewhere if they are effective. The PRC may ultimately expand its spoofing techniques elsewhere, as it seeks to expand territorial control, including in the South China Sea.

“Dark” CCG Vessels Around Taiwan’s Outer Islands

The PRC began normalizing coast guard incursions into waters around Taiwan’s Kinmen and Pratas Islands in 2024 and 2025. Kinmen is an archipelago located approximately two miles from the PRC city of Xiamen, making it the closest ROC point to PRC territory. It is home to over 140,000 people, including around 3,000 military personnel. Taiwan does not claim territorial waters or a contiguous zone around Kinmen due to the islands’ proximity

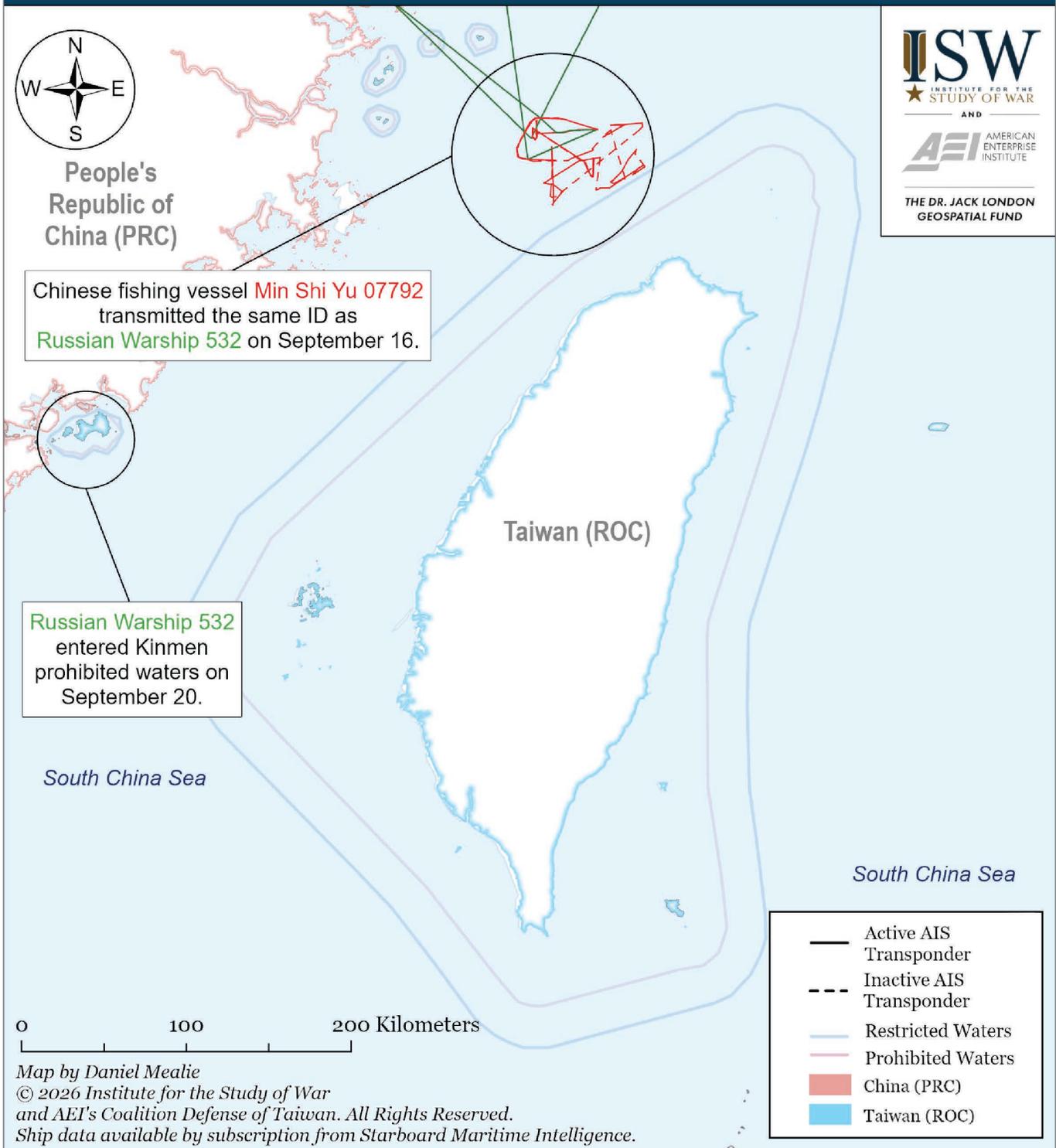
to the PRC, but maintains concentric “prohibited” and “restricted” waters that are functionally equivalent. The CCG began regular patrols into Kinmen’s restricted waters following the February 2024 capsizing incident mentioned above. It has since normalized a pattern of four two-hour patrols per month, though the timing of these patrols may be spread throughout the month or clustered together in one or two days. The stated purpose of the intrusive patrols is to assert the PRC’s “legitimate” law enforcement jurisdiction over Taiwan-controlled waters and ostensibly to protect fishermen. Neither Taiwan nor the PRC has reported these patrols actually conducting law enforcement activities against civilian boats in Kinmen’s waters, however.

Disguised vessel intrusions offer a means of extending the PRC’s de facto maritime control, one of the PRC’s main goals in both the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. The PRC has increased its overt and covert vessel activity around Taiwan’s outer islands, in line with ISW-CDOT’s assessment that the PRC may be laying conditions for a short-of-war seizure of Kinmen.³³ Kinmen has served as a PRC “testing ground” for policies it likely aims to implement in other Taiwanese territories, including the “Kinmen model” of normalizing PRC vessel presence ostensibly to protect PRC fishermen. Patterns of PRC activity around Kinmen may indicate an intent to extend those same policies to Pratas as a means of menacing Taiwanese defense presence there.

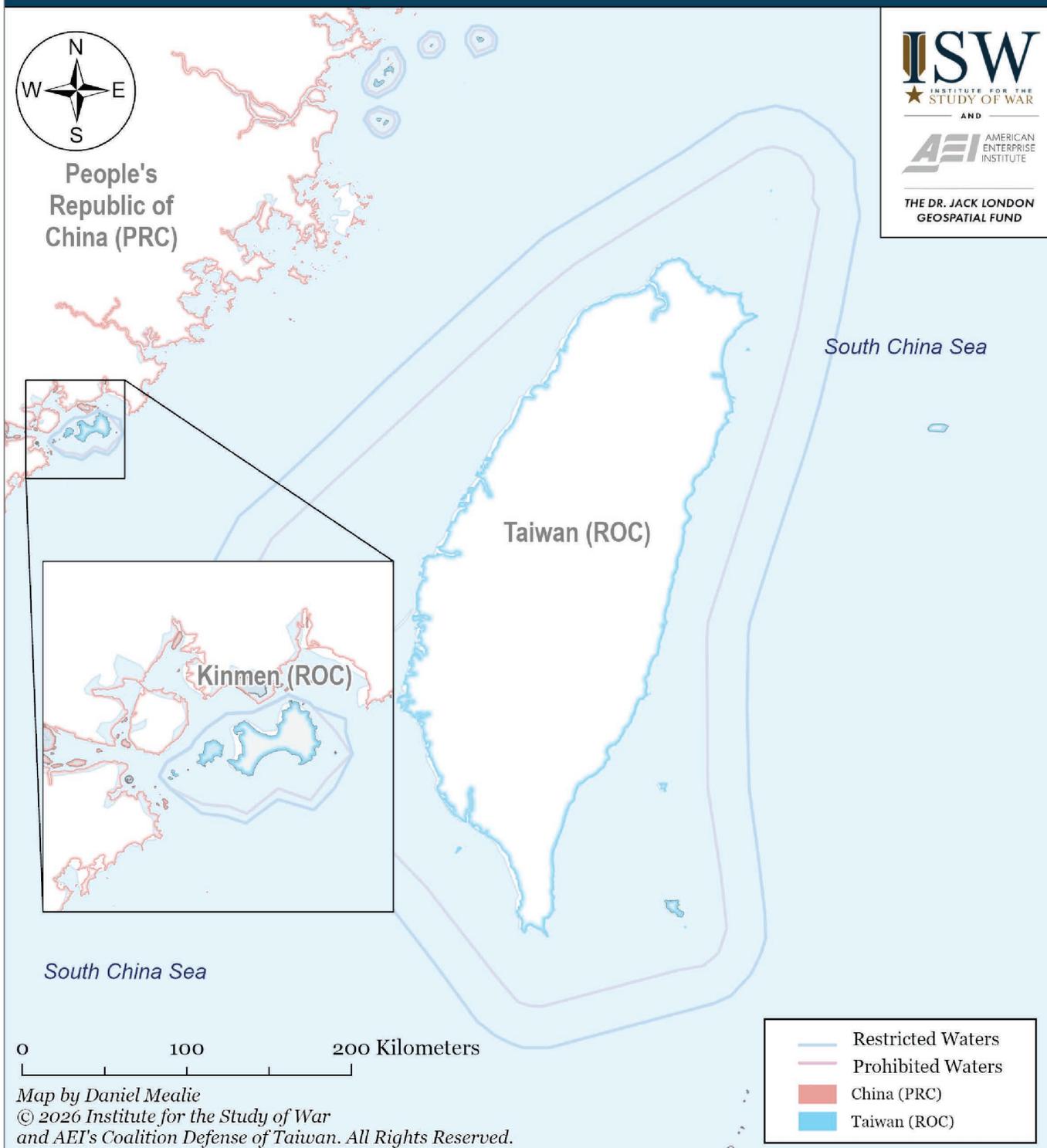
CCG intrusions into the waters south of Kinmen and around Pratas resemble rehearsals for blockade or “quarantine” operations that the PRC could use to seize those islands from Taiwan.³⁴ The CCG likely aims to desensitize Taiwan and its partners to such intrusions, which could help cultivate surprise in an actual blockade scenario. Turning off AIS is likely meant to impede Taiwan’s ability to monitor and respond to CCG incursions and avoid drawing

Specific patterns of PRC disguised vessel activity may also highlight an intent to test techniques and ultimately implement them elsewhere if they are effective. The PRC may ultimately expand its spoofing techniques elsewhere, as it seeks to expand territorial control, including in the South China Sea.

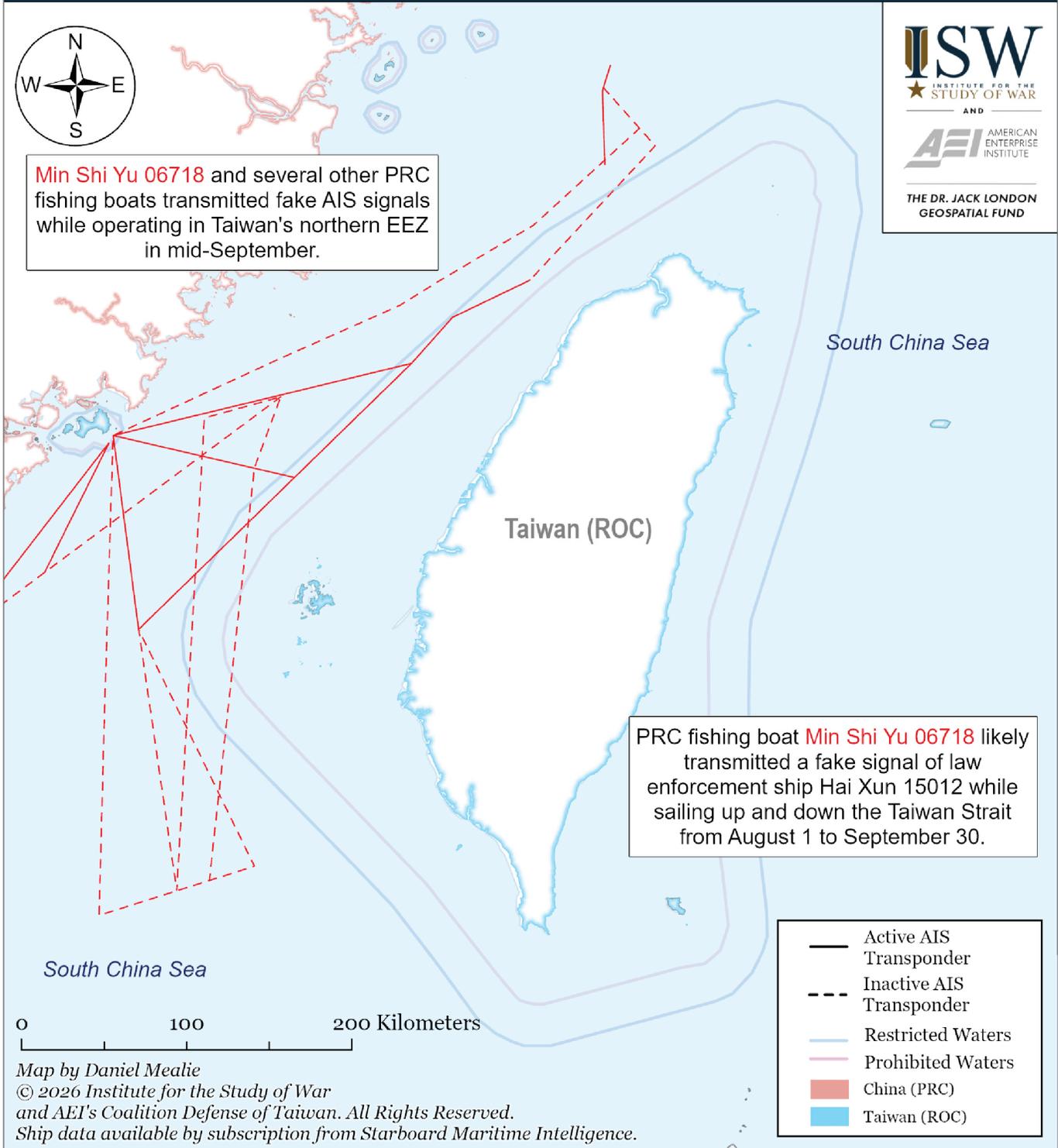
Likely PRC Signal Spoofing in the Taiwan Strait September 16 to September 20, 2025



Taiwan and Kinmen Island's Prohibited and Restricted Waters As of December 31, 2025



Likely PRC Law Enforcement Signal Spoofing in the Taiwan Strait August 1 to September 30, 2025



international attention to the PRC's coercive activities.³⁵ Deactivating AIS does not ultimately conceal the CCG ships' activities or disguise their identities, however, since CCG ships are easily identifiable at visual range. The CCG ships deliberately activating AIS while in the Pratas contiguous zone very likely means that they are deliberately signaling their "law enforcement" activities to influence Taiwanese decision-makers and test Taiwan's response.

Pratas is an atoll at the northern end of the South China Sea. It has no permanent civilian population but hosts contingents of Taiwanese marines and coast guard personnel.³⁶ The CCG has carried out multiple patrols per month encircling Pratas, initially precipitated by the expulsion from Pratas waters of a large PRC fishing fleet by Taiwan's Coast Guard in February and March 2025. The Pratas patrol pattern is somewhat different from Kinmen patrols in that the patrols usually involve one ship at a time, rather than four, and fully encircle the island over a 24-hour period instead of patrolling back and forth for two hours in one small area. ISW-CDOT noted that the patrols are likely establishing a procedure similar to the "Kinmen model" to normalize CCG presence in the area.³⁷

CCG ships carrying out Kinmen patrols have frequently switched AIS off throughout their patrols, often just before entering Taiwan-controlled waters. CCG ships carrying out patrols around Pratas, meanwhile, usually turn their AIS off upon approach and restart it once in Pratas restricted waters. The Pratas patrols usually circle the island with AIS on, enabling tracking.³⁸

Commercial Vessels and "Flags of Convenience"

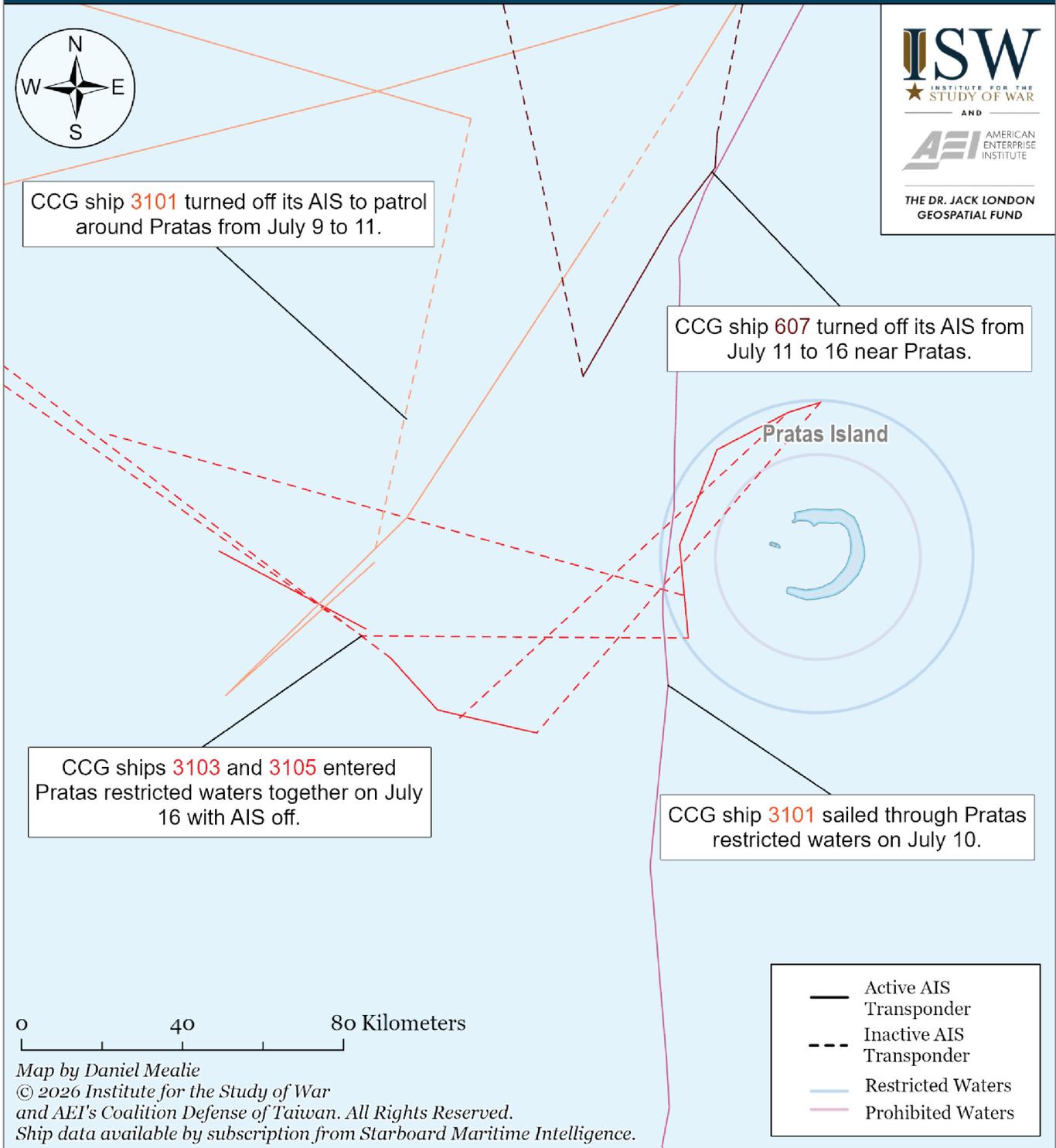
Taiwan's NSB identified "mixed navigation," or concealment among civilian ships, as one of several means of PRC intrusion near Taiwan in its October 2025 report.³⁹ The PRC has likely used ostensibly commercial ships sailing under foreign flags, or "flags of convenience," to harass, sabotage, or surveil Taiwan in Taiwanese waters. UNCLOS stipulates that ships must have a "genuine link" between their country of operation and the country whose flag they fly; UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

estimates that 73 percent of the world's cargo vessels fly flags of convenience, however.⁴⁰ Many shipping companies register ships under the flags of countries that offer financial benefits, but doing so can also add an additional layer of disguise to suspicious operations. The Taiwanese government maintains a list of vessels with some connection to the PRC that it has observed sailing in suspicious patterns in Taiwanese waters. Vessels on the list are registered in third countries such as Mongolia, Togo, and Sierra Leone, even though they are crewed by PRC nationals and owned by companies based in the PRC.⁴¹

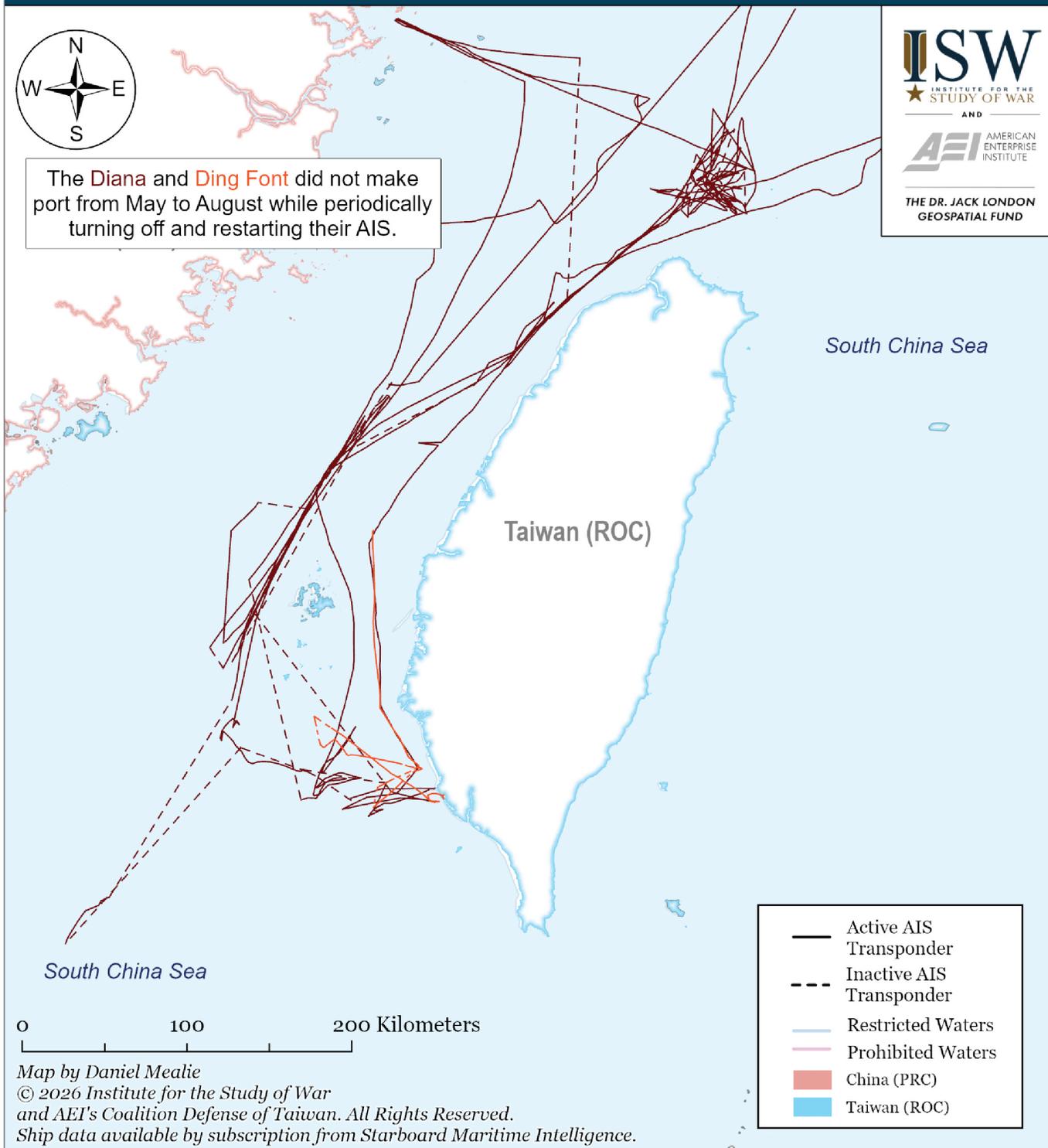
Maritime intelligence permits real-time tracking as such vessels transit near Taiwan. Two tankers, *Diana* and *Ding Font*, sailed up and down the Taiwan Strait from May to August 2025, seemingly without docking at any port at this time. Data from Starboard Maritime Intelligence shows the two vessels consistently shutting off and restarting their AIS in the last four months as they operated in various positions in the Taiwan Strait. The ships switched to different AIS identities when sailing away from Taiwan, likely to obscure the fact that they are going to PRC ports. The *Diana's* registered owner, Zhong Fu International, is based in Hong Kong; its most visited port is Xiangzhi in the PRC's Fujian Province, and it flies the flag of Sierra Leone. Xiangzhi is part of Shishi City, a subordinate jurisdiction of Quanzhou and the base for a PRC fishing fleet that frequently engages in coercion and deception against Taiwan.

The PRC may deploy such vessels for everything from spying to patrolling disputed territorial waters. Dark or disguised vessels may also carry out sabotage in addition to surveillance. ISW research has identified PRC sabotage of Taiwan's undersea cables as a means of coercing and isolating Taiwan, which largely depends on such subsea cables for its internet access. Taiwan's National Communications Commission (NCC) said that a PRC fishing boat and a PRC cargo ship severed both cables connecting Taiwan to its outlying Matsu Islands on February 2 and February 8, 2023, by dragging their anchors, causing an internet outage that lasted 50 days.⁴² Insikt Group, the intelligence team of security firm Recorded Future, identified five additional incidents of submarine cable damage to Taiwanese

CCG Ship Incursions into Pratas Waters July 7 to July 16, 2025



"Dark Vessels" Diana and Ding Font Operating Off of Taiwan May 1 to August 31, 2025



cables in 2024 and 2025.⁴³ Although some damage to undersea cables came from natural wear and tear, Taiwan connected some of these incidents to sabotage by PRC-affiliated ships.⁴⁴ A PRC-owned, Cameroon-flagged cargo vessel *Shunxing-39* damaged a cable off of Kaohsiung in January 2025.⁴⁵ A PRC-crewed cargo ship flying the flag of Togo, the *Hong*

Tai 58, cut a Taiwanese internet cable in a likely act of sabotage in February 2025.⁴⁶ A PRC military journal published designs for a device capable of operating in tandem with deep-sea submersibles to cut cables deep underwater.⁴⁷ Such a device may evade detection by Taiwan's CGA, which mainly tracks suspicious surface vessels.

Conclusion: Implications of Disguised Vessel Activity

PRC disguised vessels risk undermining global stability, fishing, and infrastructure. “Dark fleets” and disguised vessels lay the groundwork for maritime incursions that risk sparking military tensions at critical flashpoints. The following section explains possible PRC motives for using disguise and concealment.

De Facto Control and Denial

Concealment and suspicious vessel behavior give the PRC de facto control over contested territories and the resources within. CCG and CMM ships amass in large numbers, physically blocking and denying PRC adversaries — specifically the Philippines — access to locations the PRC deems strategically significant. This approach supports PRC efforts to secure access to South China Sea energy resources, fishing grounds, and islands the PRC may aim to militarize. This goal holds special significance for the PRC when facing US allies such as the Philippines or Japan, which the PRC seeks to drive away from Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal, and the Senkaku Islands.⁴⁸

Quasi-Military and Logistical Functions

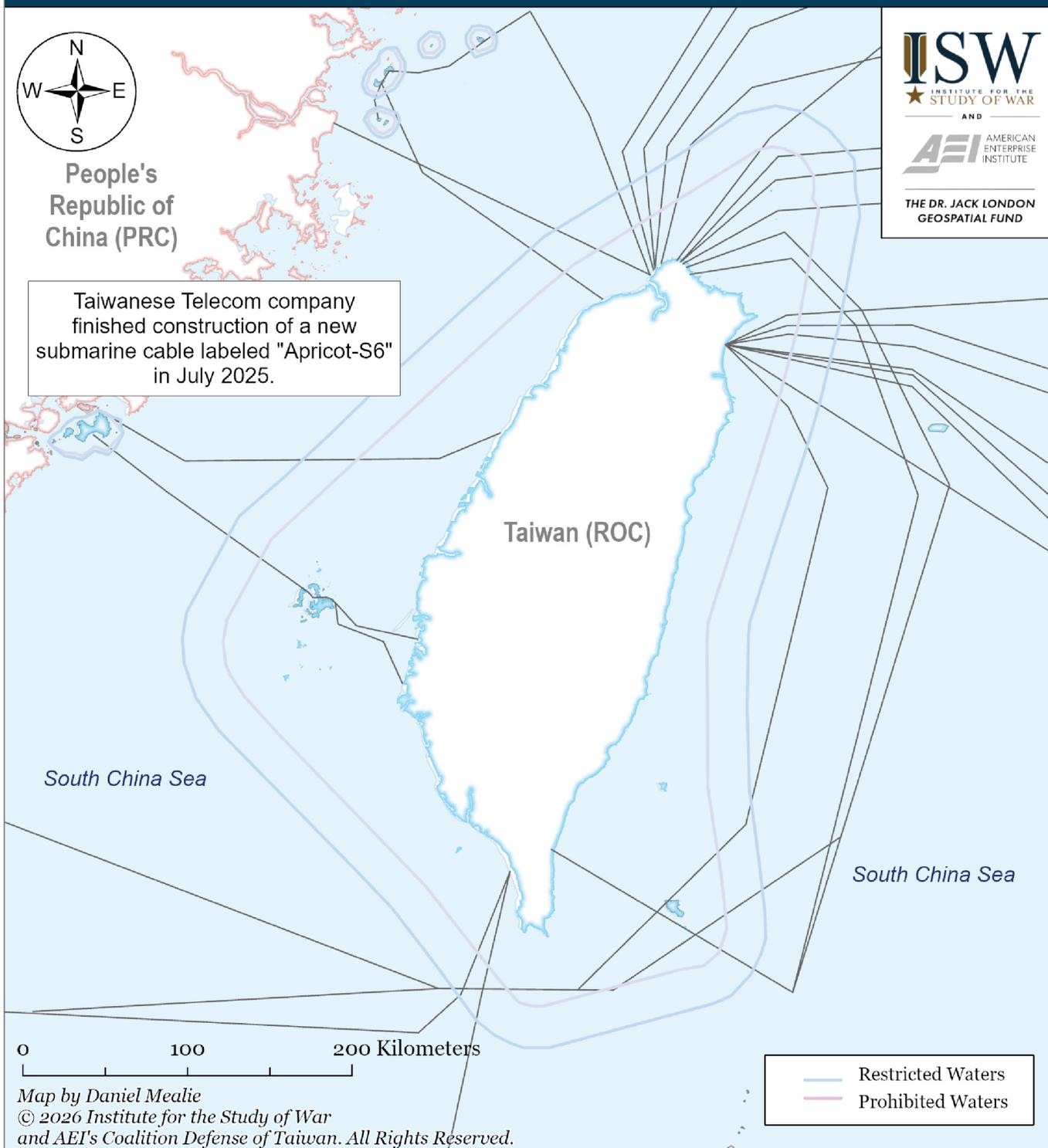
PRC disguised vessels can perform military support functions, including surveillance and resupply. ISW-CDOT reported on a likely disguised fuel resupply vessel near Taiwan in March 2025. The vessel had no certificate, port of registry, or name (the “three no’s”) and was likely supporting other PRC vessels operating off Taiwan’s coasts.⁴⁹

Conditions-setting for Conflict

Vessel concealment gives the PRC a deniable means of setting conditions and pretexts for conflict or seizure of territory. Disguised fishing vessels could function as a “tripwire,” allowing the PRC to claim that its actions to “protect” such vessels are defensive. Disguised vessels’ deniability allows the PRC to claim that their vessels’ encounters with CGA or other Taiwanese personnel are unprovoked attacks and use the opportunity to deepen PRC presence in a contested area. The PRC used this tactic to advance information operations against Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in February 2024 after two PRC fishermen died following an encounter with the CGA in waters off Kinmen.⁵⁰ The PRC introduced what the PRC media has referred to as the “Kinmen model” of CCG patrols around Kinmen in May 2024, ostensibly to protect PRC fishermen in Kinmen waters.⁵¹

Vessel concealment likewise allows the PRC to degrade the threat response of both Taiwan and the Philippines, which must contend with constant low-intensity incursions that stretch Coast Guard resources and personnel. This tactic echoes the PRC’s use of air defense identification zone (ADIZ) incursions to normalize a high level of activity and thereby erode Taiwan’s threat awareness. Taiwan stopped scrambling jets in response to every PRC ADIZ incursion in March 2021; the PRC may reason that similarly high levels of unidentifiable maritime incursions around Taiwan will similarly lower the CGA’s willingness and ability to respond.⁵²

Taiwan's Sub-sea Cable Network As of December 31, 2025



The PRC will likely continue its suspicious vessel activities as long as it perceives such behavior as sufficiently low risk. Addressing this reality necessitates regional and international responses that take legal, military, and technological considerations into account.

Policy Recommendations for Curtailing Disguised Vessel Activity

The PRC's short-of-war approach requires a comprehensive response that combines regional cooperation, technological innovation, and strong international legal frameworks. Multilateral efforts, such as those led by intelligence and military coalitions such as the Quad and the Five Eyes communities, to share information and enhance maritime monitoring are crucial for ensuring collective security.⁵³ These coalitions already maintain intelligence-sharing and collective security agreements that promote joint adoption of mutually beneficial measures. The following recommendations advocate multilateral and state-level approaches to deter disguised vessel activity.

The PRC's short-of-war approach requires a comprehensive response that combines regional cooperation, technological innovation, and strong international legal frameworks.

Regional Recommendations: Taiwan and the Philippines

- **Protect critical infrastructure:** States vulnerable to undersea cable sabotage by disguised vessels should take steps to protect these cables while augmenting their redundancy. Efforts to track, record, and punish operators of cable-cutting vessels may deter future actions by such vessels. Taiwan publicly sentenced the PRC ship captain whose ship it caught cutting a Taiwanese cable in February 2025 to three years in prison and deported his crew back to the PRC.⁵⁴ This action accompanies other initiatives to guard against cable-cutting by dark vessels, including maintaining a registry of suspicious ships and increasing

patrols around Taiwan. Taiwan's Ocean Affairs Council reportedly flagged 96 suspicious ships and noted that these ships' activity dropped in February 2025.⁵⁵ The Council "said that it was too early to determine whether the situation had changed for the better, or whether the ships were temporarily adjusting their movements," per Taiwan News.⁵⁶ Information-sharing between Taiwan, the United States, and coalition partners would further facilitate joint responses.

- **Deploy maritime drones and additional vessels:** Maritime drones offer an additional means of defense against intrusions by suspicious vessels. Taiwan has proposed indigenous maritime drone designs with ranges of up to 373 miles.⁵⁷ Taiwan took steps to test and incorporate maritime drones in 2025; introducing such technology to the CGA could deter or drive away dark vessels approaching Taiwan's coasts.⁵⁸ Other expert recommendations include introducing a designated cable-repair ship, partnering with other states to build more cables, and bolstering Taiwan's satellite communications partnerships.⁵⁹ Taiwan currently relies on foreign cable repair ships from Singapore, the Philippines, and Japan, which extends the time it takes to fix broken undersea cables.⁶⁰ Some repair ships involved with fixing damaged international cables also originate from the PRC, raising concerns of loitering and further espionage off of Taiwan's coasts.⁶¹ Such reliance underscores the value of multilateral partnerships in protecting Taiwan's critical infrastructure but likewise highlights Taiwan's need to boost its domestic capacity.
- **Increase infrastructure redundancy:** Taiwan has taken steps to construct additional submarine cables and completed a new cable, "Apricot-S6," in July 2025.⁶² Apricot-S6 connects Taiwan with Guam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Japan, and Singapore and has a landing point in Taiwan's Yilan County.⁶³ Chunghwa Telecom, Taiwan's largest telecommunications company,

has continually announced efforts to strengthen the redundancy of Taiwan's internet systems to guard against potential disruptions.⁶⁴ Satellite and airborne internet coverage offer a further long-term solution. Taiwan has developed an air balloon-based communications platform that covers an 11 km internet range and can stay airborne for two weeks.⁶⁵ Taiwan is also in talks with Amazon's Kuiper to develop satellite communications. The Taiwan Space Agency (TASA) will reportedly work with private sector entities to develop a complete supply chain.⁶⁶ Continued public-private sector collaboration paves the way for added redundancies crucial to protecting telecommunications threatened by suspicious vessels.

- **Shore up CGA safeguards in Kinmen and Pratas:** Kinmen and Pratas may constitute training grounds for new patterns of suspicious vessel behavior, including incursions by spoofed or dark PRC vessels. Taiwan's CGA has emphasized the measures it takes to patrol and defend Kinmen, including by tracking and expelling intruding PRC vessels.⁶⁷ Taiwanese authorities must make ongoing efforts to prevent PRC infiltration even within the CGA's ranks, however. Kinmen indicted a CGA officer in August 2025 for providing sensitive information, including patrol schedules, radar data, and vessel activity records, to PRC handlers.⁶⁸ PRC access to such information could enable further incursions to evade CGA interception. Prosecutors requested a 9.5-year sentence for the officer, in line with similar short sentences for spies caught elsewhere in Taiwan.⁶⁹ Taiwan must heighten its responsiveness to infiltration and espionage to minimize suspicious vessel activity.
- **Jointly train Taiwanese and Philippine navies and coast guards:** Taiwan and the Philippines face similar threats from PRC short-of-war coercion. Taiwan has trained Philippine Coast Guard officers since 2021 despite lacking a formal memorandum of understanding to do so.⁷⁰ Bilateral training efforts have reportedly increased: *The Washington Post* in July 2025 cited unnamed sources reporting that the Philippine and Taiwan coast guards carried out a simultaneous patrol in the Bashi Channel. Taiwan's marine

corps and navy reportedly also sent delegates to observe US-Philippine combined marines exercises in June 2025.⁷¹ Philippine-Taiwan bilateral training and engagement could facilitate information-sharing necessary to deter PRC suspicious vessel activity. The United States could help facilitate bilateral training; Taiwanese and Philippine coast guards and navies should build capacity to jointly train independently, however.

- **Develop a Taiwanese Merchant Marine force:** CDOT recommended this measure in 2023 as a means of countering PRC short-of-war coercion. CDOT's study recommended that Taiwan fund shipbuilding as a means of expanding its fleet of Taiwan-flagged commercial vessels. CDOT similarly suggested that the Taiwanese Ministry of Transportation and Communications Maritime and Port Bureau train commercial ship crews to recognize and avoid harassment by foreign vessels.⁷² A functional Taiwanese Merchant Marine could help reduce the strain on CGA, freeing up resources to deal with growing maritime threats.

International Recommendations

- **Incorporate dark vessel responses into military and law enforcement protocols:** Addressing the threat posed by disguised fleets requires military and diplomatic interventions as well as technological ones. The PRC's use of civilian shipping and fishing vessels for these tactics carries major implications for international law, as international laws protect civilian vessels and specifically fishing vessels.⁷³ These laws could confront the commander of a US naval vessel or allied vessel with the dilemma of causing a possible crisis if they fire on civilian vessels, regardless of its real purpose, or permitting the PRC's coercion through inaction.⁷⁴ This dilemma poses a problem for freedom of navigation operations since these vessels could inhibit navigation operations of legitimate vessels. This problem similarly poses a risk to US captains, who can risk provoking a political crisis by boarding or firing on these vessels. These ships could swarm any one of the major trading ports in the region or single out

auxiliary vessels in the region, such as logistics ships, halting trade and supply chain activity.⁷⁵

The United States could similarly reinstate its Maritime Civil Affairs detachments (MCA) to help combat suspicious civilian vessels.⁷⁶ MCA units worked hand in hand with other nations' Foreign Ministries, the Department of State, and the US Navy's Policy and Plans Staff gathering information on everything from fisheries to the local population.⁷⁷ Incorporating such a unit could help gather more information on these vessels and their actions. Doing so would not require a large force and could provide an effective counter to low-cost coercive tactics. MCA detachments can similarly build civil society ties with allies and partners, deepening coalition-building efforts in critical regions. Such a model already exists in the Philippines and could incorporate Taiwan for an added deterrent effect.⁷⁸

- **Cooperate multilaterally on shared anti-dark vessel technologies:** Allied cooperation can advance coalition members' adoption of satellite-based tracking technologies, such as Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR). SAR supports the detection of dark vessels; emerging artificial intelligence (AI) technologies enhance its utility as a monitoring tool over long periods of time. Both governments and NGOs tracking dark vessels would benefit from investment

in these technologies. The United States' Defense Innovation Unit reported in 2023 that it supported the development of AI-based detection systems that integrate SAR in order to uncover hidden vessels.⁷⁹ Canada has also developed its own Dark Vessel Detection program to combat illegal fishing globally.⁸⁰ Canada and the Philippines signed an agreement to grant the latter access to the detection system in 2023. The Philippine government reported that the program "utilizes layered multi-sensor satellite data from both commercial and government-owned satellite assets" and "incorporates historical vessel information, environmental data, and analytics to support and facilitate analysis," often intended to reduce illegal fishing attempts.⁸¹

Taiwan signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to adopt the same detection system, along with satellite imagery analysis training from Canada, in August 2025.⁸² Taiwan is the third partner to receive the technology after the Philippines and Ecuador; Indonesia and Vietnam have reportedly also expressed interest in the dark vessel detection system.⁸³ The Five Eyes community should continue to collaborate with Pacific partner nations to promote the widespread adoption of such technologies as a means of safeguarding against PRC short-of-war activity.

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