

The China–Taiwan Weekly Update



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

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has continued its extensive espionage campaign against the United States and its partners in the Indo-Pacific. This campaign is meant to prepare the PRC for a possible regional war. This campaign was highlighted by the United States recently convicting a former Army intelligence analyst for spying for the PRC from 2022 to 2024.^[1] The analyst provided the PRC information on lessons learned from the Russia–Ukraine war, which are applicable to the defense of Taiwan. Similarly, PRC military officers have visited Russian-held territory in Ukraine and toured frontlines to learn lessons and prepare the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) for modern warfare. PRC military thinkers have previously noted the cost-effectiveness of using drones to destroy high-value targets based on their observations from the war. The lessons that the PRC draws from the war will likely inform its doctrine and strategy, especially in an invasion of Taiwan scenario.^[2]

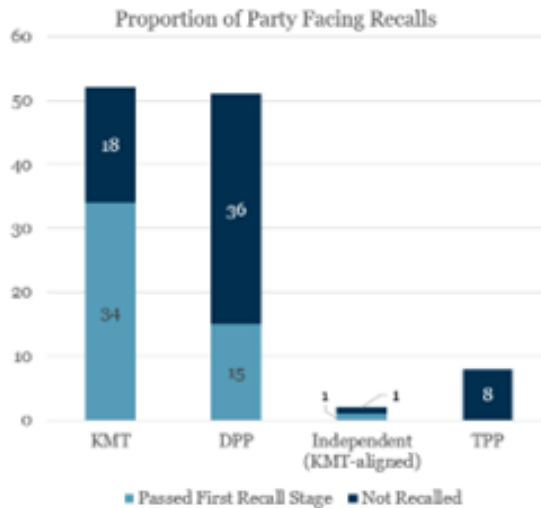
The US Army intelligence analyst provided the PRC with information on US military exercises in South Korea and the Philippines as well. The conviction of the analyst came amid numerous reports of PRC espionage in these countries in recent months. This reported espionage has targeted key military bases, including US facilities. South Korea cannot charge the suspected spies because its counter-espionage law only applies to activities that are related to North Korea.^[3] The PRC Embassy in Seoul has accused South Korea of exaggerating and politicizing the reported espionage.^[4] There have been several PRC espionage allegations in South Korea in recent months, which suggests that the PRC has intensified its espionage activities amid South Korea’s leadership transition. Alternatively, South Korean authorities may have been more effective at countering alleged espionage in recent months. The Philippines has separately identified numerous cases of PRC espionage targeting critical infrastructure and military bases there in recent months.

These activities complement PRC espionage operations in Taiwan, which could help prepare the PRC for an attack on the island. Former Taiwanese Military Intelligence Bureau Director Liu Te-liang said on April 24 that PRC espionage in Taiwan likely surpasses the previous estimate of 5,000 spies.[5] The William Lai Ching-te administration has accordingly intensified its counter-espionage efforts in recent weeks, especially targeting spies in the military. Most espionage cases in Taiwan in 2024 involved active or former military members.[6]

The opposition Kuomintang (KMT) called for the ouster of Taiwanese President Lai amid the continued, high-profile quarrel between Taiwan’s two most prominent political parties. KMT Chairman Eric Chu on April 27 urged legislators to recall Lai. This followed a large-scale, anti-Lai demonstration outside the presidential office.[7] Protestors expressed opposition to “green communism,” a reference to the color of Lai’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Protesters called Lai a dictator, echoing repeated KMT efforts to frame Lai as authoritarian.[8] Tens of thousands of people reportedly attended the demonstration, highlighting the salience of KMT narratives among portions of the Taiwanese public[9]

The KMT rhetoric is reinforcing the long-standing PRC effort to portray Lai and the DPP as authoritarian oppressors. The KMT rhetoric also highlights how easily PRC talking points can enter the mainstream Taiwanese political discourse. The KMT rhetoric risks undermining the credibility of Lai and his efforts to resist PRC aggression.

The KMT's efforts against Lai came amid widespread campaigns to recall members of the Legislative Yuan in recent months. Fifty-eight legislators have been targeted by recall petitions so far. DPP Chairman Ker Chien-ming called for the recall of KMT and KMT-aligned legislators after they passed controversial legislation, including extensive budget cuts.[10] The recall petitions primarily targeted KMT and KMT-aligned legislators but have also expanded to target some members of the DPP. These recall petitions have catalyzed further political discord, including calls for votes of no-confidence against members of the presidential cabinet.[11] The recall petitions will likely fail to remove a significant number of legislators due to the widespread unpopularity of the recall campaigns. Continued friction within Taiwanese domestic politics does, however, risk increasing general feelings of chaos within the government and decreasing public faith in its elected officials.



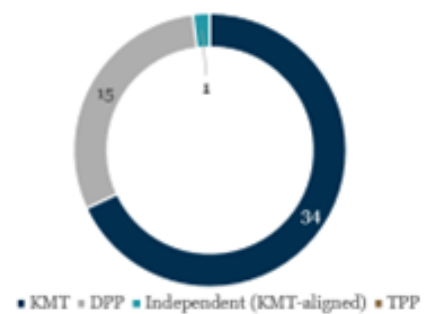
Source: Taiwan's Central Election Commission

Many members of Taiwan's 113-seat Legislative Yuan are facing recall petitions. These efforts primarily target members of the Kuomintang (KMT) party, which is the opposition party controlling the legislature. The KMT passed a series of highly controversial bills such as record budget cuts. KMT and KMT-aligned politicians have launched a retaliatory recall movement against the ruling Democratic People's Party (DPP), but these petitions have gained far fewer signatures than the ones against the KMT.

Criteria for each stage to the recall process:

- 1) Signatures from at least one percent of eligible voters in their respective districts.
- 2) Signatures from at least 10 percent of eligible voters in the targeted legislators' district within 60 days to trigger a recall election.
- 3) A special election to fill the vacancy will occur upon a successful recall.

Party Breakdown of Recall Petitions
(As of April 25, 2023)



Key Takeaways

- **PRC:** The PRC has continued its extensive espionage campaign against the United States and its partners in the Indo-Pacific. This campaign is meant to prepare the PRC for a possible regional war, possibly including an invasion of Taiwan. PRC espionage has tried to gather information on US military bases in the region and lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine war.
- **Taiwan:** The opposition KMT called for the ouster of Taiwanese President William Lai Ching-te amid the continued high-profile quarrel between Taiwan's two most prominent political parties. Continued political discord in Taiwan risks increasing general feelings of chaos and decreasing public faith in elected officials.

Cross-Strait Relations

Taiwan

The PRC criticized a US military transit through the Taiwan Strait — the second of its kind in US President Donald Trump's second term. PRC officials' comments on the transit align with informational efforts to delegitimize the United States–Taiwan partnership. The USS *William P. Lawrence* sailed through the strait on April 23. The PLA Eastern Theater Command, which is responsible for operations involving Taiwan, stated that it observed the destroyer's movements.^[12] PLA Eastern Theater Command spokesperson Shi Yi accused the United States of hyping the transit and misleading “international perception.”^[13] This response aligns with past PRC responses to transits of the Taiwan Strait, which the PRC called

“provocative.”^[14] The United States previously transited the strait in February 2025, and Canada transited in October 2024.^[15]

The PRC aims to isolate Taiwan from its partners, including the United States. The PRC is continuing to delegitimize the United States–Taiwan relationship by framing the United States as an unreliable partner to Taiwan. This aligns with PRC efforts to portray the DPP as a US pawn — a narrative that the PRC propagates to undermine Taiwan’s ruling authorities. PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesperson (MND) Zhang Xiaogang said on April 24 that the DPP treats Taiwan “as a battlefield” and that “If they are allowed to act on their own, Taiwan will surely be in danger.”^[16] Zhang responded to a question on a US Army general’s observation of Taiwan’s Han Kuang Exercises by saying that Taiwan would be “stabbed in the back” and “abandoned” by the United States.^[17] Zhang’s statements support an ongoing narrative that aims to undermine United States–Taiwan ties while creating the false impression that the PRC is Taiwan’s only safeguard.

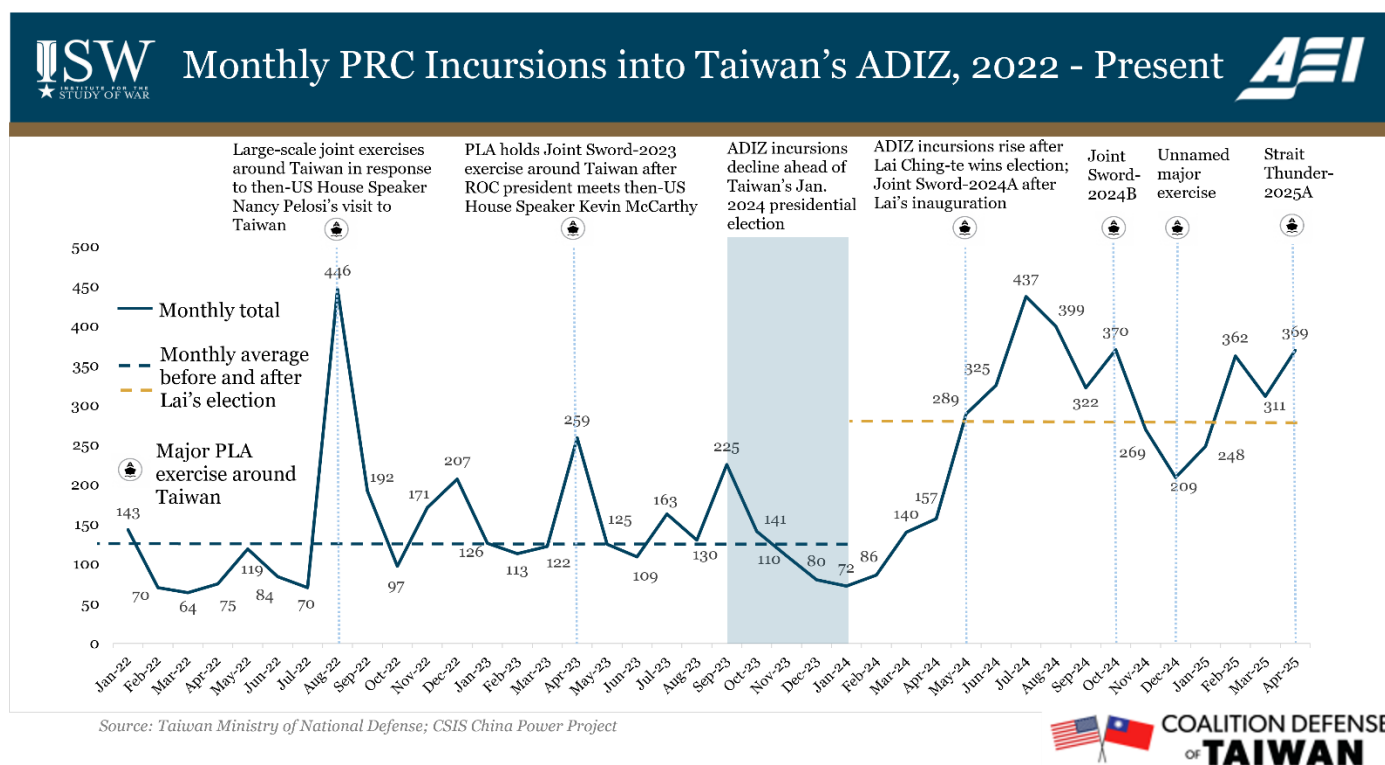


Source: Taiwan Coast Guard Association

The China Coast Guard (CCG) conducted six incursions into Kinmen’s restricted waters in April 2025, continuing PRC efforts to normalize such incursions. The incursions occurred twice during the Strait Thunder-2025A exercise on April 1 and 2, as well as on April 10, 11, 17, and 23.^[18] The PRC typically sends four CCG ships to simultaneously enter Kinmen’s restricted waters for approximately two hours during each incursion. The Strait Thunder-2025A exercise incursions differed in that they were in coordination with PLA ships as part of a broader military drill. April 2025 is the first month in over half a year with more than four CCG incursions into Kinmen’s restricted waters, with the Strait Thunder-2025A activities driving this discrepancy. These efforts are part of the PRC effort to reduce Taiwan’s threat awareness and expend Taiwanese resources. Kinmen is a Taiwanese-administered archipelago two miles from the PRC city of Xiamen. Taiwan does not claim territorial or contiguous waters around Kinmen Island due to its proximity to

the PRC, but it maintains “prohibited” and “restricted” waters that are functionally equivalent. The Taiwan Coast Guard Association (CGA) has reported a total of 70 incursions since these incursions began in February 2024. ISW was able to track each reported incursion dating back to September 2024—the publicly available data prior to then is incomplete and thus excluded from the graph.

A CCG vessel also circled within the restricted waters of Pratas on April 25. The Pratas Islands are in the South China Sea under Taiwanese jurisdiction and are an increasingly important flashpoint.[19] CCG ships were last reported in Pratas’s restricted waters on March 25 after Taiwan’s CGA expelled PRC fishing boats.[20]



PLA aircraft incursions in Taiwan's de facto Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) sustained a high frequency in April. The PRC has normalized a higher frequency of ADIZ incursions to degrade Taiwan’s threat awareness and response threshold.

Incursions spiked at the start of the month as the PRC conducted large-scale joint military exercises around Taiwan, which it named “Strait Thunder-2025A.” Such spikes will likely become more common as the PRC standardizes pre-programmed blockade exercises as part of its coercion toolkit against Taiwan.

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

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

China

The PRC is urging the international community to resist the United States' tariff policy as US tariffs become a core focus of its propaganda. PRC Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi referred to the United States as a "bully" at a BRICS meeting on April 28, urging countries against appeasement to the Trump administration.[21] Wang also proposed four plans to improve global governance, including upholding multilateral trade rules and strengthening global financial governance.[22] The PRC has exploited American tariff policy to further criticisms of "Western hegemony" and juxtapose itself as a leader of multilateralism. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released a propaganda video on April 29, repeating this rhetoric to foreign audiences. [23]

The PRC has maintained that it will not back down against American tariffs but has acknowledged the economic pressures and created some tariff exemptions. The PRC Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) noted supply chain disruptions with the return of three Boeing 737 Max aircraft as a result of tariffs.[24] US-made semiconductors were completely exempted from the PRC's 125-percent retaliatory tariff.[25] The PRC MFA declined to comment on tariff exemptions when asked.[26] US President Trump said on April 22 that he was willing to cut tariffs against the PRC and that the PRC signaled willingness to negotiate.[27] Trump later claimed to be negotiating with the PRC on tariffs, but MOFCOM denied this.[28] Trump then claimed to have spoken with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretary General Xi Jinping on the phone about tariffs, but the PRC MFA also denied that this happened.[29] The MFA spokesperson said that the United States "should stop threatening and blackmailing" if it wanted to resolve tariffs through negotiations.[30]

The PRC is courting investment from a leading artificial intelligence (AI) semiconductor producer to circumvent the United States' export restrictions.[31] Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang met with top CCP officials in Beijing on April 16, two weeks after the United States imposed new export restrictions on the company's exports to the PRC.[32] Director of the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission and Politburo member He Lifeng highlighted the PRC's vast market potential and welcomed Nvidia to invest in the PRC to realize its industrial capacity.[33] He's comments signify the PRC's efforts to localize production and secure access to dual-use technology.

Nvidia stated in a filing on April 15 that the US government was imposing license requirements on exports to the PRC of the H20 chip, which Nvidia designed with limited performance specifications to comply with earlier US export restrictions.[34] Nvidia is the dominant provider of advanced semiconductors that are optimized to train generative AI models, maintaining a market share of approximately 80 percent.[35]

The latest round of US export restrictions follows PRC-based AI company Deepseek's release of its R1 reasoning model in January, which demonstrated the need for the United States to further tighten the performance limits of chips that qualify for shipment to the PRC. Semiconductor analytics firm Semi-Analysis estimates that Deepseek had at least 60,000 Nvidia chips, including 30,000 H20 chips, which it likely used to train R1.[36]

One of the primary goals of US export controls on advanced semiconductors to the PRC is to inhibit the PRC's development of AI to support its military modernization efforts.[37] The PRC seeks to integrate AI into its military decision-making, planning, and logistics as part its pursuit of "intelligentization"—a primary objective of PRC military modernization.[38] The technological demands of intelligentization require the PRC to co-opt private sector actors to support its activities as part of the PRC's military-civil fusion policy.[39] The US House Select Committee on the CCP published a report on April 16 that detailed Deepseek's strong connections and obligations to the PRC government and PLA, making the company's AI development a challenge to US national security.[40]

Northeast Asia

Japan

The PRC criticized Japanese military enhancement and accused the Japanese government of exaggerating the threat posed by the PRC. Lockheed Martin and the Japanese Ministry of Defense (MOD) released additional details for the AEGIS System Equipped Vessel (ASEV) International Defense Exhibition in March 2025. The two ASEVs currently under construction are Japan's solution to replace the cancelled acquisition of the AEGIS Ashore systems, which the United States had hoped to be part of its missile defense network in the Indo-Pacific.[41] Once completed, the ASEVs will be the world's largest destroyers, surpassing the US Navy's Ticonderoga class cruisers and the PLAN's Type 055 destroyers in length and displacement. The MOD stated that the ASEVs will specialize in ballistic missile defense to repel sea-based attacks from Japan's southwest.[42] The ASEVs will also be able to conduct long-range strikes with Japan's improved Type-12 missiles and Hypersonic Glide Vehicles. This likely reflects Japan's growing concerns about the security of its Nansei Islands, which are located near Taiwan. The MOD recently reported a significant increase in PLA drone activities around the Nansei Islands in fiscal year 2024, and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs named the PRC as an "unprecedented challenge" in its 2025 Diplomatic Bluebook.[43]

PRC MND spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang criticized Japan for "pursuing breakthrough advancements in military capabilities" while exaggerating the "China threat." [44] Zhang said that PLA activities are intended to

protect PRC sovereignty and security while adhering to international laws. The PRC routinely condemns negative portrayals of the PRC in official Japanese statements and sees enhancement of the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) capabilities as Japan's attempt to "revive its militarist past" and create confrontation. PRC state media commented in 2022 that the ASEVs will likely be commissioned on schedule under pressure from Washington to become part of the US missile defense network, reflecting United States' control over Japanese self-defense.[45] The report further criticized Japan for willing to become the United States' "vassal state" in exchange for "resuming its path of military expansion that will only bring disaster to itself." [46]

North Korea

North Korea acknowledged its participation in Russian operations in Kursk Oblast for the first time, highlighting the increased strategic alignment between the two countries. North Korean state media *Rodong Sinmun* reported that the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) praised the "heroic achievements" of North Korean soldiers fighting in Russia on April 28.[47] The CMC described the deployment as part of "liberation operations" of Russia's Kursk region against "neo-Nazi Ukrainian invasion forces" and that the operation has "successfully concluded." ISW reports indicate that the fighting is ongoing in Kursk Oblast as of April 26, despite Russian claims that it had fully defeated Ukrainian forces in the region.[48] The CMC stated that the operation highlighted "the strong combat superiority" and strength of the alliance between the two nations.[49] The CMC justified North Korean troops' deployment in the war by citing Article 4 of the Russian-North Korean Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which calls for mutual military assistance, signed in June 2024. *Rodong Sinmun* included a statement issued by WPK General Secretary Kim Jong Un, who promised to honor those who were killed in action and take "national measures" to care for the families of the veterans.

The North Korean acknowledgement comes after Russian Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov made the first official Russian acknowledgement of North Korean troop participation in the war on April 26. Gerasimov said that North Korean forces "provided significant assistance" in pushing Ukrainian forces from Kursk Oblast. Russian President Vladimir Putin thanked North Korean troops for "fighting side by side with their Russian brothers in arms" in a written statement posted on the Kremlin website on April 28.[50] Russia is set to hold a military parade on May 9 marking the 80th anniversary of the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Russia has invited Kim and a North Korean military unit to participate in the parade. Kim would be one of several leaders present alongside CCP Secretary General Xi Jinping.[51] A North Korean delegation's visit to Moscow on April 30 increases the likelihood of Kim's attendance.[52]

A strong North Korean-Russian partnership could drive competition for influence between Russia and the PRC. North Korea's emphasis on its "brotherhood" with Russia is likely intended to position itself as an equal ally to Russia, elevating its international status. North Korea's claim of victory in Ukraine mirrors Russia's narrative ahead of Victory Day, aiming to promote the achievements of both Putin and Kim in challenging the US-backed forces. A potential ceasefire in Ukraine could pivot North Korea toward greater economic cooperation with the PRC as an alternative economic partner to Russia. Its partnership with Russia gives North Korea greater leverage and strategic independence, helping it avoid overreliance on the PRC.[53]

North Korea showcased its naval modernization by demonstrating the missile capabilities of its largest destroyer. WPK General Secretary Kim Jong Un and his daughter Kim Ju Ae attended the launch ceremony of the new destroyer *Choe Hyon* at the Nampo Shipyard on April 26. The *Choe Hyon* is a 5,000-ton-class warship, upgraded from previous vessels under 2,000 tons.[54] North Korea demonstrated a series of missile launches from the *Choe Hyon* on April 28, including "supersonic cruise missiles, strategic-cruise missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, and test firing of a 127mm shipboard automatic gun." [55] It further tested "ship-to-ship tactical guided weapon, various shipboard automatic machine guns," and "electronic jamming guns" on April 29.[56] The *Choe Hyon* reportedly equips vertical launch system (VLS) capabilities, which would enable the ship to carry nuclear-armed short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), yet the two-day test did not include such weapons.[57] The *Choe Hyon* will officially enter service in early 2026 and join the Korean People's Army Navy's East Sea Fleet. Kim vowed to continue building warships and frigates as quickly as possible, establishing an operational fleet by 2026.[58] The new destroyer follows the unveiling of what North Korea claims to be a nuclear submarine in March 2025.[59]

The *Choe Hyon* showcases North Korea's enhanced nuclear strike capabilities and could strengthen its leverage in future negotiations with the United States. The new destroyer increases the credibility of North Korea's deterrent posture toward both South Korea and the United States. The ship's surface-to-air missiles (SAM) enable North Korea to target aerial assets in international airspace off the east and west coasts of the Korean Peninsula.[60] North Korea can target key assets throughout South Korea closer and with greater mobility if it successfully demonstrates nuclear-capable SRBMs from the destroyer. Kim justified this military development by accusing the United States and South Korea of intensifying provocative acts while ignoring North Korea's security concerns.[61]

Southeast Asia

Philippines

Six China Coast Guard (CCG) personnel landed on the disputed Sandy Cay in the Spratly Islands, possibly signaling that the PRC will aggressively pursue territorial claims in the South China Sea amid growing US-Philippine military cooperation. The PRC presence on Sandy Cay indicates its opposition to US-Philippine defense cooperation in the Luzon Strait — a chokepoint between Taiwan and the Philippines. Sandy Cay is located near a Philippine military base on Thitu Island in the Spratly archipelago.[62] China Central Television reported that CCG officers planted a PRC flag on the shoal to declare PRC sovereignty over the territory. [63] The PRC released a report claiming that their team found evidence of "illegal activity" by the Philippines, including fishing and environmental degradation from Philippine construction on Thitu Island.[64] The Philippines stated that it witnessed "the illegal presence" of a PRC Coast Guard vessel 1,000 yards from one of the sandbanks near Sandy Cay and seven PRC militia vessels in the

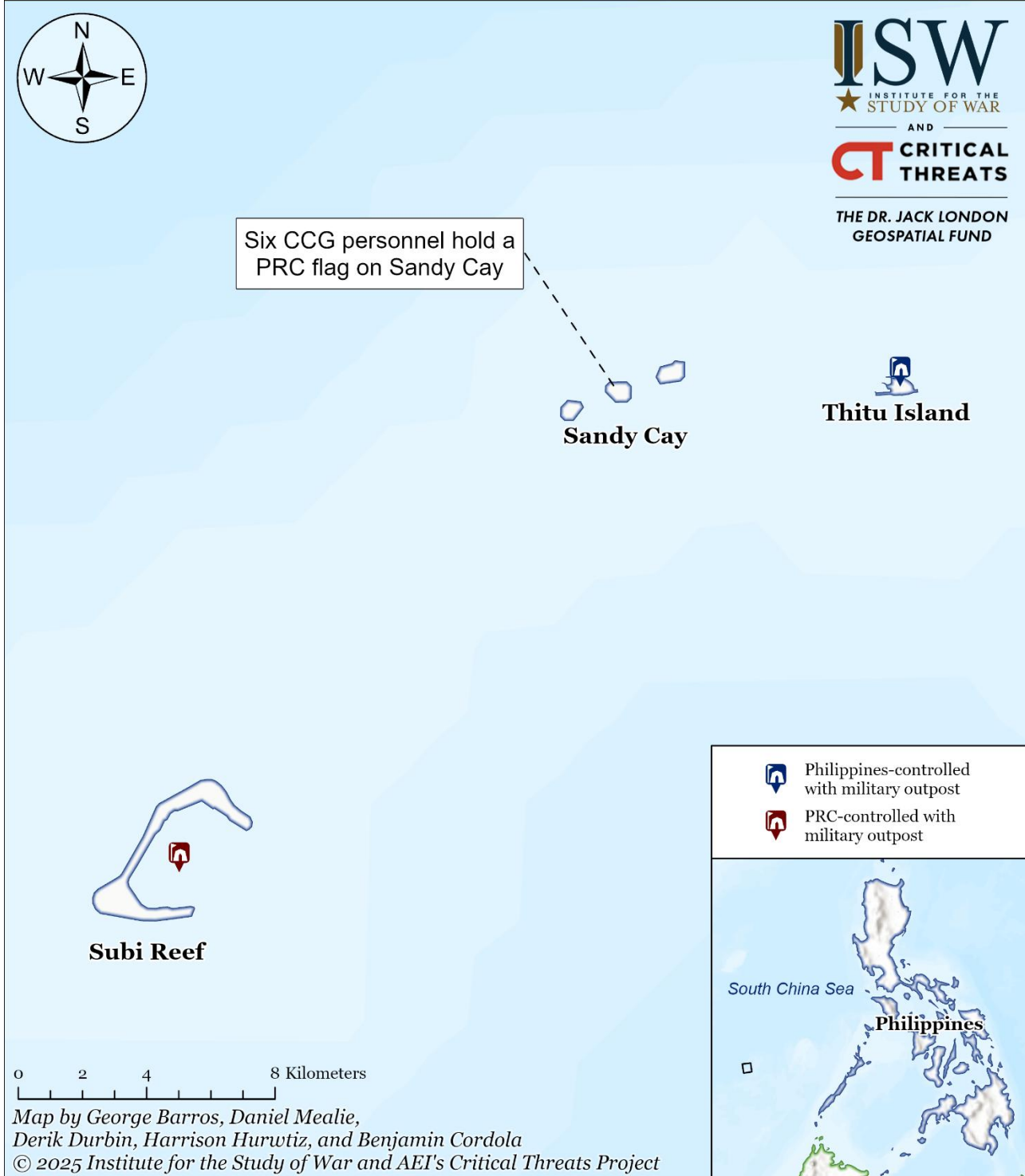
area.^[65] A Philippine contingent landed in the area on April 27.^[66] Philippine officials later claimed that the PRC did not seize the disputed reef, finding no signs of the PRC militarizing the island.^[67]

Both the Philippines and the PRC have increased their presence in the disputed territory by constructing military structures and the deployment of area interdiction capabilities. The Philippines constructed a monitoring facility on Thitu Island in 2023 and has sought to upgrade an airstrip and other military infrastructure on the island. The PRC has likewise placed surface-to-air missiles nearby and constructed hangars, a runway, radar, and a deepwater shelter port on nearby Subi Reef.^[68]

The PRC may have meant its Sandy Cay landing as a signal against the Philippines amid growing United States-Philippine defense cooperation. The CCG landing occurred concurrently with the United States-Philippines Balikatan military exercises in the Strait of Luzon, to the south of Taiwan. The United States stationed the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System (NMESIS) missiles as part of the exercise on Batan Island in the Luzon Strait—the first such deployment of this system in the Philippines.^[69] The NMESIS deployment on April 26 threatens PRC vessels’ ability to remain undetected while transiting the Luzon Strait between Taiwan and the Philippines.

The PRC’s Sandy Cay mission demonstrates its willingness to counter United States–Philippine military cooperation and aims to expand existing PRC claims in the area. The PLA Navy and CCG have pursued similar military readiness drills as United States–Philippine cooperation has increased. The PRC launched joint patrols in February 2025 as Manila increased troop numbers in its northernmost province of Batanes. This coincided with an exercise between the Philippines, the United States, Japan, and Australia.^[70] The PRC has likewise increased the regularity of military patrols to support its claims over disputed territory in the South China Sea.

CCG lands on Sandy Cay in the South China Sea in mid-April



The United States sanctioned PRC and Iran-based entities and individuals involved in ballistic missile propellant procurement for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). US sanctions have targeted Iran-PRC cooperation as part of US President Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign. The US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated six individuals and six entities for participating in a network that transferred sodium perchlorate and dioctyl sebacate to Iran from the PRC. Sodium perchlorate is a precursor for ammonium perchlorate; both ammonium perchlorate and dioctyl sebacate can be used in solid-propellant rocket motors for ballistic missiles.[71]

These sanctions align with previous US efforts to curtail PRC involvement in Iran’s illicit economic activity and come shortly after an explosion at Iran’s Bandar Abbas port, attributed to the mishandling of sodium perchlorate.[72] The PRC shipped sodium perchlorate to Iran in January 2025, when two Iranian ships reportedly transported the material.[73] International Institute for Strategic Studies researcher Fabian Hinz told the *Wall Street Journal* at the time that the PRC has been involved with supplying Iranian missiles and rockets’ solid propellant since as early as the 1990s.[74]



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